

**Parramatta Region Homelessness Interagency
Written Comments in response to**

‘Going Home Staying Home’

This response to ‘Going Home Staying Home’ is submitted by Parramatta Region Homelessness Interagency. This response consists of a number of comments made by members of the Interagency. It also includes a number of suggested strategies that can be introduced/ promoted that will address homelessness. Clarification of any content can be sought from:

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About the Parramatta Region Homelessness Interagency:

The Parramatta Region Homelessness Interagency was established in 2009 with the aim of preventing and reducing the numbers of homeless people in the Parramatta Local Government Area (LGA); increasing the quality of services provided to them and more effectively addressing the needs of homelessness people in the area. The Interagency meets monthly and is regularly attended by approximately 20 representatives from large and small not for profit and government services and organisations. It is an ‘action based’ forum and its standing agenda includes Guest Speaker; Case Presentation and report backs/ decision making regarding its Working Groups: The Interagency’s Working Groups address different issues relating to homelessness in the Parramatta area. Recent and current outcomes of the Working Groups include the development of community education short films; the development and delivery of Homelessness and Mental Health Issues Forums and strategies to progress collaborative service models. More information can be found at the Interagency’s web pages <http://www.parrarhi.org/> .

Response to ‘Going Home Staying Home’

1. Critical issues that drive homelessness

It is recognised that lack of housing is the main driver of homelessness and that there are a number of reasons for the lack of housing outside the scope of SHS services. Currently the paper does not acknowledge this. Reasons for the lack of housing and subsequent increases in homelessness include:

- economic drivers including the increasing costs of housing
- Affordable Housing stock rents for low income earners being considerably higher than clients of SHS services can afford

- community housing providers are not building new housing
- since stimulus money stopped no more housing has been built and what has been built is a very small fraction of what is needed
- poor lending practices by financial institutions: people purchasing homes when they really could not afford to repay
- increasing rents for housing mean multiple income families need to occupy rental properties. Some services felt that some rents are so high that that only those such as refugee families with multiple incomes are able to afford the rents of these properties.
- levels of poverty in the community particularly for people of low incomes and Centrelink payments (particularly Newstart allowance).
- legislative/ systematic responses to domestic violence that result in woman- and often their children- having to escape from their home into homelessness.
- an increasing population and particularly increasing low income groups including refugees, older people and those who have rented their entire adult lives. Services noted the increase in the number of members of these groups that are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Given the complexity of the reasons leading to insufficient housing stock, services responding to this paper believe that its scope – limited to SHS services and programs- is not sufficient to address homelessness.

Other drivers of homelessness:

Services also identified a number of policy and systems issues increasing homelessness. These include:

- Housing NSW service policies including evicting people into homelessness for not paying rent.
- A systematic bias against housing some groups of clients across Housing NSW
- Policies that are increasingly shifting vulnerable client groups from Housing NSW to community housing providers
- The expectation- increasingly a requirement - of community housing providers and Housing NSW that vulnerable clients can only accessing housing stock where support is provided by other agencies.
- Inefficient use of Housing NSW homelessness policies and funded programs, for example Temporary Accommodation (TA) funding. Systematic problems with TA include the fact that TA funds 24/7 services which is very expensive. Despite the expense of TA there is poor leverage by Housing NSW of the

opportunity of working closely to support people in TA to secure more permanent housing. If TA funding is to be reduced there will be a significant increase in homelessness. It is suggested that 2 pilot programs be held in 2 geographical areas (for example Parramatta and Liverpool) where TA funding is managed by the not for profit sector.

- Corrective Services, Juvenile Justice and Mental Health services (including hospitals) releasing people into homelessness (or to SHS services). Services reported that lack of support pre and post release from these departments exacerbate homelessness.

2. Principles embedded in the paper:

It is understood by services that the paper includes a policy intention to push dysfunctional/ 'broken' families back together. However, services recognise that 50% of homeless people are young people escaping dysfunctional/ abusive home environments. It is therefore unrealistic and unethical to expect young people to go back to such environments.

Special consideration needs to be given to young people's and children's needs: services believe that the needs and circumstances of adults dominate the existing services, programs, policies and systems that are designed to respond to homeless people.

There is an assumption that SHS need to 'do better' in addressing homelessness. However, there needs to be consideration given to government departments whose policies/ practices increase homelessness including Housing NSW, Corrective Services, Juvenile Justice, Health (particularly Mental Health). Funding within these departments needs to be allocated to services and programs that reduce- or at least- to not increase- rates of homelessness.

Services are unanimous that any reform of SHS must include reform of mainstream services including Housing NSW, Corrective Services/ Juvenile Justice etc

Services consider that the government has a responsibility to address homelessness and to actively prevent and reduce it. Services consider that government is currently reducing its commitment and resources to reducing homelessness.

3. Early intervention/ prevention

Services believe that early intervention/prevention strategies are required by non SHS services e.g. neighbourhood centres/ schools etc. Whilst it was acknowledged that SHS funded services do have a role to play in early intervention/ prevention, it is the 'First to Know' agencies that have the potential to play a pivotal role. Funding for early intervention/ prevention strategies being delivered from other mainstream services should not come from SHS funding.

The paper does not recognise the link between other services – and funding programs- and homelessness e.g. the federally funded Emergency Relief program. This funding often maintains housing for example by paying utility bills for people

living in poverty/ low incomes. People receiving Emergency Relief support are recognised as being at risk of homelessness and yet, in most instances services administering these payments do not recognise the risk of homelessness. Emergency Relief funding plays a preventative role in homelessness and staff need training to more effectively resource and support these people.

4. Common Assessment tool

Representatives questioned the appropriateness of this and the practicality of rolling it out: Service providers will need to be trained in it so it is applied consistently. In addition, the very different backgrounds and situations of homeless people indicate developing one universal tool will be problematic.

If a common assessment tool is rolled out, consistent training needs to be provided to both government and not for profit services.

5. Issues related to Funding

Many organisations receiving SHS funding also receive funding from other sources without which they would not be able to deliver their services and programs. This is not acknowledged in the paper. For example: one member organisation receives only one fifth of its funding through SHS. The rest of its funding is from donations made to its parent organisation. In their funding reports to SHS this organisation reports on the total number of clients they see because it is too hard to report on only the proportion of clients that SHS funds. There needs to be an acknowledgment that SHS services are funded not only by government but by a range of other funding sources including private donations.

All services who commented on the paper reported that their funding has been reduced over last 12-14 years because there has been no increase in SHS funding. Despite the reduction in funding, services have kept on delivering services to the same level or at an increased level. The shortfall in funding through SHS has been made up through parent organisations; private donations etc.

Some services estimate a reduction of 20% in real funding over the last few years. Whilst it is acknowledged that the paper does recognise this to some extent, it is felt that not enough acknowledgement of other funding sources has been made.

In addition services want government to be transparent and accurate regarding their funding levels and what this funding can provide.

Packages offered through a transitional model: it is recognised that this model is one HASI has been built on. However services understand that there is an expectation/ requirement that this funding will be reduced making it questionable whether individualised packages can meet the needs of complex/ vulnerable people.

Services believe that a brokerage model that provides additional funding for services and resources that cannot be provided through SHS services would be more effective. Services emphasise that SHS services as they are currently funded cannot deliver the required services and additional money for brokerage is required.

If no extra funding is available any suggested reforms mean that current funding can only be redistributed. Services questioned whether the government intends to use

any SHS funding to fund more administrative staff and concern was expressed that in reality this would reduce the funding available for direct service providers.

There is an emphasis on the Housing First model and whilst this is recognised as an effective and valuable model, it is also recognised that it requires appropriate funding to ensure it is effective: properties need to be available and long term secure tenancies offered (and supported).

It is understood that a Housing First model will mean smaller services will be pressured to either merge or to close as bigger services receive increased funding. There was concern expressed that this would lead to SHS being centralisation into large not for profits and that the expertise of smaller organisations would be lost. Many smaller services are doing very good work and are meeting critical needs. If they are pressured to merge or close a significant impact on groups of homeless people/ people at risk of homelessness will result. It was agreed by all services commenting on the paper that effective smaller organisations are important and strategies should support their expertise.

Services questioned the validity of packages around crises described in the paper, believing that if the government introduces packages, they should be focused on exiting crises, not entering crisis. There should no be limitations on accessing crisis services. Crisis services need to be built on, not restructured.

SHS funding needs to recognise what it takes to establish a home: resources are required to do this and support families to do this. Basic standards (furniture, crockery, bedding etc) still cost more than SHS services have the capacity to provide, and delivery costs also need to be covered. No one service is equipped to handle the demand for this. Funding needs to be provided and it needs to be realistic.

6. Current reporting requirements

All services agreed that current reporting requirements for SHS are complex and demand significant time and staff resources. Smaller organisations disproportionately suffer from this requirement as larger organisations can absorb some of costs whereas smaller ones can not.

7. Referral systems

The current referral arrangements through the Homeless Persons Information Centre (HPIC) should be built upon. It was recognised that whilst HPIC captures a lot of data regarding homeless people, alternative referral systems outside this system mean instances of homelessness and people seeking assistance are currently not being counted.

It is suggested that to collect and analyse more useful data from HPIC, it is necessary that it employ a housing worker. It is also suggested that HPIC should have discretionary TA funds. There is a critical need to reduce the ability for people to cycle around the system which largely occurs through the fact that they utilise various systems rather than one.

8. Accreditation/ quality improvement

It is acknowledged that SHS services need to go through the process of accreditation not only as a requirement of the National Quality Framework but to ensure best client care. However services also recognise that accreditation will cost. Services experienced in accreditation indicated that the process of accreditation requires considerable resourcing i.e. the employment of specific worker. Smaller organisations will need assistance in meeting quality improvement initiatives.

Homelessness NSW submission to Going Home Staying Home

Members of Parramatta Region Homelessness Interagency support Homelessness NSW's submission to the paper.

Consultation Process

Services stated that there was a need to include homeless people in this review and in the development of any program/ policy related to addressing homelessness.