

# Chapter 4: New Directions for Housing Action

## Temporary Accommodation: Less is More

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The recent ABC *Four Corners* documentary, 'The last chance motel', depicted with heartbreaking clarity the impact of homelessness on people's lives. It also demonstrated the limitations of the NSW Government's Temporary Accommodation program.

The Temporary Accommodation program provides low-cost hotel, motel, caravan park, boarding house or similar accommodation for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program provides emergency accommodation usually for an initial period of one to seven days, but weekly reassessments may enable households to receive up to 28 days of temporary accommodation. Further extensions can however be made depending on the circumstances of the applicants.

Accommodation under the program can be accessed from Housing NSW directly during business hours and via the After Hours Temporary Accommodation Line in the evenings during the week and on weekends. In 2007–08, the After Hours Temporary Accommodation Line responded to over 14,600 telephone calls and 4,381 households were assisted.

The program targets people who are assessed as being able to manage independently once temporary accommodation is provided. Those who require support services are referred instead to specialist homelessness services. Temporary accommodation is provided on the assumption that recipients just need somewhere permanent to live — somewhere affordable, safe, adequate, appropriate (in terms of disability, cultural and other needs) and sustainable, somewhere close to jobs, transport, schools and other services. When people are booked into temporary accommodation, they are required to visit their local Housing NSW office the

following working day for an assessment of whether they should be granted more temporary accommodation or other housing assistance. It is their responsibility to find long-term housing which will comprise their exit from temporary accommodation.

Under the NSW Government's *Homelessness Action Plan, A Way Home: Reducing Homelessness in NSW*, the provision of temporary accommodation is to be increased. The increase is to be funded under the NSW Implementation Plan for the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness. The initiative is part of the strategic direction in the *Homelessness Action Plan* which focuses on responding effectively to homelessness.

There's no doubt that the need for Temporary Accommodation program is intensifying. In July, it was reported that this year's budget for temporary accommodation is over \$9 million with an extra 643 people being accommodated per month compared to last year.



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## Insufficient Supply of Affordable Housing

The demand for the program reflects the impact of the crisis in housing unaffordability. There is a massive gap between the demand for social housing and affordable housing for low-income households, and the supply of housing.

A substantial increase in supply is in the pipeline ... Aside from the construction of new social housing dwellings being funded by the NSW Government, there has been a hefty increase in funding for social and affordable housing from the Commonwealth Government, most notably new social housing dwellings under the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan (here's hoping there are no more cuts to the funding by the Commonwealth Government). There are also new dwellings to be constructed under the A Place to Call Home program, new affordable private rental dwellings for low- and moderate-income households to be constructed which are linked to incentives under the National Rental Affordability Scheme, new social housing dwellings to be funded by the National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing, and new dwellings to be constructed under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing. This all can't happen fast enough, particularly in the context of the *Homelessness Action Plan's* target of reducing by 7 per cent the overall level of homelessness in this state by 2013.

However, this is still not enough to meet the level of need. As at 30 June 2008, there were 49,950 on the waiting list for public housing in New South Wales. It is estimated that there was a shortage of 44,000 affordable and available private rental stock for very low-income households in Sydney alone in 2006 ('affordable and available' stock takes into account the fact that some higher-income households rent the affordable stock so it is not available for lower-income households).

## Impact of the Global Financial Crisis

The demand for temporary accommodation also reflects the impact of the global financial crisis, such as job losses and reduced working hours. For example, in August the Homeless Persons Information Centre reported a 19.5 per cent increase in demand for its NSW-wide telephone information and referral service for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in 2008–09 (the highest level of demand in 25 years). For the first time, housing stress was identified as the primary reason for homelessness in this state, followed by family breakdown.

## A Case in Point

The issue of increased demand for temporary accommodation aside, it's worth looking at an example of how the program works in the context of the wider housing assistance system.

One Sydney-based Tenancy Advice and

Advocacy Service (TAAS) worker recounted the case of a family consisting of parents and six children aged between 18 months and 17 years. One parent had serious mental health issues, and possibly one of the children. The TAAS worker believed that the family needed trauma counselling because they had had no permanent address for nearly 10 years, including a period as refugees overseas.

Following their release from a detention centre in South Australia, they moved to Sydney and managed to find private rental accommodation. They received no assistance in settling, as this was prior to the Commonwealth Government's changes to the visa categories made in May 2008 which removed many barriers to public assistance for humanitarian entrants. When the mother's mental health issues worsened, the family stayed with a women's refuge for about two years, even though there was no domestic violence involved. (There was just no other crisis accommodation available which was suitable for the family.) The refuge assisted the family to apply for priority housing with Housing NSW, however it appears that Housing NSW lost contact with the family.

The refuge assisted the family to obtain a fixed-term lease on a property with a community housing association for a specified short period. When their lease expired, the community housing provider advised that a further lease was not to be offered — even though they had not been in rent arrears or been in breach of their lease in any way. A hearing took place before the Consumer, Trader and Tenancy Tribunal, at which stage the TAAS worker became involved, but the tribunal made an order terminating the tenancy. In New South Wales, tenants can be evicted without being provided with a reason and without being at fault — and in this case, the lease was for a fixed term because the housing provided was intended to be temporary.

The TAAS worker obtained funding from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship for a worker to be assigned to the family, and this worker assisted the family to access accommodation under the Temporary Accommodation program. They were allocated a single room at a poor quality bed-and-breakfast facility. Every seven days, the family had to reapply for temporary accommodation, and on some weeks they were instructed that they had to pay for their accommodation because they had a Centrelink payment that week. During this time, Housing NSW referred the family to their private rental specialist, whose only offer of accommodation was a two-bedroom cottage that was so run down that it had council demolition orders on it. The family declined to take up the offer.

Meanwhile, the TAAS worker pursued the household's application for priority housing with Housing NSW, but the application was rejected on the basis that the family was deemed to be able to resolve its housing need in the private rental market. An applicant for priority housing must be eligible for public housing, in urgent need

of housing and unable to resolve their housing need in the private rental market. Housing NSW assesses the applicant's ability to resolve their urgent housing need in the private rental market by looking at the availability and cost of private rental accommodation that matches their housing requirements in their preferred area as well as other suitable areas (amongst other factors). For the purpose of assessing priority housing applications, private rent is considered by Housing NSW to be affordable if it does not exceed 50 per cent of the household's total gross weekly income. The pooled Centrelink incomes of large families can result in this type of ruling, which can be made regardless of whether a suitable property for an affordable rent can be found.

After about three months in temporary accommodation, they left to move in with friends.

At last report, the TAAS worker was assisting the family to appeal to the Housing Appeals Committee for a review of the decision by Housing NSW to reject their application for priority housing.

## Assistance to Find Long-term Accommodation

So how could the Temporary Accommodation program work better than it currently does?

The requirement that recipients of temporary accommodation search for long-term accommodation without expert help is onerous and impractical. In order to receive continuing assistance, recipients have to provide evidence that they are actively looking for long-term accommodation. This may involve proving that the recipient has made 10 to 20 applications to real estate agents or landlords ... per week!

Vacancies in the private rental market are low, particularly in unaffordable housing hotspots like Western Sydney, and the searching consumes time, money and energy — plus it is invariably fruitless. Vacancies are hotly contested, and it would be fair to say that most of the homeless households competing for this accommodation would be at the bottom of the pecking order.

The longer people are in temporary accommodation, the more harsh this requirement becomes. One couple receiving temporary accommodation who appeared in 'The last chance motel' had inspected 40 properties.

On top of that, if an extension of temporary accommodation is granted, there is no guarantee that the accommodation will be in the same location. Packing up and moving repeatedly can only intensify the stress of an already incredibly difficult situation, affecting both wellbeing and relationships. It also makes searching for long-term accommodation even harder. 'The last chance motel' featured one family who had stayed in four motels and one caravan park under the program over a 17-week period (costing the government \$15,000).

In 2007–08, a temporary accommodation project taking place in Liverpool and Fairfield was evaluated with telling results. The project involved eight weeks of temporary (furnished) accommodation provided by a community housing association, Hume Community Housing — not a hotel, motel, caravan park or boarding house. Recipients were also assisted to access private rental accommodation. The evaluation found that: 14 per cent more households found stable accommodation than households who had been housed in motels under the usual Temporary Accommodation program; after leaving, 56 per cent of households exited to stable accommodation; and it cost \$54 per day, as opposed to approximately \$100 per day in a motel.

To help minimise the amount of time spent in temporary accommodation, assistance to find long-term accommodation should be provided. Assistance could take the form of a brokerage service, in which a worker negotiates for accommodation on behalf of a homeless household, and hence raises their stakes in the competition for the limited housing available.

### Support Services

Support services should also be made available to assist temporary accommodation recipients with non-housing needs where required. Recipients are facing poverty, and may be searching for work, may have disabilities, may have health and/or mental health issues, may be escaping domestic violence, may be caring for children ... all this amidst cramped and temporary conditions.

In 2006–07, about \$1.006 million or approximately 17 per cent of the program's expenditure assisted people who were escaping domestic violence. The Start Safely Rental Subsidy Scheme, which is a new initiative under the *Homelessness Action Plan*, will provide a private rental subsidy for women and children escaping domestic violence for three to 12 months, focusing on the Illawarra and Hunter regions. The aims of Start Safely include reducing the time that women and children escaping domestic violence spend in temporary accommodation. However support services should be available for those fleeing domestic violence who do end up in temporary accommodation.

### Unsafe Conditions

The suitability of the accommodation allocated under the Temporary Accommodation program also needs to be reassessed. Caravan parks, boarding houses and low-cost motels are often unsafe, particularly for women and children. Rooms and bathroom facilities can be unclean and insecure. The location of the temporary accommodation can also influence whether the accommodation is suitable for vulnerable people.

Sue Cripps, Chief Executive Officer of Homelessness NSW, told the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues during its inquiry into



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homelessness and low-cost rental accommodation in April: 'Many homeless people particularly women and children, but also men, will choose to sleep in their car rather than sleep in the caravan park because they feel so vulnerable in caravan parks ... people [in Nowra] talked about how they had their clients [staying in a caravan park] tell them that the drug dealer used to come around and door knock every night to see what people wanted in terms of takeaway.'

But what if caravan parks and boarding houses are the only available low-cost accommodation in a particular area? ... Here we again return to the issue of housing supply.

### 'Housing first' and an Integrated Service Response

Beyond improving how the Temporary Accommodation program operates, could some of the funding for the program be more effectively utilised?

In 'The last chance motel', Stephanie Brennan, convenor of the Nepean Campaign Against Homelessness, spoke about their Project 40 initiative which was set up in September partly in response to the shortfalls of the Temporary Accommodation program. Under the project, 40 properties from Wentworth Community Housing are being allocated to provide permanent accommodation for those who are chronically homeless, and homelessness agencies are providing support services. This initiative's 'housing first' approach aims to circumvent temporary accommodation (and crisis accommodation) by placing homeless people directly into long-term housing with support services as soon as possible. It is also an integrated service response to homelessness, which matches one of the priorities of the *Homelessness Action Plan*, and it is an impressive example

of regional service collaboration. The plan is to expand Project 40 into a larger initiative, to be called Nepean Wentworth Supportive Housing, which will utilise up to 150 properties from Wentworth Community Housing constructed under the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan for the most vulnerable and chronically homeless people.

Implementing a 'housing first' response to homelessness more broadly is of course dependent on affordable housing — enough to meet the needs of those who are homeless and at risk of homelessness.

Questions about how to improve the Temporary Accommodation program — in terms of meeting the needs of its target group as well as cost-effectiveness — should be seen in the context of the focus in the *Homelessness Action Plan* on transitioning people who are homeless to long-term accommodation and support, and on integrated service responses. The plan includes initiatives to improve coordination between specialist homelessness services and temporary accommodation, and to improve coordination between the various NSW crisis telephone lines for homeless people, including the After Hours Temporary Accommodation Line. The plan also features an audit of the full range of programs that provide accommodation across New South Wales (including NSW, Commonwealth and non-government programs) in order to improve access to services by homeless people.

It is definitely time to review the Temporary Accommodation program as part of the broader homelessness response — but the efficacy of the Temporary Accommodation program will continue to be hindered by the chasm between the huge demand for affordable housing for low-income people and the supply. ■

\* This article does not necessarily represent the views of Shelter NSW.