

Homeless people: will they really get their day in the sun?

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. In opening, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, the Gadigal Clan of the Eora Nation. I pay my respects to elders past and those present today.

Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services. Being homeless is being without: without shelter, without resources, without support, without recognition, without power to influence society.

Every night across Australia almost 105,000 people are homeless¹. The census tells us where these homeless Australians are staying. Forty-five percent are staying with relatives and friends, twenty percent are living in boarding houses and other temporary accommodation, sixteen percent are sleeping rough on the streets of our cities and towns and nineteen percent find a bed in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), now called the specialist homeless service system. In NSW, 27,374 people were counted as homeless during the census in 2006. The percentages are similar for NSW to the national figures.

¹ 'Counting the Homeless 2006', ABS Catalogue No. 2050.0

Homelessness has continued to increase over the past decade despite good economic times – from 99,900 in 2001 to 104,000 at Census night count in 2006.

The shocking truth is that there has been virtually no progress in reducing the number of homeless since 1996. Clearly, resolving homelessness is a complex problem otherwise it would have been fixed a long time ago. The Census figures show the scale and complexity of the homelessness problem throughout Australia, and the numbers are a wake-up call to the sheer scale of what needs to be done.

On 21 December 2008, the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Minister Plibersek released the Homelessness White Paper, *The Road Home: a national approach to ending homelessness*, in Sydney.

The release of the Road Home is the culmination of a personal commitment by the Prime Minister to address the issue of homelessness, after he identified in November 2007 that he did not want to live in a country where it was considered acceptable for people to sleep rough on the streets.

The *Road Home* is an aspirational and historic document in the development of homelessness policy and planning in Australia. To achieve its aims, it will require a commitment from all levels of government, business and the community. It will force radical rethinking about how to deliver broad services to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place, and a changed response for those who unfortunately still do become homeless.

We believe that we have two important ingredients – the political will to make change and money – with both we can make a difference.

This is a once in a generation opportunity that Australia cannot afford to miss.

So, what does the White Paper set as its targets and strategies?

Targets have been set as follows:

- We need to halve homelessness by 2020; and
- We need to offer accommodation to all rough sleepers who ask for it by 2020.

There are a suite of interim targets set for 2013, with some key targets focused on a reduction in the numbers of people cycling through the specialist homeless service system, assisting people to sustain social housing and private rental tenancies, reducing the numbers of people entering homelessness from institutional care and an increase in the numbers of people engaged in employment, education and training after presenting to homeless services.

Three strategic directions have been identified within the White Paper – you may well have heard them spoken about in the past few months. These are to turn off the tap, improve and expand services and break the cycle.

While we welcome the paper - the commitment and the money – we do have some questions – as a peak working on such an issue at such a time this is not surprising.

First of all the world has moved since the release of the paper.

We now have the Global Financial Crisis with many questions and much debate about whether Australia has managed to dodge the recession bullet or not. Regardless, things are tough out there and seem to be getting worse for some people.

Homelessness NSW has been receiving advice from our members across the state that they are seeing more and more clients – and they are seeing new clients.

The new homeless. These are people, who have never regarded themselves as homeless before, but something has occurred in their lives, unemployment or illness for example, and they are no longer able to make ends meet. For the first time in their lives these people need to ask for assistance. This raises issues for front line services and governments in addressing the issue of homelessness.

How we track and monitor this and many other issues, how we get relevant and current data to help inform our policy planning and resource investment is an important issue that serious consideration needs to be given to.

The other major challenge that the white paper brings revolves around how we build an integrated service system.

To achieve this goal, we need to rethink how current homelessness specific and mainstream programs work and how they can work together. Not an easy task and one that will cause a few gray hairs I am sure over the coming months. However, homeless people and those at risk of homelessness deserve everyone's focused effort to streamline and strengthen the whole system as much as is possible to resolve homelessness.

So how is this national approach being developed across NSW? Firstly, I am sure none of you will be surprised when I say that Homelessness NSW, in partnership with the other homelessness peaks in NSW, Shelter and NCOSS have lobbied long and hard over the last 4 years for NSW to have a homelessness strategy, and for homelessness to be identified as a key action within the State Plan.

I am pleased to say that the Premier has made a commitment to address the issue of homelessness and has identified that homelessness will be an action within the State Plan. Housing NSW is leading the development of the NSW Homelessness Action Plan.

To support the provision of the breadth of advice required if we are to truly make a difference in the numbers of people who become homeless in NSW, a group of organizations – Homelessness NSW, Shelter, NCOSS, the Youth Accommodation Association, The Women’s Refuge Movement Resource Centre, the Homeless Person’s Legal Service, the Welfare Rights Centre, the Network of Alcohol and Drug Agencies, the Mental Health Coordinating Council and the Federation of Community Housing Associations has formed the NSW Homelessness Community Alliance.

The Homelessness Alliance is meeting regularly to develop advice to input into the development of the NSW Homelessness Action Plan, and will be monitoring its implementation over the coming months and years.

So what are some of the things that Homelessness NSW sees as key issues that need to be addressed if homeless people are to get their day in the sun?

Firstly, I am pleased to report that government has made a strong commitment to the concept of regional planning. This is an important issue. For strong and enduring system change to occur there needs to be the capacity for local communities to develop tailored responses responding to a state policy framework.

To illustrate this, let’s look at the issue of rough sleepers. The figures on rough sleepers released in the Parliamentary briefing paper on homelessness that was published in April this year, clearly identifies that there are significant numbers of people rough sleeping in the Bega Valley and on the North Coast in addition to the numbers that we know sleep rough in the inner

city of Sydney.

When we look at the geography though, it is clear that the response developed in inner Sydney, a tight geographic area with a wealth of housing, health and other human services available will and must be radically different to what is developed to respond to these issues in country NSW.

There is also a strong commitment to homelessness prevention – an important bedrock underpinning all our planning. It is clear that there is significant undersupply of affordable housing. This is beginning to be addressed through the economic stimulus package.

However, provision of a house as we all know is often not enough to resolve someone's homelessness. The delivery of support services, in a variety of different modes, is vital to help create enduring and sustainable tenancies and healthy communities. The Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative, identified in the homelessness Green Paper as a model of best practice across Australia, is an example of a model developed for people with mental illness to help create enduring tenancies and prevent homelessness. It is exciting to be looking at how we trial and then resource successful models across NSW to prevent people becoming homeless.

We are at a crucial moment in history – never again in Australia will we get this amount of interest and commitment at the political level to resolve the issue of homelessness. Through the advocacy and commitment of the peaks and the Homelessness Community Alliance, we will continue to work with both the NSW and Federal governments to build the best possible system that we can, truly working to make the system respond and deliver to give homeless people their day in the sun.