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**Contact:** Sue Cooke, Chief Executive Officer, Anglicare Southern Queensland

**Phone:** (07) 3838 7627

**Email:** [scooke@anglicaresq.org.au](mailto:scooke@anglicaresq.org.au)

**Author:** Leanne Wood, Manager, Research and Advocacy

## Acknowledgement of First Nations Peoples

Anglicare Southern Queensland acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first Australians and recognises their culture, history, diversity and deep connection to the land. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which our service was founded and on which our sites are operating today.



*Artwork by Olivene Yasso to celebrate 150 years of Anglicare  
Read more at [anglicaresq.org.au/reconciling-story/150-years-of-anglicare-sq-commemorating-our-indigenous-past-present-and-future](http://anglicaresq.org.au/reconciling-story/150-years-of-anglicare-sq-commemorating-our-indigenous-past-present-and-future)*

We pay our respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders both past and present, who have influenced and supported Anglicare Southern Queensland on its journey thus far. We also extend that respect to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, clients and partners (past, present and future) and we hope we can work together to build a service that values and respects our First Nations people.

We acknowledge the past and present injustices that First Nations people have endured and seek to understand and reconcile these histories as foundational to moving forward together in unity.

Anglicare is committed to being more culturally responsive and inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we are committed to embedding cultural capabilities across all facets of the organisation.

## About Anglicare Southern Queensland

Anglicare SQ's experience in identifying and responding to the needs of vulnerable members of our many and varied communities is underpinned by 150 years of delivering innovative, quality care services.

More than 3,000 staff and volunteers operate across southern Queensland and in Longreach and Townsville. We offer a comprehensive, integrated range of community services that comprises community aged care, residential aged care and community support programs, including child safety, disability support, counselling and education, mental health, homelessness and chronic conditions. Our services are designed to 'wrap around' clients in a comprehensive way, recognising their health needs but also addressing the social needs which contribute to wellness.

## Hanging by a Thread: Our Search for Home

*Hanging by a Thread: Our Search for Home* is a photovoice project in which young people from Anglicare's youth homelessness services explored their personal perceptions of home and homelessness through candid, thought-provoking and at times, challenging photographs.

*What does it feel like to have a place to call home? What does it mean to belong — or to be disconnected? How does it feel to be forced to grow up too quickly?*

This project is a collaboration between Anglicare Southern Queensland and The University of Queensland Life Course Centre.

Permission for use of the photos included in this submission has been provided by the photographers. We thank them for their skill, creativity and generosity in allowing us to share their work.

Front cover: Hanging by a Thread (Anonymous)  
Below: Left to Wander (Harmony)  
p. v: If found, please return to... (Anonymous)  
p. 15: Shopping list (Anonymous)



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## 1.0 Introduction

Anglicare Southern Queensland (Anglicare SQ) welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) consultation to inform a National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

We bring to this submission the direct experience and expertise of Anglicare Southern Queensland staff in delivering a wide range of services for those who are experiencing, or are at risk of homelessness, including accommodation and support, tenancy support, healthcare, counselling and advocacy.

We also bring a willingness to question the systems we work within: to ask what values and attitudes drive society's investment in housing and homelessness. It is the answers to these larger questions that should underpin a National Plan for Housing and Homelessness, and determine how we direct our finite resources. As social entrepreneur Nic Frances asks:

*How do we create a market for positive social change? For a start, we have to price the things we want to achieve according to their value and the cost of not having them.<sup>1</sup>*

In this submission, we begin by stepping outside the complex labyrinth of interventions and approaches that characterise the housing and homelessness sector, and asking – as a society and government, what values and priorities are we funding and servicing? Since we operate in a market economy, what are the costs and benefits of those decisions?

The answers to those questions provide a framework and a direction for the Plan as it addresses the pragmatic issue of how to alleviate homelessness.

In October 2023, we prepared a staff survey based on the DSS public survey at [engage.dss.gov.au](https://engage.dss.gov.au). The survey was not intended to be representative of the broader Australian community, and the results are not statistically rigorous. Rather, we wanted to provide an opportunity for our own Anglicare community, and particularly staff working with people in programs such as those listed right, to share their views on what will make a difference for those caught up in the current housing crisis.

### Anglicare Homelessness Services

- **Accommodation and Support:** We provided more than 42,000 hours of accommodation and/or support to single women, women with children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the 2021-22 FY.
- **Early Intervention:** We focus on early intervention strategies, helping individuals maintain their existing tenancies through advocacy and education.
- **Transition Accommodation:** Our programs establish long-term supportive relationships with clients, empowering them to achieve their goals.
- **Healthcare Services:** We provide nursing, first aid, wound care, physical health monitoring, and health education, addressing both immediate needs and long-term challenges.
- **Counselling and Advocacy:** Our commitment to social inclusion includes offering counselling and advocacy services for those at risk of homelessness.
- **Outreach Support:** Our outreach service reaches out to homeless individuals in our local community, ensuring they receive the support they need.

The input we received was wide-ranging and thoughtful. Staff identified gaps and inefficiencies in the housing and energy sectors, for example, that mean existing houses are left empty or essentially unlivable in increasingly volatile climate conditions. They noted the critical importance of providing wrap-around services where they are needed. In particular, staff emphasised the need for strategies shaped by ground-up approaches that ask people what they need, and don't assume that 'just any roof' will meet people's needs for a sense of home, community and their overall wellbeing.

As a society, we know that secure, affordable and appropriate housing provides the bedrock for wellbeing. Other components of wellbeing, such as good nutrition and health, strong relationships, and meaningful work and learning are much harder to achieve without the stability of a home.

With this point at the forefront of our submission, and informed by many years of experience, we address key questions from the Issues Paper. We then conclude by drawing together the threads of the discussion to summarise the contributions of the Anglicare SQ community to this consultation.

## **2.0 Reducing homelessness?**

### ***How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?***

This question is at the heart of this consultation. It is therefore very important that, as a community, we get the framing right. Do we want to 'reduce' or 'manage' homelessness — or do we want to *end* it?

This is not a fanciful goal. Juha Kaakinen, CEO of Y-Foundation, a global leader in implementing the Housing First principle and CEO of Finland's largest not-for-profit housing association, notes that there is a false economy in simply dealing with homelessness as an inevitable fact of life:

*All this costs money, but there is ample evidence from many countries that shows it is always more cost-effective to aim to end homelessness instead of simply trying to manage it. Investment in ending homelessness always pays back, to say nothing of the human and ethical reasons.<sup>2</sup>*

This shift in focus requires attention and investment at every point of the housing continuum from prevention and early intervention through to crisis accommodation. There are significant gaps at every one of these points and for the foreseeable future, we will continue to need to fill those gaps. Our priority, however, should be systemic — *fixing the system* so that we are solving homelessness, not constantly servicing crisis.

In Anglicare SQ's submission to the Senate inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia,<sup>3</sup> we argued that poverty is a policy decision, not an inevitable fact of life. What happens to individuals and families who have little power, we pointed out, is directly related to the decisions of government and politicians, who have much. As

social commentator Greg Jericho has argued, inequality is effectively set at the level the government of the day is content with.<sup>4</sup>

We suggest that 'poverty', in this statement, could easily be replaced with 'homelessness'.

The development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan is a chance to turn this state of affairs on its head; think big, and differently; and address the roots of housing inequality.

### 3.0 Fixing the system

#### *A brief history of housing and homelessness policy and programs in Australia*

The issue of homelessness first started to gain the attention of policy makers during the 1930s and 1940s, with the combined impacts of the Depression and the scarcity of labour and building materials to build appropriate and secure housing. In 1944, the newly-appointed Commonwealth Housing Commission reported a shortage of some 700,000 dwellings;<sup>5</sup> and the Government consequently began a program of public housing construction, with the aim of simultaneously stimulating the economy, providing people on lower incomes with secure accommodation, and increasing workforce participation.<sup>6</sup> From 1945 to the early 1950s, meeting housing need was a priority reflected in the consistent growth of public housing dwelling completions. In total, nearly 670,000 homes were built during the term of the first Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA), from 1945–1956.<sup>7</sup> Professor Dave Adamson, from Compass Housing, points out that:

*The funding of such an exercise at a difficult time indicates that contemporary governments make an active choice not to fund a similar program and ground that choice in arguments of austerity that do not measure up against the deprivations of the immediate post-war years.<sup>8</sup>*

The proportion of the total number of completed dwellings annually that were public housing was commonly around 13–14%.<sup>9</sup>

From 1956, however, there was a distinct shift in Government policy towards encouraging home ownership and supporting low-income households in the public rental market.<sup>10</sup> By the 1970s and 1980s, public housing accounted for around 10% of all residential dwellings built;<sup>11</sup> and over the last decade, it has rarely been above 3%, with our population now approximately 26 million.<sup>12</sup>

As the commitment to public housing has declined over time, there has been a parallel increase in private sector housing initiatives, and an expansion in funding for welfare with, as Adamson notes, a “developing perception of State housing as ‘welfare housing’”.<sup>13</sup> The *Homeless Persons Assistance Act* came into being in 1974, designed to assist homeless persons by subsidising the organisations that provided services to them; and in the mid 1980s the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) and the Crisis Accommodation Programs (CAP) were

introduced. By 2008-09, SAAP funding had expanded to \$384 million with over 1,500 agencies funded. Public housing came to be reserved for those households with greater disadvantage and higher and more complex needs, especially people experiencing homelessness,<sup>14</sup> rather than the “general low-income families” that were supported in the post war years.<sup>15</sup> The right to public housing was, and continues to be, seen as temporary; and tenants who improve their conditions are expected to move into the private rental market, with the potential support of welfare subsidies such as Commonwealth Rental Assistance.<sup>16</sup>

For at least the last decade, however, the private rental market has been failing those on low incomes. The Anglicare Australia *Rental Affordability Snapshot* has shown again and again that almost no homes exist in the private market for those on income support or minimum wage. In 2023, for example, out of 45,895 rental listings Australia-wide on a designated weekend in March, we found that:

- 345 rentals (0.8%) were affordable for a person earning a full-time minimum wage
- 162 rentals (0.4%) were affordable for a person on the Age Pension
- 66 rentals (0.1%) were affordable for a person on the Disability Support Pension
- 4 rentals, (0%) all sharehouses, were affordable for a person on JobSeeker
- 0 rentals (0%) were affordable for a person on Youth Allowance.<sup>17</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the political and social shifts outlined above have not reduced homelessness. In 1973, the ‘Working Party on Homeless Men and Women’ estimated that there were not more than 25,000 people experiencing homelessness across Australia: at the time of the 2021 Census, 122,494 people were estimated to be experiencing homelessness, an increase of 6,067 people (5.2%) since just 2016.<sup>18</sup>

The point of tracing this brief history is to demonstrate the impact of ideology on the nature of our investment into housing, and the way we address homelessness. As a society, we have moved away from a view of housing as not just a human right, but also necessary for a healthy economy and society — a benefit not just for those who need it, but for the whole community. We are at war with crisis, with an armory full of fragmented interventions that simply encourage more crisis. Crisis accommodation simply hides the long term homeless from sight.

While we work within a system that creates this level of need, there is no question that we must continue to fund and support intervention services at every level. The following section identifies our support for broad evidence-based approaches that have been proven to move individuals and families out of homelessness, and spotlights areas of service delivery that require more focused attention and funding.

At the same time, we urgently need to be asking how our current mindset *contributes* to a continuing problem, and what impact a truly groundbreaking investment in actual houses would have on the wellbeing of all Australians.

## 4.0 Interventions and supports

### *A Housing First approach*

All Australians, regardless of their circumstances, have the right to safe and affordable housing. This foundational point should be explicit in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan and underpin every strategy outlined within it.

Anglicare supports, therefore, a Housing First approach that reflects the integrity and original goal of that model. The model was designed to support people with extremely high and complex needs — not, as it appears in some contexts, a model that is “indistinguishable from housing-and-nothing-else”.<sup>19</sup>

The case study to the right<sup>20</sup> provides one demonstration of the effectiveness of the model for people with high needs. A range of Housing First trials in Australia has also shown that the combination of housing, assertive outreach and ongoing flexible support had overwhelmingly positive and sustainable outcomes for people sleeping rough.<sup>21,22</sup> An interactive data visualisation<sup>23</sup> from the US-based National Alliance to End Homelessness provides a further clear depiction of the weight of evidence supporting Housing First interventions.

In Finland, homeless policies have been based on a Housing First approach since 2008. It is the only country in the European Union with decreasing homelessness numbers and almost no people sleeping rough.<sup>24</sup>

In Australia, however, the model has historically been under-funded, and implemented through discrete, geographically haphazard, programs offered largely by not-for-profit organisations. As Homelessness Australia point out, we have “a situation where we know how to end rough sleeping for good, but we only do so in certain parts of the country”.<sup>25</sup>

Researcher Andrew Clarke notes that Housing First was implemented in Finland as “a *system wide* reform program rather than as a discrete program operating within

#### **A Housing First case study: Santa Clara**

The target population for this intervention was people with extremely high needs. Participants averaged five hospitalisations, 20 visits to the emergency department, five to psychiatric emergency services, and three to jail in the two years prior to being enrolled.

The results of the intervention were extraordinary: 86% were successfully housed and remained housed for the vast majority of the follow-up period (which averaged around three years). Similarly, there was a sharp drop in utilisation of emergency psychiatric services among the treatment group, corresponding to a rise in scheduled mental health visits.

When the researchers revisited Santa Clara for additional data some time after the original reporting, they found that more than 90% of participants had been housed and remained housed over the long term.

an unchanged system” (our italics).<sup>26</sup> Its status as a mainstream national homelessness policy and common framework has supported the establishment of diverse partnerships between state authorities, local communities and non-governmental organisations, with targeted measures made possible by cooperation.<sup>27</sup>

### *‘Rapid rehousing’*

Anglicare supports a ‘rapid rehousing’ approach for individuals and families experiencing episodic homelessness, rather than the chronic homelessness and highly complex needs that characterise participants in Housing First programs. Like Housing First, rapid re-housing has no ‘readiness requirements’, but aims to help people exit homelessness (ie crisis mode) and stabilise in housing as quickly and efficiently as possible.<sup>28,29</sup>

Several US-based agencies have undertaken evaluations of rapid rehousing initiatives in their jurisdictions. These include whether program participants (individuals and families) were living in permanent housing following the end of assistance, and whether they returned to homelessness after a specified period of time. Overall, the results indicated high rates of establishment in permanent housing and few returns to homelessness.<sup>30</sup> Other evidence from a randomised controlled trial of homeless families with children shows that families who received priority access to rapid re-housing assistance moved into their own place more quickly and were significantly more likely to be living in their own place during the first year after random assignment than those receiving usual care.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the evaluation of a 12-month NSW Rapid Rehousing demonstration project, despite time and process constraints and challenges, noted that:

*... the vast majority of tenancies secured through Rapid Rehousing have so far been able to be sustained – this means that costs*

#### **Rapid Rehousing Pilot to house women and children leaving refuges**

The two-year Rapid Rehousing Pilot for Women and Children initiative will support eligible women, with or without children, to leave refuges and secure tenancies in the private rental market. It will provide up to 40 women a year with assistance packages, including a contribution toward the bond and a rental subsidy of \$400 per week for 20 weeks.

The Pilot is designed to help participants to avoid homelessness or a return to the perpetrator of their abuse. It will provide a financial safety net which will allow women to retain more disposable income to assist them to build independent, stable lives.

A second initiative, the Rapid Rehousing Pilot for Aboriginal Women and Children, will be rolled out later this year. This focused pilot will assist Aboriginal women and children due to them being significantly overrepresented in experiencing family and domestic violence and homelessness.

*associated with repeat use of Temporary Accommodation have been avoided as well as the costs associated with homelessness.*<sup>32</sup>

The Rapid Rehousing model is highly flexible and can be structured in different ways to meet local circumstances, funding and the needs of specific groups, as can be seen in the Western Australian pilot project described above.<sup>33</sup>

### *Increased support for specialist homelessness services*

Because of the failures of the system at earlier points of the continuum and the particular challenges of the COVID and post-Covid environment, specialist homelessness services are themselves at a crisis point. We need an immediate boost to the funding for specialist homelessness services to address the 'turn away rate'. Behind this somewhat abstract terminology is an individual or a family like the one our ER staff described:

*[The case that sticks in my head is that of] a woman in a major regional centre who has terminal cancer, and is fleeing domestic violence. She and her children lived in a caravan until that became unaffordable and, despite approaches to every possible support agency, are now living in her car. Her greatest fear is that her children will wake up one morning in the car next to her body.*

Additional support for specialist homelessness services should comprise an increase to base funding, so that services have the stability to be able to plan ahead and retain staff; but it should also allow for 'surges' of demand. People do not find themselves homeless in a neatly spaced-out fashion. Demand is often sporadic and uneven, and services need the capacity to fund additional shifts or brokerage as required. No one in need should ever be turned away to sleep rough, or in an unsafe environment.

### *Addressing the specific housing challenges of First Nations peoples*

Particular attention should be directed to the specific housing challenges of First Nations individuals and families.

The Issues Paper outlines the disproportionate rates of housing inequality faced by Indigenous Australians compared with non-Indigenous Australians. While many of the threats to wellbeing from housing inequality can be seen across disadvantaged population groups, the history of colonisation and the relationship of First Nations people to their land, and other cultural considerations, intensify the importance of housing conditions as a determinant of health for Indigenous Australians.<sup>34</sup>

While recognising that the circumstances and views of First Nations peoples will differ across Australia, the Queensland *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Action Plan 2019–2023* may offer some valuable input to the National Plan. The Queensland document acknowledges that access to safe, secure and culturally appropriate housing is the first step to closing the gap in all areas of life, but that the nature of that home is likely to differ depending on personal

circumstances and where people live. Based on extensive consultation with First Nations peoples across the state, the key themes of the *Action Plan* are:

- Increase housing supply and more affordable housing
- Develop local solutions with shared leadership
- Deliver appropriate housing
- Provide greater housing choices
- Culture is key to opening doors for all
- Utilise housing delivery to provide jobs, training and opportunities to grow local communities
- Provide support services for vulnerable cohorts.

This last theme, regarding support services for vulnerable cohorts, raises a point related to the section above. Specialist homelessness services are used by Indigenous Australians at eleven times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (821 compared with 74 per 10,000 population). In 2021–22, around 8% of the Indigenous population used such services.<sup>35</sup> Given these figures, it is important to meaningfully engage with First Nations individuals and families to ensure that the specialist homelessness service sector is both culturally appropriate and accessible.

### *Prevention and early intervention*

The following comment from the Benioff Housing and Homelessness Initiative (BHII) at the University of California (San Francisco) is a compelling argument for the need to fund prevention and early intervention interventions in conjunction with Housing First-based approaches to existing homelessness:

*[W]hile Housing First [and Rapid Rehousing] programs are the best way to help most people who are already homeless, they do not prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. If Housing First programs were to successfully re-house 10,000 people over one year, but rising housing costs forced 20,000 people into homelessness over the same period, then the homeless population will have grown on net. That is why Housing First interventions need to be paired with policies that bring down housing costs, offer protection to struggling renters, and prevent people from falling into homelessness in the first place.<sup>36</sup>*

### *Supply*

Some of the most obvious issues here relate to supply. No homelessness program or programs will address the housing crisis without a simultaneous investment in social and affordable housing. As researchers Hal Pawson and Cameron Parsell point out:

*[H]omelessness cannot be overcome purely through better management and co-ordination of existing services.... We have to*

*reduce reliance on band-aid interventions that are costly and, at best, only lessen the harm.*<sup>37</sup>

There are multiple options for funding new supply, and housing specialist economists and researchers address these with more expertise than we do. QShelter's recent *Submission to the SEQ Regional Plan Update* includes proposed measures which relate to both general housing affordability and, more specifically, to the provision of social and affordable housing.<sup>38</sup> The Grattan Institute's submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs inquiry into the rental crisis also addresses housing supply, pointing out that:

*... housing costs – especially rents – would have risen less [in recent years] if there had been more housing. Australia has among the least housing per person of any country in the OECD, and is one of only four countries where housing per person went backwards over the past two decades.*<sup>39</sup>

Anglicare Australia, in their response to the same inquiry, noted that the Federal Government has pointed to its proposed Housing Australia Future Fund as its response to the supply crisis. However, the 30,000 homes promised across five years<sup>40</sup> is a long way from Australia's 640,000 home shortfall.<sup>41</sup> After years of under-investment in social housing, social housing stock has simply not kept pace with the growth in population, with demand now far outweighing supply. Housing has become less and less affordable over that same period. Turning this around will require regular, on-budget commitments well beyond the proposed Fund.

But turning it round, as Anglicare Australia points out, will leave a legacy of tackling the housing crisis and transforming hundreds of thousands of lives.<sup>42</sup>

### **Income sufficiency**

The Coronavirus Supplement was introduced in 2020 to support vulnerable Australians in a time of unprecedented crisis. After 26 years of stagnancy, income support was raised to a point that enabled many people to both eat and pay rent at the same time — to live just above the poverty line instead of struggling below.

The scrapping of the Coronavirus Supplement, replaced by an inadequate 'boost' of \$50/fortnight, or \$3.57 per day<sup>43</sup> was, for many, a return to rental stress and poverty. Further minor increases and routine indexation to adjust for inflation at the beginning of each year have done little to resolve the issue. In an environment where rents have risen by about 18 per cent, energy bills by about 20 per cent and food by about 9 per cent in just in 2022, such increases are woefully inadequate.<sup>44</sup>

The combination of insufficient income and a desperate lack of housing availability means that families currently in, or on the edge of, poverty are more than likely to never find their way out. As one of our staff members recently commented:

*When Centrelink payments were increased during early Covid stages Anglicare closed, or redistributed staff from emergency relief roles as there was not enough demand. That was brilliant. Now we are*

*constantly seeking donations and supporting families to meet the basic needs of themselves and their children. Our capacity to promote long term positive change and good outcomes for children, who are our future, is significantly negatively impacted as financial stress takes too much emotional toll on parents/carers and too much worker's time & focus.*

Nor is Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) sufficient to relieve the rental stress faced by people on low incomes, despite a recent increase. In their submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into housing affordability and supply in Australia, the Grattan Institute pointed out that the maximum rent assistance payment is indexed in line with CPI, but rents have been growing faster than CPI for a long time. CRA should be indexed to changes in rents typically paid by people receiving income support so that its value is maintained.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the Henry Tax Review recommended:

*Rent Assistance payment rates should be increased so that assistance is sufficient to support access to an adequate level of housing. Maximum assistance should be indexed to move in line with market rents.<sup>46</sup>*

Recent research from Anglicare Australia also shows that the payment is both insufficient and poorly targeted:

- One in two people who get rent assistance (46%) are still in rental stress
- Young people fare even worse, with two in three young people on rent assistance (60%) still in rental stress
- The payment leaves out people on the lowest incomes. Only one in three people on the JobSeeker payment is eligible for the payment (38%), and only one in ten young people out of work (12%)
- Almost no rental vacancies are affordable for people who get rent assistance.<sup>47</sup>

The costs of raising both welfare payments and CRA could be met, as numerous commentators have pointed out, by scrapping the Stage 3 tax cuts scheduled for July 2024. The people who will benefit most from the planned tax cuts are amongst the wealthiest in the country. Those already in poverty, homeless or in rental stress, will benefit least or not at all. Social commentator Greg Jericho points out:

*Income tax is crucial to reducing inequality, but mostly through how much it allows governments to redistribute income through benefits and services. If you massively reduce the level of revenue, as the stage-three tax cuts will do, inevitably government benefits and services will need to be cut. And when you cut government services, you raise inequality.<sup>48</sup>*

In a society that values equality, the more than a quarter of a trillion dollars saved by scrapping the tax cuts would be better spent supporting people out of poverty. In a recent open letter by the leaders of major faith-based charities, it was pointed out that the funds could, among other benefits:

- raise working age payments to the poverty line, lifting 2.3 million Australians, including 840,000 children, out of poverty
- enable the Government to build 36,000 social homes each year. This program would end the shortfall and provide affordable homes to hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, the costings for these two initiatives come in around \$208 billion over ten years, well below the now \$320 billion cost<sup>50</sup> of the tax cuts.<sup>51</sup>

Recognising that scrapping the cuts entirely is politically unpalatable, the Australia Institute has offered four alternatives that both leave median and average income earners better off, and provide Government with more resilience in the budget to adapt to the challenges we will continue to face.<sup>52</sup>

Such alternatives would enable Government to better support a whole array of services (including support for the homelessness sector), that enable Australians to flourish and contribute back to society.

### Climate resilience and disaster preparedness

Homelessness is an emergency in and of itself, regardless of the occurrence of a natural disaster or weather events due to climate change. In *Building the Disaster Resilience of the Homeless Community*, authors Every and Richardson point out the immense additional pressures on homeless service providers in severe weather.<sup>53</sup> Services that are already under-resourced can spend significant amounts — more than \$20,000 in some cases — responding to natural disasters. While this may include infrastructure damage, it is most likely to be related to staffing costs for increases in client presentations and staff workload:

*Staff work extra hours in difficult conditions, may be affected by disasters themselves, and may not be aware of what to do in the situation.*

*The service most impacted by severe weather is outreach. Outreach is also the most effective way to reach clients to warn them about emergencies and to assist them to respond. More restricted outreach impacts on client's safety during severe weather.*

A 2019 survey completed by 161 Australian homeless service providers, together with 45 interviews, identified a range of ways that would assist organisations to be better prepared and cope more effectively with severe weather events. These comprised:

- financial support for additional staffing hours for disaster planning and response, as well as material (eg clothing, food and protective gear) and staff training for emergency response
- training for staff, volunteers and clients
- funds for identified infrastructure recovery, including infrastructure that is specific for homeless people in evacuation centres (eg trauma care, connections with homeless service providers, substance-withdrawal support)

- material support for clients, including emergency packs, mobile phones, swags, water and food
- good inter-agency collaboration, including cross-agency business continuity planning and disaster planning to share resources and coordinate actions to create clear roles for each organisation when a disaster occurs.<sup>54</sup>

More broadly, the impact of climate change and erratic weather patterns on housing, and particularly on the homes and wellbeing of lower income Australians, is likely to be significant. We support measures to improve the sustainability of homes and communities, including such initiatives as:

- targeted financial support to increase the uptake of renewable energy and energy efficiency, with a particular focus on supporting solar on rental properties<sup>55</sup>
- collaborative activity between the Federal Government and the states to improve minimum rental standards for rental properties to reduce bills and emissions.<sup>56</sup>

Neither of these initiatives, nor any other climate change mitigation proposals, are cost-free. As ACOSS has pointed out, however, climate change will affect low-income households and disadvantaged communities disproportionately. For these Australians, and for the community as a whole, the cost of inaction on climate change is far greater than the cost of action.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.0 Success factors

### *A sound evidence base and scalability*

In writing this submission, it was noteworthy how often online searches for housing-related initiatives turned up the phrases ‘pilot’ or ‘demonstration’ project. History tells us that pilot programs are at the mercy of changes of government, loss of funding and inability to ‘scale up’, and that we constantly lose the benefit of innovation and good practice developed in such programs because of this.

The National Plan urgently needs to address this issue. A core question in funding applications for new pilots should relate to scalability: how could the initiative be expanded in scope and/or scale to take advantage of the lessons learned? Could it be implemented at a level that would appeal to institutional investors willing to try to make a population-level difference?

Making such demands of innovators means that Government also needs to consider how to incentivise and compensate innovators for sharing their intellectual property. Pilot programs are beneficial testing grounds for new approaches and often provide valuable data that should be shared and built upon by researchers and practitioners across government, university and the community sectors. There is little value in data that stays forever locked in a cabinet.

## *Workforce*

Like most of the community sector, housing and homelessness service providers face challenges obtaining and retaining suitably qualified staff. A recent AHURI report succinctly summarises the workforce pressures:

- Low remuneration, short term contracts and competitive funding models reduce employees' financial security, resulting in experienced staff leaving the sector, and particularly specialist homelessness services.
- Increasingly complex and heavy workloads (including added administrative tasks; tough emotional and problem-solving demands; unrealistic expectations based on outdated KPIs; and the need to navigate welfare systems outside their control), place high physical and psychological demands on staff, including employee mental health.<sup>58</sup>

Maintaining a funding model that does not recognise or reward the complex nature of the work done by staff in this sector is counter-productive. A highly skilled, capable and well-educated housing and homelessness workforce is an investment not only in staff, but in the wellbeing of the clients they assist. Setting and funding a high benchmark in terms of staff credentials, with a medium-to-long term obligation for organisations to gradually meet those requirements in their staffing profile, would benefit staff, clients and the sector.

## *Coordination and integration of services*

As the Issues Paper suggests, the links between homelessness, insecure housing and other social issues are well documented. The National Plan needs to include a focus on the integration of housing with social infrastructure and programs, such as healthcare, transport, and cultural and recreational facilities and investment; and to support coordinated multi-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral approaches and partnerships.

The past has shown us that the rhetoric of collaboration is easier than achieving and maintaining such partnerships. Systems impacting on homelessness, such as health, justice and the community sector, have developed largely in isolation from each other; and their processes, procedures and sometimes philosophies can seem to be incompatible. Collaborative activities can revert to their original siloed form when funding or support is removed, and staff across jurisdictions and sectors return to old habits.

The coordination and integration of services is thus a long game, and needs ongoing attention to be successful. Collaborative structures and processes need to be embedded as business-as-usual. Agreed channels for information-sharing across agencies need to be maintained and nurtured; processes and language developed and/or shared; and effective referral pathways improved. There needs to be ongoing commitment from *all* of the partners that the collaboration is valuable and worth supporting.

One example of a collaborative approach is the Western Australian Department of Communities project to develop a collective, co-designed understanding of the ‘No Wrong Door’ approach, whereby people can get help regardless of which service or agency they connect with. Knowing that the term meant different things to different government agencies, service providers and the community, the Department instigated a process that revealed shared insights into the challenges, barriers and opportunities of a collaborative ‘No Wrong Door’ approach. Despite what the report described as “the systemic challenges and complexity of the process”, the project identified a range of interconnected initiatives that could improve the experience of people who access and are supported by the homelessness system.<sup>59</sup>

## 8.0 A final word

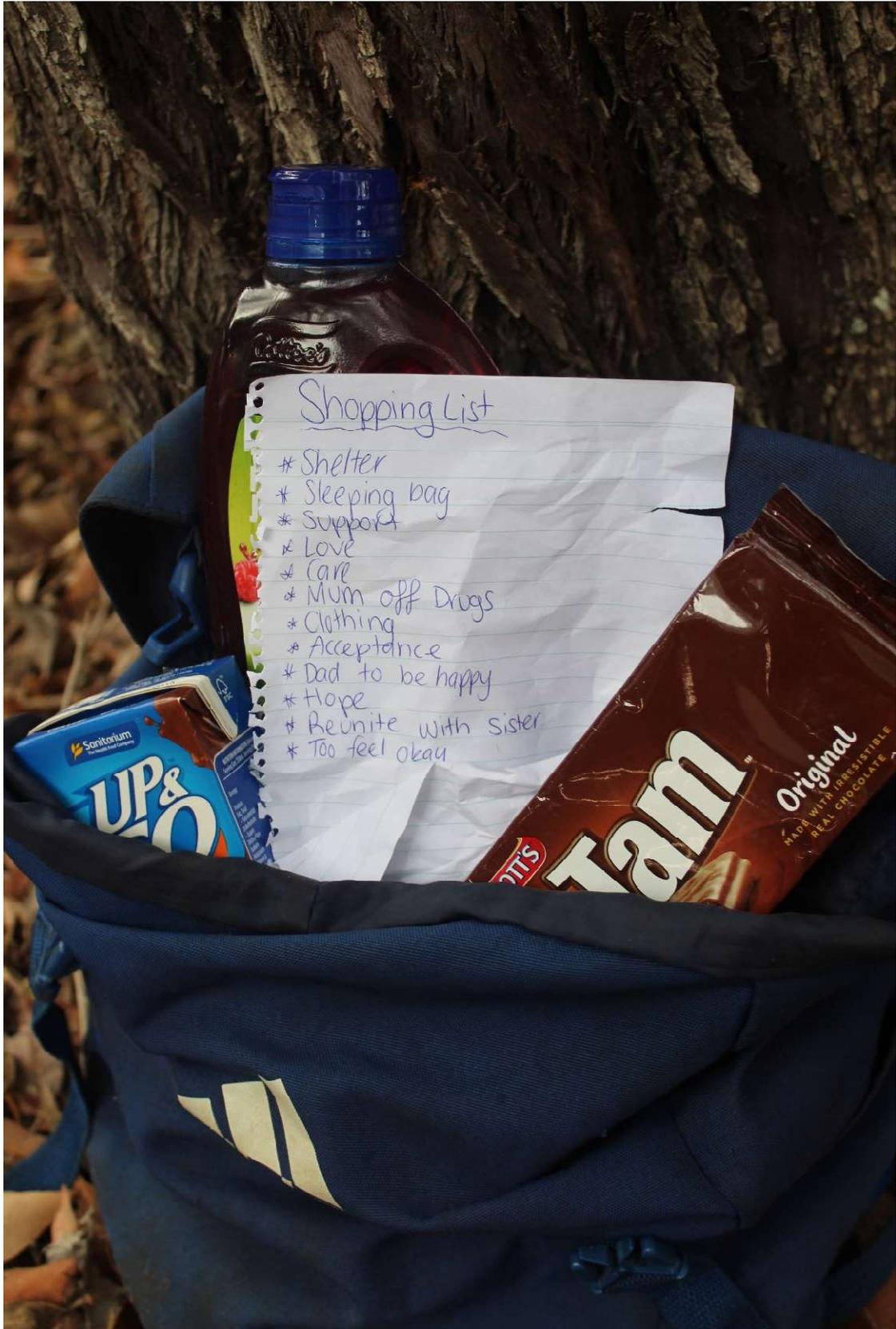
In 2020, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs instigated an inquiry into homelessness in Australia.<sup>60</sup> The final report from that inquiry was informed by five public hearings and more than 200 submissions from government agencies, community groups and individuals. It outlines, too, some of the other reviews and inquiries into homelessness undertaken at the state and federal level in recent years:

- A 2008 White Paper on homelessness, *The Road Home*<sup>61</sup>
- A House of Representatives Standing Committee report, *Housing the Homeless*, in November 2009<sup>62</sup>
- the 2015 report of a Senate Economics Committee inquiry into affordable housing, *Out of reach? The Australian housing affordability challenge*, which included 40 recommendations<sup>63</sup>
- a 2021 Victorian report that contained 51 recommendations for addressing homelessness in that state<sup>64</sup>
- the annual reports on homelessness of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare,<sup>65</sup> and the Productivity Commission’s reports on government services.<sup>66</sup>

There is, clearly, an enormous body of qualitative and quantitative research and lived experience input on housing and homelessness. Governments cannot say that there has been no opportunity to hear the voices of those who live the reality day in and day out.

We cannot therefore excuse the continued existence of homelessness by claiming to be unaware of the nature of the problem, or solutions to address it. We must assume that successive governments have chosen not to fix it.

The National Housing and Homelessness Plan is the circuit-breaker opportunity Australians have been waiting for — the chance to do something groundbreaking, and leave a legacy not only those in need of a home, but for the whole community now and in the future.



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