
National community sector meeting calls for certainty on homelessness funding

The nations' peak Councils of Social Service have called for a clear Federal Government announcement on future funding for chronically under-funded homelessness services in Australia during a national meeting in Perth today.

The future of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) remains uncertain despite a positive report from the Western Australian Auditor General on the programs success in this State and amid growing housing pressures.

"With almost one in ten households nationally experiencing housing stress, and with over 105,000 people homeless in Australia on any given night, the demand for secure affordable housing continues to rise," said Dr Cassandra Goldie, CEO of ACOSS today.

"The uncertainty of ongoing funding of homelessness programs must be addressed. Secure housing is often the greatest barrier to achieving sustainable outcomes for people with complex needs, including those escaping trauma or facing mental health problems and the cost to society of homelessness is often greater than the provision of housing," Dr Goldie said.

"The first State Auditor General's report to be released on the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (from WA) has highlighted how successful the program has been to date, and we anticipate that other States will be delivering similar results," said Irina Cattalini, CEO of WACOSS.

The NPAH expires on 30 June 2013 and the future of the program beyond this date remains uncertain, with no commitment to date for ongoing funding from the Commonwealth. Federal Housing Minister Brendan O'Connor indicated at the last COAG meeting in Perth that they could not commit to maintaining the current level of funding.

The COSS Directors are calling for a clear announcement on future funding at the meeting of the Select Council of Ministers in Brisbane on the NPAH on 16th November.

Forty-one not-for-profit community organisations have been working in WA with the Department of Child Protection to deliver homelessness support services in WA as part of the \$135 million 4 year program.

"The uncertainty of ongoing funding creates problems for these services, with staff in the equivalent of 110 full-time positions likely to begin searching for ongoing and more secure employment," said Ms Cattalini.

Other states and territories are facing similar risks if funding commitments are not entered into soon.

"The consequences of cutting funding to these programs are likely to be significant nationally, but the housing pressures are particularly high in WA, as rapid population and economic growth continue to make housing unaffordable and cost of living pressures increase the financial stress on low income households," she said.

The Western Australian Auditor General's report on the NPAH in WA highlighted the shortfall in available housing as a significant barrier to achieving long-term outcomes, noting that it was ultimately not possible to determine whether the program had succeeded in its target of reducing homelessness numbers by seven percent because of the broader economic circumstances of population growth and a lack of affordable housing.

Losing these homelessness support services will simply result in greater pressures and greater costs elsewhere, particularly in acute care settings and hospital emergency departments.

A recent national study by Prof Eileen Baldry (UNSW) looking at the life course of 11 people with mental health disorders and cognitive disability who cycle in and out of homelessness indicated the cost throughout their life of contact with housing, health, community services and justice agencies to be between \$900,000 and \$5.5 million each.

The *Australian Community Sector Survey* released by ACOSS in August found that nearly 3 in 5 respondents listed housing as a 'high need' service, with 81% saying they could not meet service demand and 20,496 people (56 per day) turned away from the services surveyed.

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This statement was released at St Bartholomew's House, a homeless service in East Perth, by the heads of the Councils of Social Service.

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