



**Eastern Homelessness Service System Alliance
Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness
January 2020**

Terms of Reference

That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, within 12 months, on the state of homelessness in Victoria, in particular, the Committee should;

1. provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria;
2. investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness; and
3. identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.

Eastern Homelessness Service System Alliance (EHSSA)

The EHSSA is a partnership comprising of specialist homelessness and family violence funded services in Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne. The EHSSA is committed to achieving better outcomes for vulnerable members of the community who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and/or family violence.

Its purpose is to:

- provide strategic leadership for homelessness, housing and family violence in the Eastern Metropolitan Region,
- bring together relevant agencies to achieve an agreed vision and mission,
- ensure consistency and quality for service delivery practice amongst member agencies,
- make evidence-based recommendations to the Department of Health & Human Services and Housing and Community Building Division about responses to service gaps,
- monitor service provision (via data collection and/or client satisfaction reviews) through the establishment and feedback of EHSSA working groups for the purposes of identifying gaps and opportunities for enhancement in service provision.

For further information please visit <https://www.ehn.org.au/about>

1. Changing Scale and Nature of Homelessness

The causes of homelessness are complex, with no single trigger. Individual, interpersonal and structural factors all play a role and intersect with each other. The key driver of homelessness is **the lack of affordable housing and a significant increase of people living at or below the poverty line**. Homelessness is often compounded by family violence, physical and mental illness, family crisis and trauma, social isolation, incarceration, discrimination, substance misuse, gambling or disability etc.

Homelessness doesn't just happen. It is usually the result of a crisis escalating to the point where a person can no longer sustain their housing. Homelessness should be rare, the experience brief, and it should not recur in cycles of repeated homelessness¹.

The EHSSA membership have identified an increase of women presenting in the eastern region as a result of family violence; coupled with a high presentation of young people and single people on very limited income. Centrelink recipients and those on low to medium income, are being forced out of the private

¹ Council to homeless persons Victorian Homelessness Election Platform 2018

- 2.2. **Income support failure** – Newstart and Youth Allowances are too low. The rate has not been increased in real terms in 25 years while living costs for people on low incomes are at an all time high. \$40 per day is too low to give people the support they need, making it difficult for recipients to break out of the poverty and unemployment cycles they may be experiencing.
- 2.3. **Increased cost of living and education** – We are seeing more and more people in rental stress. (paying more than 30% of their household income on rent). Food insecurity is becoming ever more present with some parents choosing to go without to feed their family. The membership reports vulnerable older persons not using heaters, or TVs and leaving lights off for fear of not having financial capacity to pay their utility bills. A local program assisting young Mothers has noticed an increase in the number of requests for food hampers this year. Ever increasing school expenses are often taking priority over food.

The State-wide Children's Resource Program administers the government funded *Homeless Children's Brokerage Support Project* that was established to enhance opportunities for children experiencing homelessness and or Family Violence. They have reported an increase in the percentage of brokerage being allocated to educational expenses to fund school costs. Housing insecurity, poverty, trauma and transience may cause disruption to children's education and the formation of friendships, memories and social skills. Increasing technology/book and school fee costs mean that children are unable to access aspects of public education with their peers, which can lead to a child not feeling entitled to participate as their peers do. Children may have reduced access to medical/dental screening and care due to competing costs, with high rental costs (for those that can afford private rental), high costs of living and education expenses.

- 2.4. **Shortfall in Housing Establishment Funds (HEF)** – HEF funds are primarily used to accommodate people who are rough sleeping, in short stay temporary accommodation options, such as motels. Having not been increased since its inception, the Housing Establishment Fund is insufficient to be effective; many highly vulnerable people are being turned away from homelessness services without receiving immediate crisis support or at best receiving very minimal support. This includes people sleeping rough in the remote bushland of the Yarra Ranges who are exposed to the associated risks of isolation and extreme weather conditions.
- 2.5. **Inability to respond effectively to Family Violence** due to lack of resources and funding. Homelessness services have an increased demand to assist women, children and young people escaping family violence with no extra funding or housing options. There has been no resource allocation to homelessness services as a result of the royal commission into family violence. This results in those victims of family violence not requiring high security refuge who seek support from homelessness services, often cannot be assisted and sometimes return to the perpetrator as a result. This places people at risk of further harm and adds an extra burden to an already overloaded homelessness service system.
- 2.6. **Service system intersection / coordination** – Many people within our community, who need ongoing support with disability or mental illness or recovery from significant trauma, do not receive support. As a consequence, they are highly vulnerable to becoming chronically homeless. Often the pathway from exiting acute health, mental health facilities or prison is directly into the homelessness service system. There is very little funding and support available for those exiting or transitioning from these services. There seems to be a lack of understanding that it is everyone's duty of care to assist anyone experiencing homelessness.
- 2.7. **Lack of support for young people** - With nearly 20,000 young people aged 15–24 seeking support from a homelessness agency in 2016-17, young people account for nearly a fifth of those

experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Victoria⁴. It is essential that appropriate housing is available with support as needed. Young people who have been in out of home care are heavily over-represented among all young people experiencing homelessness. Improvements are needed to increase housing stock and to ensure support is available to people who are couch surfing, those who are from the LGBTIQ community and young people with multiple complex needs.

2.8. Dissolution of social support programs with the introduction of NDIS – There has been a noticeable increase in the number of people presenting to homelessness services with mental illness as a reason for their homelessness. Many are individuals who have been supported by a social support program and are now not eligible for NDIS. Many are on Newstart and previously would have been eligible for the Disability Support Pension. The application process for the NDIS and Disability Support Pension is more difficult to manage individually without support or assistance from a family member or advocate.

3. Solutions

Need for increased affordable, appropriate and safe housing – short, medium and long term

- Build 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings per year for the next ten years and ensure 1,500 of the 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings are one or two bedroom.
- Better emergency accommodation options for highly vulnerable groups, including people experiencing chronic homelessness, those exiting acute health or mental health facilities or prison, and for young people unable to live safely at home.
- Providing safe, appropriate and affordable housing options for singles and small families is an urgent priority.
- Housing First approaches and new programs to include stepped out meaningful support.
- Improve system intersection and communication. Everyone has a *Duty to Assist* to ensure other service systems address their clients'/patients homelessness.
- A significant government investment in youth homelessness and young people transitioning from out of home care to independent living. An extended care guarantee for young people leaving care.
- Continue to fund and expand programs that have proven to work to reduce homelessness, such as early intervention programs for young people and Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP)
- Increase *Continuing Employment and Education Pathways* (CEEP) and *Homeless Children's Brokerage Support Project* funds to ensure more young people are better supported and stay engaged with education opportunities as well as staying connected socially to their local communities.

⁴ Pierce, D., 2017, *Current state and future possibilities; Youth refuges redesign, Today design* for the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, p.3.