



**Speech to Youth Accommodation Association (YAA) Sixth
NSW State Youth Homelessness Conference**

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Newcastle

Monday 11 August 2008 at 5.00pm

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Introduction

Thank you Michael (Coffey, YAA Executive Officer) for your introduction.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I also acknowledge Mr Kevin Crowe, the President of the Youth Accommodation Association, and Ms Narelle Clay from Southern Youth and Family Services in Wollongong.

Thank you all for the opportunity to speak at the sixth Youth Accommodation Association Youth Homelessness Conference.

Your work is really important because although there are more than 100,000 homeless Australians every night, there are no signs that this number is falling.

After a period of sustained economic prosperity, it is a national shame that so many Australians are homeless every day.

Reducing the number of homeless Australians is a priority for the Australian Government.

We need to rethink how programs across all levels of government can work together to tackle homelessness.

Meetings such as this, where experts like yourselves can come together to have a full and frank discussion is one way of finding real solutions that work.

Another way is to bring homelessness to the forefront of the public policy debate – which occurred last week during National Homeless Person's Week.

The advertisements and posters for National Homeless Person's Week showed the harsh realities of what being homeless actually means.

It does not matter how often I am confronted with these realities – the stories of homeless Australians continue to sadden me.

Every time I visit a homelessness service – like I did earlier today when I went to Carrie’s Place in East Maitland – it emphasises the importance of our efforts to reduce homelessness.

Carrie’s Place is typical of many other services – with dedicated and committed staff who put their heart and soul into their jobs.

They also had inspiring stories of people who had experienced domestic violence who have recovered from abusive relationships and homelessness and achieved a better life for themselves.

Sadly the other typical thing about Carrie’s Place was its turn away rate, with the centre forced to turn away nine out of ten families – or 1,155 women and children – last year.

This shows that there is a chronic need for us to get serious about reducing homelessness.

Homelessness is a problem which impacts on the entire community and it should be an issue the entire community is committed to addressing.

Young people – particularly those that have not finished school or can’t rely on support from their family - will continue to be among the hardest hit if housing gets even more unaffordable in the future.

Already more than one in three people experiencing homelessness are aged between 12 and 24 years.

The latest annual report into the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) found that the highest rate of usage of SAAP services during 2006-07 were young people aged 15-19 years.

The Australian Government is determined to tackle youth homelessness, something that prevents our young people from fully participating in their communities and the economic and social life of the nation.

We need to provide young people with greater support to encourage them to become active members of the community, and addressing homelessness is a major part of this.

It will not be easy, and we will all have to work together, but the high level of homelessness in Australia today is a national tragedy.

Effective working relationships between all levels of government, business and community organisations are essential if we are to make a genuine difference in the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

I can tell you that both the Prime Minister and I are passionate about reducing homelessness.

This is why one of the Government's first acts in 2008 was to announce that it would develop a Homelessness White Paper, which I will talk more about later.

Homelessness Green Paper

In May the Government released its Homelessness Green Paper, *Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness*, to promote discussion on how to reduce homelessness.

We were delighted by the level of interest in the Green Paper.

We received almost 600 written submissions and over 1,200 people attended the 13 consultation sessions held across the country.

I thank those of you here who made a submission to the Green Paper, or if you attended one of the forums.

Many submissions make it clear that youth homelessness is an alarming problem.

Almost 25 per cent of submissions to the Green Paper came from organisations and individuals involved with young people.

One of those submissions was of course from the Youth Accommodation Association.

In your submission, you called on the Government to retain a specialist homelessness response, develop goals and targets to reduce homelessness and focus our efforts on early intervention and wrap-around support.

You also – like many – made the point that we cannot fix homelessness without increasing the supply of affordable housing

YAA also encouraged the Government to develop the homeless service workforce.

Many submissions made similar points.

Many submissions called for enhancements to early intervention services including Reconnect, family relationship and mediation services. That is an area we are looking very closely at.

There is also a need to provide targeted affordable housing for young people with support to meet the needs of the individual.

Mainstream services must acknowledge the diversity and complexity of young people's needs.

Young people need help to make the transition into independent living.

There is a clear opportunity to prevent young people who are leaving state care from becoming homeless through targeted housing, education, and financial support.

Intergenerational homelessness must also be addressed by providing integrated services to support women and children affected by family violence.

I was pleased that many submissions agreed that service system needs to be improved.

We need to find better ways of integrating and coordinating the work of mainstream services and homeless services.

Responses also need to be targeted to individual needs as it is clear a 'one size fits all' approach does not work with an issues as complex as homelessness.

Some people here will know that for many years my electorate office has been just across the road from the Oasis Centre – the service for homeless youth that was featured earlier in a documentary screened on ABC earlier this year.

Over the years I have made many visits to Oasis and seen many of the young people supported to deal with the problems they face and improve their lives.

Some of the nicest times I have visited have been for graduations from Oasis's training programs.

It almost always comes at after a lot of support from staff at the service, but is a very important milestone in the long term well being of the young people who get there.

The Green Paper process confirmed that there are many services across the country that are achieving excellent results.

Many of these services are a credit to strong local leaders who have brought together funding from multiple sources to create the programs that they think will work for their clients.

People working on the ground have worked across government funding programs, used philanthropic funds and built relationships with their local hospital, mental health team and job network provider to bring services together in the interests of their clients.

I think it is fair to say that most of this has been happening without leadership from government, especially the Australian Government.

The good news is that we have many examples of excellent services that deliver outcomes for homeless people.

Between us we know quite a bit about preventing homelessness and helping people to get out of homelessness when it happens.

But we are yet do it everywhere.

One of the great challenges in the Green and White Paper process is to focus the whole system on providing the service and models that work best.

I understand that part of that is about resources.

The other part is about making our services systems as good as they possibly can be.

Homelessness White Paper

All submissions and feedback are now being considered and worked into the Government's Homelessness White Paper.

The White Paper will be released later in the year.

The Paper will need to both include what we are going to do now as well as providing a strategy for all of us to keep working on homelessness in the future.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity and the Government is determined to make the most of the White Paper policy process.

From my point of view I am grateful that we have a Prime Minister who is so committed to efforts to reduce homelessness.

We can, and really need to, make a genuine difference in the lives of homeless Australians.

Researcher lock up

Many submissions raised the importance of research in developing and rolling out our national response to homelessness.

The Government's renewed focus on homelessness has highlighted the poor evidence base that we have to work with.

We also need to know that what we doing works: there is not much point in establishing new programs if we do not have an idea of how they will work.

We also need to be able to properly measure the impact of our interventions and our progress on goals or targets we might set.

To those who thought it was dead – evidence-based policy is back.

To test some of the suggestions for research that came out of Green Paper submissions, I recently invited a small group of researchers from a broad range of backgrounds to a ‘researcher lock up’.

This energetic forum will assist the Government to develop a national homelessness research agenda as part of the White Paper.

Strengthening data collection might not seem particularly sexy, but I think it is central to a new approach to reducing homelessness.

National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse

There is no point in having research unless we encourage practitioners, academics, policy makers and journalists to use it.

We want to make sure everyone in the homelessness sector is sharing, and has access to, relevant information.

That is why I am so pleased to be able to launch the National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse today.

With government funding of \$500,000 over three years the clearinghouse will be an invaluable tool to inform and help connect the homelessness sector.

Through this web-based tool you will be able to share relevant homelessness research, information and good practice examples across the sector.

This is a great opportunity for the homelessness sector to build a store of knowledge and increase debate and discussion through online forums.

These online forums, or 'Communities of Practice', use technology so we can work smarter.

It will reduce the time commitment of participants and eliminate logistical barriers, such as distance, so that information and ideas can be shared with ease.

Along with a range of general information about homelessness in Australia, the website will provide links to relevant federal and state government department websites, and links to homelessness organisations websites and agency contacts.

Examples of good practice in homelessness agency management and in working with people experiencing homelessness will be available, along with lists of research publications and data sources about homelessness.

For example, in the youth section of the website you can access a range of information relating to youth homelessness and the many complex factors affecting homeless young people.

The resources available are diverse and include useful documents, case studies, reports, services, programs and links to documents or online resources.

You can make a difference to youth homelessness by adding to the discussion and knowledge base.

I encourage you all to use the National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse and think about how it can help your work in the future.

Although formulating and implementing policy is important, gathering evidence and evaluating success – or otherwise – of our programs is also essential if we are to properly address homelessness.

There is a need for broad and long-term research into homelessness and the National Homelessness Information Clearinghouse will play an essential role in this, both now and into the future.

Conclusion

I know I do not have to lecture anyone here about how homelessness, in particular youth homelessness, is a very real and complex problem.

But I can tell you that there is serious commitment in Government – from the Prime Minister down – to reduce homelessness.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

I wish you a successful conference.

ENDS