

It's time to fix homelessness

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It is time to fix homelessness. It is long overdue. Seventeen years of economic growth yet the number of homeless people has risen. I was asked to address what should be considered if we are to make the most of the opportunity offered by the Federal Government. I will address what's different, what's possible, and what's needed. Many of us have worked in this area for decades. Even when it's been really tough – we have kept the ideal alive – social justice and the elimination of homelessness. The task ahead is huge and it won't happen overnight.

But it must happen. People who experience homelessness are depending on us. You have heard some figures today. 100,000 homeless people; 36,000 aged 12 to 24 years; 22,000 of those are teenagers; an additional 10,000 children homeless on any night. The recent report, Australia's Homeless Youth, revealed yet again the continuing disgrace of youth homelessness. Every time you hear those figures, or see media coverage, or open the door of a service to provide shelter you can not help but be moved. There are too many homeless people, too many living in sub standard housing because of poverty, too many as the result of child abuse and domestic violence, too many incarcerated and too many without opportunities most of us take for granted. It is hard to imagine a group more socially excluded than homeless people.

The problem has not been a lack of concern but this concern has often translated into a new program, or a reform, or a data collection or an Inquiry. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was a National response to the inadequate and ad hoc arrangements in the States and Territories. SAAP was developed with the community sector, still has, a legislated social justice framework and has been the key homelessness response in Australia since 1985. It remains an effective program, and in fact desired in many countries. However, for too long, it was expected to do more than it was resourced or intended to do, and it could not meet the relentless demand. I have heard it said, that SAAP failed to reduce homelessness. It did not fail. Past Governments failed. SAAP could never reduce homelessness without the elimination of the causes or drivers.

There have been improvements including the expansion of medium term supported accommodation, the enhancement of case management, increased professionalism, and a move away from institutionalisation. SAAP services showed great commitment and innovation by stretching their capacity with additional housing so people exiting had access to an affordable option for transition. But overall, these were all small changes.

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Despite the improvements, there have been missed opportunities to actually make a difference. The big decisions around policy, priority and resource allocation were not made. For too long we've been forced to accept tinkering around the edges of programs, as an alternative to real action to eliminate homelessness. The spin's been endless – unmet demand was explained away as double counting, we were told it's not about bricks and mortar, they said co-ordination and case management were lacking, and individuals were blamed for their homelessness. Of course we knew that - there was and is high unmet demand, that it is very much about bricks

and mortar and that case managing individuals could never prevent homelessness in the absence of action on the causes.

Last year, as part of the Inquiry into Youth Homelessness independently funded by the Caladonia Foundation, Commissioners David McKenzie, David Eldridge and Father Wally Dethlefs, and I heard evidence at the Public Hearings that was both inspiring and discouraging. There were strong messages from the young people themselves of entering a supportive and positive placement, many in SAAP, of feeling safe and gaining help, of the important relationships they made with workers. Many of you would have recently seen the documentary featuring the Oasis Service. Despite the most dire situations that those young people found themselves in, you could not help but to be touched by the young people's hopes for their future.

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From the Inquiry's findings, we know that services are doing a really positive job in a very difficult area. That being said, there were too many stories of young people who because of child abuse, domestic violence and other untenable situations had left home with the assistance of the State/Territory child protection departments only to find themselves homeless, poor and vulnerable because of a lack of appropriate placement or supported accommodation. Young people told us of their confusion, their lack of appropriate treatment in the mental health system including those who said they wanted to kill themselves, yet were discouraged from entering hospital. Maybe hospital was not the right place for them, but there were no other available

alternatives. And we heard time and time again, that young people wanted to get a bed in a homelessness service but they were full.

Many ask, do we really have a chance to fix homelessness this time?. I think yes. Will we be successful? I would say Yes again. Will it be easy? No bloody way. I know many of you are relieved that our lobbying has paid off and Government has listened. But this is not the time to feel relieved. This is not the time to gloat that homelessness has finally made it onto the big political agenda. If we do that, we will be missing the opportunity to influence and design the improvements needed. The White/Green Paper process provides a chance to work on the solutions. And this won't be the only opportunity. Its just the beginning. But this chance must not be squandered.

There are some risks so let me just mention a few cautions.

- Don't defend things that could be improved. Be open to the things that can change. Some things do need to be improved or changed or replaced.
- Resist the temptation to blame current programs and services for being less than effective. Its unhelpful and inaccurate.
- Don't throw the baby out with the bath water. In an effort to do something different, in seeking innovation, don't overlook the services and models that are effective. If you do this, the consequence will be a loss of community support and infrastructure that is invested in existing local services.
- Don't fall into the trap of going with cleverly marketed models or thinking the best and most innovative ones are overseas.
- Don't just define the problem as primary homelessness because that will severely limit our responses.
- Resist the tendency to keep existing services but expect more from them without additional funds.
- Adequate staffing is a key to successful models. Don't try and save money by not

funding the real cost. It's a false economy and it doesn't work.

- Be wary of generic or simple one size fits all solutions because they may well miss the mark and people will fall through the gaps.
- Watch out that change or reform in one area doesn't have unintended consequences in another.
- Step carefully, if for instance, the SAAP legislation is repealed. Don't proceed without community support and agreement on the replacement and we need assurances that the essence and unique qualities of SAAP will not be lost.
- And be careful in the reform of Commonwealth and State Agreements not to dilute essential programs and lose national co-ordination and national leadership from national problems.

The changed environment and the provision of the current opportunity will not, on its own, be enough to rid this country of homelessness. It will still need significant ongoing commitment, time and resources.

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For community workers and voluntary managements we must remind ourselves that we have made mistakes in the past when we have perceived there is a more supportive Government in power. Even supportive Governments don't always get it right. It is even more important to increase our activism, advocacy and lobbying, our participation and engagement in peaks and unions and in Government processes and opportunities for consultation so that the opportunity provided is maximised. This will also increase and demonstrate the community's support for Government action and spending and will ensure homelessness stays a priority until it is reduced.

The sheer numbers of homeless people, the numbers of people who work in the homelessness area and the number of people here today, give great strength and momentum to the task at hand.

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