

CHAPTER 7

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Terms of reference

Part (c) of the Committee's terms of reference asked it to consider the appropriate responsibilities of governments at all levels in the provision of services to homeless youth. To a large extent this matter has been dealt with already throughout the report. There remain a few issues, however, which require some discussion.

It became apparent to the Committee during the course of its public hearings that all state governments and the Northern Territory have developed new programs, or have modified existing programs, to help come to terms with the growing problem of youth homelessness.¹ In all written and oral evidence provided by Commonwealth and state governments and the Northern Territory, it was acknowledged that governments do have a responsibility towards homeless youth.² The extent to which this responsibility should be a combined Commonwealth/state matter, however, was not at all clear.

Identified areas of responsibility

The New South Wales Government stated in its submission to the Committee that the role of government in respect of homeless youth should be twofold:

'Firstly, more accurate information should be collected on the extent of demand by youth for permanent housing and their opinions regarding permanent housing alternatives.

Governments should encourage, directly or indirectly, the provision of the most satisfactory alternatives. This need not necessarily be limited to direct Government financial support, but should include the creation of a suitable regulatory and planning framework, conducive to the construction or establishment of youth housing.

Secondly, Governments should investigate areas of special need in respect of young people who would be totally unable to sustain self-support but cannot otherwise be housed, and consider the provision of suitable dwellings to be made available through welfare organisations.³

The Victorian Government, in its submission to the Committee, stated:

'Overall, the primary level of support services should maintain and strengthen the integrity of the family, especially at times of stress. At a secondary level, government services should offer a place for 'time out' while family difficulties are resolved. Only at times of actual family breakdown should the thrust of government services be geared towards providing youth with semi-permanent or permanent accommodation away from their families. In broad terms, it is appropriate for the Commonwealth Government to assume principal responsibility for funding of major programs while the State government's responsibility should lie in standard supervision and program maintenance and monitoring; local governments should be concerned with community structures and local support services.⁴

With the exception of state wardship, the problem of youth homelessness can be approached sensibly only by assuming that families, the community and government (at

all levels) have a responsibility towards homeless young people, but that this responsibility cannot be clearly delineated.

Most state responsibility for young people is set out in statutes. The state will intervene only where families are deemed by the courts not to be providing adequate care and protection for their young, or where young people have offended against the law. Should these young people come before the courts and be made wards of the state, however, the states have a clear responsibility towards their care and protection.

Where homeless youth have either rejected or been rejected by their families and are not under state supervision, there is a problem in determining which level of government, if any, is responsible for providing them with accommodation and related services. The Committee believes it is important to note that most families provide for the care and development of their children with minimal assistance from government.

The Review of Commonwealth Functions stated that 'states and local governments are closer to the recipients of many services and are better placed to administer those programs. Their structure and location permits maximum response and involvement by those most affected by the decisions of government'.⁵ Provided appropriate financial adjustments are made, all states and the Northern Territory would appear to support the receipt of many social service functions to avoid duplication and waste. The Committee's only reservation about such an arrangement is that it believes the Commonwealth should be able to insist that when additional funds are made available for programs of national concern, they are spent as originally intended. In this way, if the Commonwealth Government acknowledges that a problem exists and requires national co-ordinated action, there needs to be some guarantee that action will be undertaken in all states.

Perhaps the greatest bone of contention in the area of shared responsibility is the Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement.⁶ The reduction in funds both in real and money terms under the Agreement in recent years was raised quite strongly in most state government submissions, and very strongly in the majority of other submissions to this inquiry. What is not clear from the Committee's point of view is the extent to which general purpose allocations have replaced part or all of the specific purpose grants under the new federalism.

Unfortunately, while the debate continues as to who should be providing the necessary money to maintain and increase the stock of public housing in Australia, the waiting lists for public housing in most states have grown dramatically. The states clearly prefer to receive their portion of Commonwealth revenue via general purpose allocations in order to have greater flexibility and freedom in initiating policies. They see the existence of specific purpose grants in some way diminishing their flexibility, apparently assuming that no further funds can be made available from other sources. It would appear that the states are reluctant to understand that funds from a general purpose allocation could be used in areas where specific purpose grants exist.

The balance between general purpose allocations and specific purpose grants under the new federalism go beyond the terms of this inquiry. However, the Committee has felt it necessary to raise this issue as it relates to public housing. Until such time as this debate is resolved satisfactorily, both the Commonwealth and state governments will continue to come under increasing criticism from many sectors of the community. In the meantime, claims by state governments that they are unable to provide more funds in a particular area because of fixed Commonwealth allocations, and counter-claims by the Commonwealth Government that the states have been given greater flexibility in financial matters (and therefore it is their responsibility to allocate the general purpose funds to areas of high priority), will not build houses.

Most states have set up emergency youth housing committees. From both the written and oral evidence submitted to the Committee it is evident that each state has responded differently to the plight of homeless youth. It is against this background of varied response that the Committee sees the need for the continuation of a nationally co-ordinated youth refuge scheme, and the introduction of a nationally co-ordinated medium to long term supportive household scheme. In this way there is a guarantee that at least a minimum level of service will be available in each state. Beyond that, the Committee believes it is up to the states to respond accordingly by meeting any outstanding needs.

Conclusion

There is no easy formula which neatly divides the areas of responsibility for homeless youth among the various levels of government, families and the community at large. The Committee believes that there needs to be a minimum level of service provided nationally which can be supplemented at the state or local level, depending on the particular needs within each region. If governments provide the necessary resources to enable homeless youth to cope with their immediate problems of food and shelter, and to help them become productive members of the community, the immediate cost is likely to be far outweighed by the long term benefits. Failure to address the problem of youth homelessness in the short term may be, in effect, to nurture a potential skid row population.

Endnotes

1. Transcript of evidence, pp. 1103, 1108-10, 1697, 1714, 1723, 2375, 2889-90, 3002, 3070, 3191, 3197, 3203, 3208-9, 3575.
2. Transcript of evidence, pp. 1103, 1108-10, 1697, 1714, 1723, 2375, 2889-90, 3002, 3070, 3191, 3197, 3203, 3208-9, 3575.
3. Transcript of evidence, p. 1108.
4. Evidence from Department of Social Security.
5. Review of Commonwealth Functions.
6. Transcript of evidence, pp. 1106, 1719, 3211-12, 2384-5, 491-6.