

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
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Submission to the House of Representatives
Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation

Please find attached the submission from the Mercy Foundation to the Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation. The Foundation welcomes the Inquiry and congratulates the Government on inviting public submissions on this important issue.

In summary, the Mercy Foundation would like to see the implementation of legislation that clearly articulates adequate, affordable and safe housing as a right for all Australians. In conjunction with such housing there must also be appropriate support services that help sustain people in permanent housing. The Mercy Foundation actively supports the reduction in crisis accommodation hostels as Australia moves towards the increased availability of immediate housing options as a response to homelessness, using a 'Housing First' approach.

Access to appropriate housing is a key social justice and social inclusion issue and the Mercy Foundation welcomes the Federal Government's recent policy, service and and other initiatives in this area.

If the Committee would like further information on this submission please contact me on 02 9699 8726 or at executive@mercyfoundation.com.au

Yours sincerely



Felicity Reynolds

Chief Executive Officer

MERCY FOUNDATION SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS LEGISLATION

MERCY FOUNDATION BACKGROUND

The Mercy Foundation is a Catholic organisation, under the auspices of the North Sydney Sisters of Mercy. It is an organisation committed to social justice and structural changes to create greater social equity and inclusion in the Australian community.

In late 2007 the Mercy Foundation Board, following a review of the Foundation, decided that the primary social justice issue with which the Mercy Foundation will be concerned is homelessness and its related causes and consequences. These include: affordable housing, poverty, family violence, social exclusion, mental illness, disability, addictions and brain injury. The Mercy Foundation has a special interest in single women and women with children who experience homelessness.

RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The principles that should underpin the provision of services to Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Key principles should include:

- Identify and work towards the vision of ending homelessness in Australia.
- The best response to homelessness is to prevent homelessness.
- Homelessness is not a standalone issue. It must be seen as an avoidable result of other problems or the failure of other systems (eg. inadequate income support; job opportunities; family violence; mental illness etc).
- Everyone has the right to adequate and affordable permanent housing.
- Housing solves homelessness. Housing with ongoing support solves homelessness for those individuals and families who have other problems for which they may require ongoing assistance (eg. mental illness).
- 'Housing First' works and there is now a substantial evidence base for its implementation as a response to homelessness.
- All homeless individuals and families have the right to dignity and respect and services and government departments must reflect these values.
- Services for people who are homeless must be outcomes based and work collaboratively with clients and other services to find suitable long term outcomes for individuals and families.



- People's individual's needs must be assessed appropriately and responded to according to those needs and not the needs of the services.
- Services to homeless people must be provided in a timely and efficient manner and with the view to both short and long term outcomes.
- Where possible and appropriate, individuals and families who become homeless should be able to access options within the community in which they live and have links with, rather than be required to move to other locations to access services.
- Mainstream health and other community services must deal appropriately with people who are homeless and provide them with the same level of services they would provide any other client of their organisation.
- Evidence based services and practices must be the first line response to homelessness and to risk of homelessness, rather than uncoordinated, but well meant actions, that do little to prevent or to 'break the cycle of homelessness'.

2. The scope of any legislation with respect to related government initiatives in the areas of social inclusion and rights.

- The current definition of homelessness which is widely used in Australia needs to be reviewed. The notion of Primary, Secondary and Tertiary homelessness does not adequately describe the social exclusion associated with being homeless and does not incorporate other factors embedded in homelessness (eg. poverty, DV, mental illness etc) – it speaks only to the notion of 'rooflessness' and inadequate housing.

3. The role of legislation in improving the quality of services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- Legislation should mandate high quality data collection in the area of homelessness. Good data about homelessness will help prevent and respond more appropriately to it.
- Data collection on homelessness and homelessness risk factors should not be limited to homelessness specialist services, but must also be mandated and incorporated within health, income support and education related government and NGO services. These are often the types of organisations that have an opportunity to prevent or provide early intervention on homelessness.
- Homelessness legislation must include minimum quality of service standards and incorporate an adequate (but not a cumbersome) monitoring regime.
- Legislation also needs to mandate outcomes that relate to obtaining and sustaining long term housing (and support, if required) for people who are homeless or at immediate risk of homelessness. In so doing, such legislation will need to be careful not provide incentives for services to deal only with individuals or families who have low support needs. Ensuring that services have adequate funding and other incentives to deal comprehensively with individuals and families with very high support needs will be essential.



4. The effectiveness of existing legislation and regulations governing homelessness services in Australia and overseas.

- The UK Homelessness Act (2002) mandates that local housing authorities formulate a homelessness strategy. It is recommended that this be also done in Australia. However, the local homelessness strategies could take a similar form to the '10 year plans to end homelessness' currently being implemented in the USA and Canada.
- Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act of 2007. In summary this US Act "Amends Findings and Purpose of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1986). Purpose as amended is to:
 - Create a unified, performance based process for funding
 - Encourage collaboration and planning
 - Focus the public and private sector on ending and preventing homelessness
 - Assist people in transitioning from homelessness
 - Consolidate existing homelessness programs (Supportive Housing Program,
 - Innovative Programs, Safe Havens, Section 8 Mod Rehab/SRO, and Shelter Plus Care)
 - Allow flexibility, creativity and outcome focus
 - Ensure that multiple Federal agencies are involved as appropriate for their missions, to serve homeless people." (From National Health Care for the Homeless www.nhchc.org)

5. The applicability of existing legislative and regulatory models used in other community service systems, such as disability services, aged care and child care, to the homelessness sector.

- It is essential that any new homelessness legislation not replicate cumbersome models which require too much inspection, service controls and reporting and limit service flexibility.

