



The Hon. Annette Ellis MP
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Ellis,

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS LEGISLATION

Thank you for the opportunity to make a brief submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth Inquiry into the content of homelessness legislation.

As the national agency which works in collaboration with all the jurisdictions to develop standards for and collect nationally-consistent data about homelessness services, the AIHW recommends that the legislation include a provision to underpin the collection of nationally-consistent data to inform policy and service delivery.

While the review terms of reference do not specifically address the issue of data collection or reporting, the availability of reliable and valid data on homelessness is an important underpinning to evidence-based policy development and service planning.

The Australian Government's White Paper on Homelessness specifically addresses data issues and notes that there are concerns regarding the collection of data including incomplete coverage of agencies, client consent, legislative restrictions on access to confidential data, privacy issues and administrative burden.

It states that these concerns need to be "balanced against the service improvements that might flow from access to richer data on clients' pathways" and that "...data linkage across large data collections with appropriate protocols for undertaking analysis of the data would assist in understanding the complex pathways in and out of homelessness and could lead to improved responses for people experiencing homelessness."

Against this background, the AIHW believes that the Inquiry provides an opportunity to consider the inclusion of provisions in legislation, similar to those in the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act*, to ensure the nationally-consistent collection and reporting of data.

The provisions in the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act* have ensured that Australia has nationally-consistent data on the services provided to homeless people who are supported under the Act. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) National Data Collection has sustained a high level of support and accuracy in providing the information necessary to assist in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the SAAP program.

The collection of nationally-consistent data in relation to the homeless and those at risk of homelessness will be facilitated by a legally binding obligation for entities identified by the Minister as being in possession of data regarding homelessness to collect and report data in a manner consistent with nationally agreed standards. These entities might include care agencies, crisis and transition accommodation services, schools and other support service providers as identified in the Commonwealth's White Paper, and government agencies.

As the White Paper notes, data collection can add to administrative burden for front-line staff and without a legislative underpinning there may be less regard for the value to be gained from good quality, comprehensive data. It is important that data collection be incorporated as far as possible into the day-to-day business of agencies providing services to homeless people or those at risk of homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Our contact officer for further discussion is Mr Geoff Neideck (Head, Housing and Disability Group).

Yours sincerely

Dr Penny Allbon

Director

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

28 August 2009