

Max Vardanega

17/08/09

<p><u>Submission No. 57</u> (homelessness legislation) A.O.C. Date: 25/08/09</p>

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Parliamentary Inquiry Into Homelessness Legislation

Attached is my submission to the Inquiry.

If I can provide further information or answer any questions in regard to my submission please contact me by telephone or email.

Yours sincerely,

Max Vardanega

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Summary

The Road Home. A National Approach To Reducing Homelessness, at page 62 states

Quote:

An integrated information technology system

Connected administrative data collected from both specialist homelessness and mainstream services over time is needed. This will improve the quality and timeliness of the data collected, reduce the administrative burden on specialist homelessness services in collecting and reporting data, reduce the burden on clients in repeatedly providing the same information to different agencies and will improve both service planning and the service offer to individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The Australian Government will undertake a scoping study to explore information technology options to better integrate homelessness specialist with each other and with mainstream services.

Under the National Partnership on Homelessness the COAG Reform Council will report annually on the progress each jurisdiction has made against the partnership's high-level performance indicators. Monitoring of progress on homelessness will be undertaken by the Housing Ministers' Conference and Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference.

Where we will start

- *Develop a national homelessness research strategy, which builds on existing data and research, to measure progress against goals and targets and ensure that our homelessness intervention is evidence based.*
- *Pilot a data linkage study to gain a clearer picture of the homeless pathways through service systems.*
- *Reform the National Data Collection process.*
- *Undertake a scoping study on ways information technology could be used to better connect homelessness specialist with each other and with mainstream services.*

End Quote:

I ask the Committee to recommend that Homelessness Legislation should require all jurisdictions to cooperate with the Australian Government in the development of an integrated information technology system.

The objective is to improve the management and utilisation of the very substantial assets that are allocated to addressing homelessness and to make it easier for clients and agencies to find accommodation.

The benefits that are expected to accrue from the development of an integrated information technology system are:

1. Better utilisation of accommodation assets because vacancies will be visible to all agencies that refer clients to them.
2. Better management of the assets because the utilisation will be seen on a daily basis thus focussing the minds of those managing them.
3. Accurate reporting of unmet demand.
4. A substantial increase in productivity within the sector.
5. A large saving in community worker time and telephone costs.
6. More accurate and timely referrals for clients.
7. Easier integration of new staff because one will not need to be experienced to know where all the accommodation options are, as is now the case.
8. Easier spread of best practice and ideas.
9. Easier implementation of required reporting standards and monitoring of performance.

I also ask that the new Legislation be absolutely clear that funding is conditional upon implementation of the new data and reporting requirements.

My understanding of Commonwealth/State relations tells me that ambiguity in legislation makes the implementation of effective change much harder. I ask that Homelessness Legislation is absolutely clear that implementation of integrated data and reporting is a pre condition of funding.

Discussion

In my submission responding to the Homelessness Green Paper I suggested that a “real time” internet based national register of possible accommodation vacancies be established including all government funded crisis and medium term or community based accommodation assets.

{I use the term “possible” because all vacancies are subject to the acceptance criteria of the accommodation service and each usually assess compliance with their criteria on a client by client basis}

I also suggested;

that the system be part of an integrated data plan which foresees integration of internal management reporting, reports required by funding bodies, SMART data and real time vacancy reporting so that duplication of input is avoided and quality of data is to the highest standard.

that the system be based on National and International data standards using AIHW recommended Data Set Specifications.

that the system include a method of recording unmet demand and be a central source for all documentation, forms, research and other resources required by those working in this field.

Regardless of which policy options are chosen to improve the response to homelessness a very fundamental issue still needs to be addressed.

How do we improve the capacity of individuals or support organisations to find the available beds on any given night in any location ?

It might sound simple but in my years of experience I have found it is not simple.

The variety of service providers and the range of service specialisations [women, men, families, children, any of those by age specific boundaries, domestic violence, mental health, specific mental health disorders, exiting custody, indigenous in all the previously named specialities, aged, dementia specific, physically disabled, intellectually disabled, specific brain trauma, respite care, alcohol or drug free, alcohol or drug rehabilitation and others I cannot recall] make it a complex task.

The current method of matching clients to vacancies involves many hundreds of hours of community workers time in the task of phoning around to find who has vacancies. Thousands of dollars in phone calls are wasted and clients are stressed by frustration or false hopes.

Despite best efforts to match demand to vacancies we still have some beds vacant on nights in locations where we know there is excess demand.

Some beds will be vacant for maintenance and some beds will be vacant because there is no demand for that particular speciality tonight [for example Family Violence shelters], however I strongly suspect that beds are also vacant because the vacancies are not immediately visible to clients and referring agencies. This is particularly true if those vacancies occur within the day eg: maintenance complete or someone does not arrive as scheduled.

I am keen to improve the productivity of the emergency accommodation and other publicly supported housing activities by the use of technology. My focus has been on the initial connection between those needing accommodation and the accommodation available.

Computer based systems are in use, or have been tried, in some jurisdictions [the Sydney City Council Homeless Persons Information Centre {HPIC}, Emergency, Supported & Transitional Housing Electronic Register {ESTHeR} in South East Queensland, Homeless Persons Information Queensland {HPIQ}, Accommodation Vacancy Register Victoria, are some examples]. These systems have experienced varying levels of success although they have all been hampered by the fact that they depend upon the goodwill of accommodation services to provide the information. There is no connection between the provision of this vital information and funding or other reporting requirements.

With the new national focus on Homelessness and the opportunity to seek national solutions we could combine the lessons learnt from all the regional systems to create an efficient national vacancy information system.

During 2005 the ACT Government Department of Disability Housing and Community Services agreed to fund a small consultancy report to investigate the feasibility of :
“developing an internet based system that provides an easy and efficient means to connect people who need accommodation with the accommodation available at any given time”.

A consultant was engaged and the report has, among other things, shown:

- a. There are no technical difficulties in implementing an internet based information system.

- b. The system could be simple and easy to use so that the smallest accommodation provider can keep their information accurate; and
- c. Management of the system, while not complex, will be crucial to success.

In discussing this concept within the community sector since 2005 I have seen nothing that changes my view that all government funded accommodation [SAAP, Community Housing etc] would become more efficient if its utilisation was made more visible.

If the assets were easily visible to all referring agencies, and their utilisation recorded on a daily basis, improved efficiency will mean more bed nights from the current assets.

The wonderful diversity of providers we have across Australia is beneficial in many ways but it means the assets can be hard to find, particularly for new staff, and we may not be getting economies of scale in management practices.

Our clients are in crisis, it seems to me that we should manage the assets with a sense of urgency that reflects their needs.

To wait for months before becoming aware that an asset, or group of assets, is not being utilised as efficiently as others is not good. For the people who missed out on a bed it is awful.

It is my view that an internet based “real time” vacancy identification system for all funded accommodation assets will not only assist in connecting clients to beds but will provide a useful view of how the assets are being managed.

By integrating the task of updating the realtime vacancy listing with the data input required for SMART [the data required by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare] and the internal management reporting and statistical needs of service providers, we could improve productivity within the sector to the benefit of everyone.

If we had a 5% improvement in the utilisation of assets plus real time performance reporting what a wonderful difference that would make in the number of people we could actually put into beds each night. Perhaps I am an optimist but I think visibility of performance is often a wonderful motivator and can bring about rapid improvements.

As part of an Integrated Information Technology System we should develop an internet based “real time” vacancy register for all government funded accommodation assets in all jurisdictions. The end result should be a system that provides real time” vacancy information and ”real time” management reporting so that it is easier for clients and agencies to find accommodation and the utilisation of those assets can be monitored.