Submission to the
Social Inclusion Board Inquiry into
‘breaking the cycle of disadvantage’

Council to Homeless Persons
September 2010
Introduction
The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Social Inclusion Board inquiry into ‘breaking the cycle of disadvantage’.

CHP is the peak body representing individuals and organisations with an interest or stake in homelessness in Victoria. Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development.

This submission provides an organisational response to the consultation questions. We also enclose a personal submission for a person who has experienced homelessness, in order to provide a consumer perspective. This can be found at attachment 1.

Social inclusion and homelessness policy
CHP is a strong supporter of social inclusion frameworks as a means to prevent homelessness and the harm that it causes. We welcome the multi-dimensional focus of social inclusion, and its recognition that homelessness is multi-dimensional, both in cause and effect.

We welcome its emphasis on rights to economic, social and community participation. As a policy paradigm, social inclusion enables us to focus upon people’s capacity, while also recognising that we must work with the hardest, most entrenched problems, not just the easy fixes where individual capacity is easily built.

Using the conceptual framework of social inclusion has the potential to move us beyond material notions of low income to a much more sophisticated view that incorporates the invisible yet all embracing web of disadvantage and lack of opportunity that harms people and communities into very concentrated and too often multigenerational patterns of exclusion. Social inclusion, is and must be more than a re-branding of anti-poverty.

CHP is of the strong view that social inclusion and human rights are mutually reinforcing paradigms. Social inclusion requires us to progress from a needs based or welfarist/residual model to rights based model of policy and practice, both at a macro and a micro level. It is therefore about universal settings and service platforms, as well as targeted, sustained effort in places and with people who have borne the brunt of entrenched exclusion, including those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Socially inclusive practice in preventing and responding to homelessness
Some of the themes in relation to the on-going policy and practice development of social inclusion in relation to homelessness should include:

- Investment in material resources for people experiencing homelessness to enable full participation in society, especially homes.
- Commitment to activity that improves social, family and community relationships.
- Supporting people to engage in and access universal social and economic systems such as employment, education and health care.
• Enacting legislation and laws that are genuinely inclusive and do not seek to exclude people because of their socio-economic status or homelessness.
• Actively including people who experience homelessness policy development and service design; and
• Social marketing and community education initiatives that address the stigma of homelessness.

What are different cycles of disadvantage?

Homelessness is both a manifestation of social exclusion, and a result of exclusion. The inter-relationship of disadvantage and homelessness is well understood.

• Victorian homelessness services work with around 60,000 men, women and children every year.
• One in every three homeless Australians is a child.
• Half of the women with children seek homelessness services to escape a violent home situation.
• One in five clients of homelessness services is a young woman aged between 15 and 24.
• Indigenous Australians are much more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous Australians.

The causes of homelessness are multiple, complex and varied. Key structural factors leading to homelessness are poverty, unemployment, geographical inequities and a lack of affordable housing. Other factors contributing to a person becoming homeless and which may directly trigger homelessness are family breakdown and domestic violence, mental illness, alcohol or substance misuse, contact with the criminal justice system, financial hardship brought about by gambling, and social isolation.

Domestic violence is the single greatest cause of homelessness in Australia – one in every two women with children seeking homelessness services is escaping a violent home situation.

How do people enter these cycles and become trapped in them?

Homelessness causes trauma, loneliness, stigma, isolation and a lack of belonging and identity. Homelessness forces people away from their family, friends, communities and social networks. Homelessness leaves people vulnerable to chronic ill-health, unemployment and social exclusion, which in turns creates and perpetuates the cycle of disadvantage.

Most people who are homeless cycle through temporary and tenuous forms of accommodation – they live temporarily with friends (‘couch surfing’), or in supported accommodation, private rooming houses and caravan parks.
In the absence of a stable home, getting and keeping a job, staying in school, and connecting socially is an almost impossible task.

The longer people remain homeless, the harder it is to exit:

- Pre-existing issues like mental and or physical disabilities become worse
- People develop disabling conditions that did not exist prior to becoming homeless
- People become emersed in a homelessness subculture, where they build social networks with other people living on the margins

Homelessness is different for different people, and in different life stages. In Victoria, the recently released *Homelessness 2020 Strategy* adopts a life stage approach, with an emphasis on connecting housing and homelessness support at each life stage, and in different ways. This is a welcome development and should encourage tailored solutions rather than requiring people to fit into programmatic boxes, seeking assistance across a myriad of systems.

**How do people avoid or break out of cycles of disadvantage, that is what is it that makes a difference for these people?**

The less time people remain homeless, the easier it is to get out....and stay out:

To ensure individuals and families do not become trapped in homelessness, interventions must focus on getting people back into a home they can afford as quickly as possible:

- Homelessness services must be coordinated with mainstream housing, health, mental health and other services to prevent homelessness, divert people from entering the homelessness system and rapidly re-housing people when homelessness does occur.
- Employment linkage support, and/or access to education and training must be attached to rapid-rehousing so that people can re-engage with the labour market or education and so improve their long term prospects. Currently our homelessness and employment support services are not well integrated, and employment services are not responsive to the particular needs of people experiencing homelessness, especially chronic homelessness.
- For people who have more complex needs, there must be a long term supportive housing option – permanent, affordable housing linked with a level of services that matches their needs.
- Tailored solutions and service work best – this is because the results we would seek to achieve in adopting a social inclusion approach to ending homelessness, may be expressed differently for target groups and sub-populations. For example:
a) **Children**: inclusion results would be - housing stability, settled in primary school, development of friends and peer group, improvement in health and well being indicators

b) **Young people**: reconciliation or reunification with family, attendance and involvement in vocational education and training; completion of high school

c) **Families**: housing stability, access to and involvement in social networks, improved relationships with children

d) **Single Adults**: access to and maintaining long term housing, access to health and well-being services, involvement in community activities, economic participation and employment

e) **Older people**: long term housing, dignity in maintaining independent living, community participation, access to services when needed

In breaking the cycle of disadvantage it is particularly important to tackle homelessness amongst children and young people, so as to avoid intergenerational homelessness. Homelessness can seriously impact on children’s and young people’s engagement in education. Almost half of our homeless young people do not finish school (49%). Common sense tells us that those who remain connected to school have much better life chances.

Our homelessness system does not routinely provide families with accommodation close to their schools and other supports. Instead families must follow whatever accommodation is available, which may include many moves and many schools. This compromises children’s education, placing them at high risk of long-term disengagement from school. We need to change how housing is allocated to homeless families, and get schools and housing agencies working together to end this unnecessary disruption.

We also note the high incidence of homelessness amongst young people leaving care. In Victoria 48% of care leavers will be homeless within a year. Young people leaving care experience a range of poor outcomes along the whole range of social indices including health, education, housing and employment.

They also experience higher levels of chronic housing instability and homelessness. Indeed it is universally recognised that there is a clear and unequivocal nexus between leaving state care and the likelihood of becoming homeless. Likewise, a disproportionately large number of people who later become entrenched in the homeless population have been in state care as young people.

Given the relatively small numbers of young people involved (400-450 per annum in Victoria), we believe state governments should provide a housing guarantee for all young people leaving care. If the State is to fulfil its role as a good parent then it must provide those things that we would expect a good parent to provide, including a home.
Does personal choice play a role in breaking cycles of disadvantage, and if so how can you help build motivation and aspirations?

There issue of homelessness being a ‘choice’ has vexed public debate about homelessness. Obviously, homelessness is not actively chosen by individuals and families, however some people may become institutionalised into a marginal lifestyle as part of the process of exclusion that homelessness is symptomatic of.

CHP’s experience is that people experiencing homelessness want a home, a job, and education like everybody else. And they face significant barriers in attaining those rights.

The Housing First approach to ending homelessness is successful due in part because of its focused on personal aspiration - people respond better when they are in a home and have the safety and stable base to make effective decisions.

What differentiates this approach from other strategies is that there is an immediate and primary focus on individuals and families quickly accessing and sustain permanent housing. This strategy encompasses a diverse range of programs, but all are guided by a set of principles:

1. Housing is a right which all are entitled (even for people who may engage in behaviours that act as barriers to permanent housing, eg those with a poor tenant record).
2. Housing is not contingent on compliance with services, but a suite of services are available and are available for as long as they need (no more, no less)
3. People experiencing homelessness or on the verge of homelessness should be helped back into a permanent home as quickly as possible
4. Issues that may have contributed to a households homelessness can best be addresses once people are housed

In the past decade, there has been a significant shift toward the Housing First approach in overseas jurisdiction and in some Australian states (South Australia). International research indicates that it is highly effective both at moving and keeping families and individuals out of homelessness but also at providing a greater social and economic return on investment and reducing public costs associated with homelessness and mental and physical health services.1 2 3

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2 Cost before and After Permanent Supportive Housing Placement www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2666.
Are there any successful interventions that should be considered?

There are a range of social inclusion based interventions currently being trialed in Victoria. One targeted at people who have experienced chronic homelessness is the *Journey to Social Inclusion Project*. A project description is attached for your information.

On a macro level, the Australian Government White Paper on Homelessness sets out the broad policy rubric for tackling homelessness over the next ten years. This blue print in beginning to deliver results and the effort intensified.

At a micro level, there are evidence-based strategies for preventing and ending homelessness described below. They are aligned with a Housing First approach, are client-centered and focused on building personal capacity.

1. **Community-based prevention assistance** – multiple systems target people at risk of homelessness and provides small amounts of assistance – legal help to prevent eviction, bonds or first months rent, negotiating with landlords (public or private) or with a family member to prevent eviction.

2. **Diversion / early intervention** - targets people at the entry point into the homelessness or other human service (or just before) and attempts to prevent homelessness by trying to save their existing housing where appropriate or immediately help them move into another home.

3. **Rapid re-housing** – targets the majority of people who become homeless with housing re-location assistance and temporary rental or other flexible financial assistance and stabilization services.

4. **Permanent supportive housing** targets people who have multiple needs, have been homeless for a long time and for whom long-term support services are necessary to maintain housing.

5. **Critical Time Intervention** The model starts with very intensive support services which taper off as families and individuals stabilize and are connected with supports in the community. The result is that programs provide services strategically and match the intensity of services to needs – services are goal oriented and person-focused.⁴

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Are you aware of any current research which is focused on this?

There is a significant amount of research activity examining causes and solutions to homelessness. The Research Agenda under the White Paper is heavily focused on examining approaches that work.

Here in Victoria, the State Government is also planning to establish a homelessness innovation and research fund in partnership with the Lord Mayors Charitable Foundation. The research agenda for the fund is due for finalization in 2011. This should provide an opportunity to undertake research into effective social inclusion interventions around homelessness and cycles of disadvantage.
ATTACHMENT 1
PERSONAL SUBMISSION FROM A PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS

What are different cycles of disadvantage?
Being on drugs and going in and out of prison. Also being dependent on drug replacement therapy

How do people enter these cycles and become trapped in them?
People have different reasons for entering such cycles. For me they were issues to do with self identity and lack of a male parent in my life setting boundaries.

How do people avoid or break out of cycles of disadvantage, that is what is it that makes a difference for these people?
People need to make a choice, however a holistic range of supports were helpful for me. I had people from church and family members who were genuinely concerned. If there are going to be any of these supports there needs to be genuine concern because street people see through motivations (it seems to me) easier than people who haven't had to fend for themselves on the street. I have also seen some great outcomes from creative opportunities which were facilitated. I think that tapping into that creative energy after being destructive for so long not only builds the person up but also works towards re-integration because destructive behaviour creates barriers and excludes people whilst creative behaviour works towards inclusion.

Does personal choice play a role in breaking cycles of disadvantage, and if so how can you help build motivation and aspirations?
In my experience personal choice does play a role in breaking cycles of disadvantage, however having access to programs which encourage that decision and build aspirations is important. Without the church and family I would have found it very difficult to make a decision because I didn't have that unconditional acceptance in society at large and the world would have been better without me, or so I thought.

Are there any successful interventions that should be considered?
Liminal Lines and Somebody's Daughter do some great work in regards to this creative process of including people in performances. I also think the White Lion mentorship program does great work. People who have been through the cycle and have broken it are invaluable examples to people going through it because they have built that empathy and they have that particular experience.

Are you aware of any current research which is focused on this?
No. I haven't looked into it.
Oh, one important thing I forgot to mention is the fact that some policies work against this social inclusion. Namely the policy which allows employers to discriminate against people with a police record even if they have shown signs of growth and good behaviour and also the policy which discriminates against the homeless getting a job. If I want a job I need to omit certain information about my life but if the employers enquire I have to tell them. I believe this had been reason for me having a hard time getting a job in some places. I am encouraged to be cagey about my past if I want a job. This is not good for my personal development.