Introduction
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The logic of preventing homelessness seems inescapable in contemporary Australia, as elsewhere.

Most commentators would view avoiding the social, economic and personal costs of homelessness as a highly desirable objective. Most of those who have experienced homelessness or who at risk of it, would also agree.

This edition of Parity seeks to highlight approaches to, and examples of, policies, programs and services which seek to prevent homelessness.

Before we examine some of the methods, it is important to define what we mean by preventing homelessness. A key part of this discussion involves throwing light on the causes of homelessness and the risk factors which come into play.

What is Prevention and Early Intervention?
The concepts of prevention and early intervention are contested in homelessness philosophy, policy, programs and practice.

In the Commonwealth Government’s 2008 White Paper, The Road Home, prevention is defined as “programs and opportunities that enable and encourage individuals to address possible risk factors before they are vulnerable to homelessness.”

Early intervention is defined as “strategies that aim to reduce risk factors through timely identification and tailored advice for those at risk of homelessness.”

As early as 1993, Professor Jan Carter was talking about different levels of prevention.

Primary prevention is concerned with health risks and might include health education to encourage clients to better health. Secondary prevention is about early treatment to minimise complications and tertiary prevention is concerned with rehabilitation.

This medical model of prevention was transposed to the social welfare arena first through disability, and then through other areas including criminal behaviour, child protection, family welfare and child care more generally.

This framework should not be confused with the cultural definition of homelessness, where Chamberlain and MacKenzie identify primary, secondary and tertiary level definitions of homelessness.

Recently, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has developed a framework for the provision of services to people who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, which distinguishes between households that are “at risk” and those which are “at imminent risk.”
In discussions about reforming the existing homelessness services system in NSW, seeking clarity about what prevention and early intervention mean continues to be an important consideration in shaping what will the role of homelessness services in the future.

Causes of Homelessness
Many researchers point to the causes of homelessness being both structural and personal/social.

Structural refers to broad social and economic factors that play a major role in determining wellbeing across communities. Such factors include the rate of joblessness, the availability of social and affordable housing, the level of inequality, access to quality education and Intergenerational unemployment.

Personal/social refers to specific factors affecting individuals or families such as family breakdown, domestic and family violence, mental health issues, alcohol and other drugs abuse, child neglect and intergenerational experience of homelessness.

Understanding and anticipating the above factors is logically a broad responsibility of Government, business and the community. Homelessness services (services whose core function is to work directly with those who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness), of themselves, have an awareness raising and advocacy role with others to mitigate these causes of homelessness. Clearly, however, responsibilities homeless cannot be prevented without leadership from policymakers and the so called “mainstream areas” of the human services system.

Where do Homelessness Services Best Fit In?
It is in the arena of early intervention that homelessness services have greater expectations and a more clearly articulated role to play.

Early intervention can be viewed as entirely predictive, heading off a problem that has not yet started and targeting individuals who are at risk by known indicators, but who do not yet have a housing problem and who, with intervention, would never become homeless. It can also be viewed as precautionary, targeting early signs of a problem in order to prevent a crisis.

Practitioners working in homelessness services often describe early intervention as focusing on identifying those at risk and providing services to support the person and their environment before incipient problems or disputes escalate beyond repair – heading it off at the pass.

Other practitioners will see early intervention as “early in life” intervention, referring to children and young people when family problems are becoming apparent.

Early intervention then, can be viewed as early in the life of a child or early in the life of a problem.
What Do we Currently Do?
No comprehensive study of current Australian prevention and early intervention activities, as they relate to preventing homelessness, has been compiled.

As indicated earlier in this article, examples of prevention and early intervention that will ultimately affect the levels and complexity of homelessness are most likely to be found in the employment, housing, health, education and broader community services and justice areas.

All homeless services work closely with other human services in order to assess and refer to meet the needs of those at risk or those who are homeless. They engage through formal partnerships or have regular networked relationships with these services at a local level.

Examples of prevention and early intervention initiatives include:

1. Programs focused on the structural causes of homelessness and directed to the broader community.
   - Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan
   - Universal early childhood services
   - Job Services Australia
   - Gonski education reforms
   - National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing
   - National Rental Affordability Scheme.

2. Targets groups deemed to be at risk but who do not as yet have a housing problem.
   This would generally include helping those on low incomes to stay housed; ensuring clients from statutory, custodial care, health / mental health and drug and alcohol services do not exit to homelessness; and providing incentives to business/ community organisations who build and rent dwellings to eligible low and moderate income households at below market rate.
   - Rent Start
   - Commonwealth Rent Assistance
   - Young People Leaving Care Support Service
   - School Focused Youth Service (Vic)
   - The Geelong Project – young people at risk
   - Private Rental Support Scheme – Expanded Eligibility (Tasmania)
   - Affordable Housing for Life Project – young people building houses in Western Sydney
   - Communities That Care (Vic) – identification of youth at risk through predictive survey administered to school population

3. Targets the early signs of a problem.
This would generally include tenancy support for private and public tenants, including advocacy, financial counselling, case management, and referral services to sustain tenancies; keeping specific young people connected to their families; connecting to Community Engagement Officers to improve access to Centrelink services for individuals at risk of homelessness.

- Family Relationships Services Program
- Tools For Change Financial Capability Project – financial literacy
- HOME at last (older people at risk in private rentals)
- Supported Tenancies Program (SA)
- Centrelink flag indicator
- Kids Under Cover
- Detour Virtual Refuge Support Services (Vic)

4. Comes into play to avert a crisis.

This would generally include rental defaults, helping women and children who experience domestic violence to stay safely in the family home.

- Intensive Family Support Program
- HOME Advice Program (previously called Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot) (Centrelink social work assistance to maintain housing)
- Commonwealth Emergency Assistance Program
- New York HomeBase
- Youth Homelessness Project early intervention
- Staying Home, Leaving Violence (called Safe at Home in some states)
- Safe From The Start
- Ruah Tenancy Fast Track Project (WA)
- The Older Person in Private Rental Assistance Project (Vic)
- Helping Young People Achieve (SA) – central assessment and referral
- Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged

Conclusion
This brief list of initiatives demonstrates the diversity of activities which occupy the prevention and early intervention in homelessness space across Australia. However, what is clear is that these and similar efforts to date have not made a significant dent in the numbers of people at risk of, or who are homeless.

If targets like reducing homelessness by 50 per cent by 2020 are to be regarded as achievable, then the most effective prevention strategies will need to be pursued with significant new investment.