Preventing Homelessness

Preventing homelessness = stopping households or individuals who are at imminent risk of homelessness, from becoming homeless

On an individual basis, preventing homelessness is a highly complex task. While practitioners can identify the risk factors for homelessness, research shows that it's difficult to predict who, of the people displaying those factors, will actually become homeless. This is why targeted interventions, close to the point where homelessness is imminent, are most effective. However, general strategies aimed at alleviating poverty and creating affordable housing are critical to any prevention efforts.

A state-wide strategy to increase the supply of affordable housing should run alongside targeted prevention programs and should include:

- Planning regulations that support the provision of affordable housing;
- Measures to improve security of tenure within the private rental market;
- Funding to increase the supply of social housing targeted at households with complex needs

While everyone's experience of homelessness is different, research has found the most common pathways to homelessness are mental health issues, substance misuse, housing crisis, family violence and moving from youth to adulthood. People leaving custody and young people leaving out of home care are particularly vulnerable.

Over the last decade, homelessness in the US and the UK has been decreasing. The following strategies have helped the process:

1. **Saving tenancies:** for example, paying full rent arrears, devising 'early warning systems' where landlords identify at risk tenancies and assistance in negotiating/mediating tenancy issues with the landlord and providing legal representation when disputes proceed to court.
2. **Planned resettlement:** helping people plan their next move when their current tenancy can't be saved. For example, providing assistance in navigating the private rental market to secure a new home, making incentive payments to landlords, building relationships with landlords and offering 'making good' payments to landlords for property damage.
3. **Housing focused support for tenancy sustainment:** this involves working with people to put them in the best possible position to maintain a tenancy. It can include

assistance with budgeting, financial planning, debt management and linking people with mainstream services in their community to give people they support they need to stay in their homes.

4. **Family reconciliation and re-establishment of family support:** having strong family and social ties decreases the risk of homelessness, meaning this strategy can have immediate and long term benefits particularly for young people. It focuses on mediation to strengthen family relationships and social networks.

5. **Exit planning from institutional settings**
   a. *Leaving hospital* – inappropriate housing after a hospital stay can exacerbate a person's medical condition. Research from the UK shows it is important for protocols to be established between hospitals and local services. Further, admission questions should be designed to elicit information about a person's housing status.
   b. *Leaving prison* – most programs are focused on reducing the risk of a person reoffending, but if a person is homeless they are more likely to reoffend. Therefore, prison release plans should include a focus on securing stable housing.
   c. *Leaving care* – in the UK, programs that feature choice of accommodation and support to stay in that accommodation have proven highly effective. When combined with a life skills curriculum and intensive case work, these programs have been particularly successful.

6. **Safe at home measures:** the biggest reason people access homelessness services in Victoria is family violence. Programs that help to keep women in their homes once the user of violence has been removed have been successful in the UK, and in early Australian programs. This includes providing legal assistance, increased police responses and short term support. These can be provided in conjunction with other support services such as increasing household income.

7. **The right service at the right time**: getting in touch with services early, before a crisis, is critical to any homelessness prevention strategy. Homelessness services should have the capacity to be located near or with other services such as Centrelink, libraries and community care programs.

8. **Feedback mechanisms:** it is essential that the homelessness sector gathers information on what strategies work and for whom, so that effective programs can be maintained. The US and UK programs both feature consistent data collection and analysis, so the homelessness sector can understand the demographics and demand for homelessness services.