The role of mainstream services

Most people interact with a range of services throughout their lives, such as doctors, the local primary school and Centrelink. How responsive these services are determines the strength of our social safety net against homelessness. Mainstream services can help prevent homelessness by addressing the problems that contribute to homelessness.

There are two types of mainstream services – targeted and universal. Targeted services cater to people with specific needs, such as family violence, drug and alcohol problems, aged care etc. Universal, or generalist, services include schools, the police, Centrelink and healthcare. In order to end homelessness, it's important that our community as a whole is inclusive, and this is where mainstream services play an important role.

They majority of people that access mainstream services aren't homeless or at risk of homelessness, so staff may not be well equipped to meet the extra needs of those who are. However with education, staff can be trained to be aware of the possible needs of homeless clients and how to manage those needs.

Mainstream services can play an important role in easing the negative experience of homelessness by being supportive in their specialised area. For example, schools can help students by transferring educational records to make moving schools easier, provide a place for them to store school materials if they're in insecure housing. It is also important that staff are aware of the impact homelessness could be having on the student. They can also help to identify households at risk of homelessness and link them in to assistance early.

What works?

Improving the way mainstream services interact with people at risk of or experiencing homelessness can be tackled in a variety of ways. Mostly these strategies involve some level of integration or coordination. We've divided these in to two types, integration around the consumer, or integration of the services

1. Integration targeted at consumers
   - Multi agency work using special case teams. For example, someone with a mental health issue could have special case team made up of a nurse, a social worker and a housing worker who meet with the consumer and work together to overcome problems
   - Co-location of services, either multiple services at one place, or making specialist homelessness assistance available at mainstream services. For example, having

services like Centrelink and Medicare at the one location, or having a homelessness services available at a Centrelink or Medicare office.

- Outreach/inreach services, which involve mainstream services regularly working out of homelessness services or vice versa. For example, once a week a Centrelink worker could make outpost visits to a homelessness services, or conversely a worker from a homelessness service could make visits to Centrelink.

2. Integration targeted at agencies
   - Collaborative service planning and funding that encourages cooperation. For example, services coming together to plan a program for a shared client group. This can be encouraged by funding models that are flexible yet require services to work collaboratively.
   - Formal partnerships that document accountabilities. Similar to the model above, yet less flexible, formal partnerships document the expectations and accountabilities of each partner.
   - Information systems that allow agencies to share information and plan client services as well as monitor agency responsibilities.

For these integrated systems to work research shows that it's important to have someone dedicated to making the collaboration run smoothly. Integration is a process that needs ongoing support to maintain.

When services integrate it is inevitable that there'll be some changes to how they operate on a daily basis. Therefore, it is important that funding is available to help services through the transition period and make sure the changes are sustainable. Critical to working with mainstream services is a shared understanding of why the organisations are working together and for what purpose.