



# Improving access to social housing and homelessness services: a review



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## Introduction

The Victorian Government has recently flagged changes to the Victorian homelessness sector that include an 'integrated front end for homelessness and social housing'<sup>1</sup>.

This briefing paper explores the different approaches to front-end access to specialist homelessness services and social housing across Australia. It outlines the access arrangements in Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and New South Wales, with a view to informing the specialist homelessness services sector about the challenges and opportunities offered through this reform. This review included analysis of the published material in each state and discussion with local service providers.

It concludes with a very brief summary and identification of some of the key issues for consideration in access arrangements.

## Victoria: The Opening Doors Framework

Access to the Victorian homelessness system is organised under what is called The Opening Doors Framework, also commonly referred to as 'Opening Doors'.

In very simple terms Opening Doors aims to provide an integrated and coordinated response by having a limited number of designated access points into the homelessness system.

The purpose of the designated access points is to assess needs, prioritise and connect people to the services and resources they need. Most of the 19 transitional housing managers (THMs) are designated access points.

There are also some specialist services named as designated access points, particularly for women, youth and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples. As they are targeted to particular groups, these services may offer a somewhat different response to the larger local area access points.

These designated access points are intended to respond to someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and in need of housing or support. Immediate help is provided if someone is likely to be homeless that evening but otherwise most assessments require making an appointment in advance.

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<sup>1</sup> DHHS 'Potential reforms to homelessness and social housing - a discussion: Presentation to the homelessness sector' 7 Sept 2015

People requiring homelessness assistance can call **1800 825 955** and they will be directed to the closest access point service.

### **Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) Workers**

At each of the designated access points, people seeking assistance will meet with an IAP worker who will complete the comment assessment and referral framework through an assessment of their housing and support needs. The assessment can be done in person through an appointment (unless crisis is imminent) or over the phone.

Following this assessment, workers provide support to address housing crisis. IAPs have access to the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) which can be used to pay for emergency accommodation and sometimes rent in arrears or advance. If appropriate, the IAP may make a referral to one of the specialist homelessness support services. Or they may support clients through the assessment process to enter another system such as health or mental health.

The IAP worker can also provide advice on housing options, access to material aid, with applications for private and public housing. The IAP worker can also advocate on behalf of consumers including with Centrelink, the Department of Human Services and/ or real estate agencies.

IAP workers have access to what is called a resource register, where housing and support vacancies from specialist homelessness services are listed. The IAP matches people with those vacancies. When doing so they prioritise people who have been assessed as most at risk.

### **Informal entry: drop-in and outreach services**

Informal 'entry' points into the system exist in many different services, in particular drop-in and outreach services.

Designated access points allow some organisations, such as those offering drop-in and outreach services, to complete the IAP form and fax it to the access point. There is an understanding that for clients who require significant outreach and assertive engagement efforts, it is not feasible to send the client to the access point or call the access point for an IAP.

Services are also encouraged to call the access point to conduct an IAP over the phone.

### **Opening Doors in Department of Human Services regions – Local Area Service Networks (LASNs)**

As indicated earlier, access to Victoria's homelessness services is organized under Department of Human Services regions.

In each region there is a Local Area Service Network (LASN). This is made up of senior representatives of housing and support agencies who are funded to deliver homelessness services in that region.

The LASNs are responsible for maximising the effectiveness of the homelessness system in that region, within the guidelines of the Opening Doors Framework.

Opening Doors works slightly differently in each region. For example in some regions the designated access point makes the decision about who goes in to the transitional properties and in some regions the support service makes this decision.

### **Access to Housing**

People can apply for public housing through a local housing office, or for priority access to public housing with the assistance of a support provider. There are also 42 Community Housing providers with separate application processes. The Victorian Government has recently announced plans to reform this system, to establish a single Statewide Housing Register and single application process.

## **Tasmania: Housing Connect**

Tasmania's 'Housing Connect' program began in 2013 and has brought together housing and support organisations to 'work side-by-side'. It has streamlined the sector to clarify both roles and the services delivered. This included amalgamating several different contracts with service providers into two contracts with Lead Agencies: Anglicare in the north and northwest and Colony 47 in the south. Lead Agencies then subcontract service delivery to other organisations.

### **Front-doors for housing and homelessness services**

Housing Connect offices across the state act as Front Doors which provide a 'one-stop-shop' for both housing and homelessness services. They are located in each major population centre, with two in Hobart.

People can also call Housing Connect at 1-800-800-588, and a switchboard transfers calls to the relevant regional office. The after hours office provides a crisis response following which people are referred to the business hours service in their respective region to follow up on longer term options.

When clients contact a Housing Connect office they have the option for a shorter appointment if they do not need to undertake a full assessment, for example if they were only seeking relatively simple private-sector rent help (e.g. bond or rent in advance). Where other services may be relevant, a longer appointment of around an hour is scheduled. There is one assessment process for access to everything from emergency accommodation to a long-term home.

The Housing Connect offices all provide:

- immediate support and advice with private rentals, including bond and rent arrears
- support and assistance to complete and lodge a social housing application (public and community housing)
- a crisis response, e.g. finding a bed for the night
- referrals into housing case management
- support and advice on how to stay in the home
- seeking assistance following family violence
- information and advice on longer-term housing options including applying for social housing.

### **Access through other channels**

One of the goals of the reform was to streamline a complex system to make it easier for clients and workers to navigate. Services report that this has been a positive change for clients, with all client groups accessing services in this way.

Dozens of services in other physical locations (e.g. neighbourhood and community centres) may also provide access to Housing Connect services, although the main focus for many of these services is applying for Private Rental Assistance. Additionally to this they may also provide access to intake services, often through allowing clients access to a phone or through an arrangement to fax assessments and referrals through to the relevant region's Housing Connect office.

## **South Australia: Homeless to Home**

South Australia implemented its Homeless to Home system reform from 2009-2013. The reforms are underlined by a set of fundamental principles: a housing first approach; consolidation of services; regionalization of services (i.e. ensuring that specialist services are available in each region); no wrong door; standardized best practice case management and integration of services; separation of tenancy management and support provision; culturally competent responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; priority for the safety of women and their children; children as clients in their own right.

### **Access to specialist homelessness support**

As mentioned above these reforms adopted the 'no wrong door' principle while also attempting to streamline access.

The system created three main 'gateways' into homelessness services via telephone services for different population groups. The gateways each provide the following services to clients:

- information
- counselling
- intake assessment
- supported referrals to crisis accommodation, specialist regional homelessness and domestic/Aboriginal family services and mainstream services.

Gateways are not geographically defined but rather focus on different client groups. These include:

- A 'youth gateway', operating both a shopfront and telephone service from 9am-5pm Monday to Friday for youth ages 15-25
- A 'domestic/aboriginal family violence gateway', which is a telephone service provided from 9am-5pm Monday to Friday to women and their children who are experiencing or escaping domestic/Aboriginal family violence
- A 'homeless gateway': a 24/7 telephone service for *anyone* experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the state.

Each gateway has been contracted out to a community sector organization to run. In addition to this streamlined structure the 'no wrong door' approach means that nearly all of the services that provide case management and housing are also 'mini-gateways'—most other housing or homelessness services also act as entry points that provide intake and assessment for specialist homelessness services.

It's unclear to what extent the streamlined telephone gateways have achieved their desired aims. According to one service provider, the mini-gateways have made the telephone gateways a 'little bit obsolete'. It is also unclear what the value add is of the three specialized telephone gateways. For example, there has been talk about the youth gateway merging with the broader homelessness gateway.

### **Access to housing**

People may choose to apply for public housing alone or both public and community housing at the same time and through the same form. These applications are managed by Housing SA. Clients may also apply for community housing separately, through individual providers. Volunteer member-tenant providers such as housing co-operatives are generally contacted separately.

# NSW Homeless Sector: Going Home, Staying Home

The NSW homeless sector reforms 'Going Home, Staying Home' include two main aspects :

- (1) mainstreaming the sector into four 'core service responses' (i.e. prevention and early intervention, rapid re-housing, crisis and transition response, and intensive responses for complex needs clients) and
- (2) introducing telephone intake and assessment services (including a coordinated 'no wrong door' approach for intake and access)<sup>2</sup>.

## Access to homelessness services

A state-wide homelessness information and referral telephone line called Link to Home is available to both clients and service providers and run by the state Department of Family and Community Services. This was created through merging the telephone lines of several different areas in order to streamline the system. However, some services have now begun to set up their own telephone lines again as the demand for the Link to Home telephone services has been significantly higher than capacity (some say perhaps as great as twice the number of phone calls as were originally expected). Assessments over the phone also tend to be abridged as the full length assessment of 45-50 minutes is too long for most clients over the phone. Referrals into case management are then made through Link to Home's centralised system according to client need and service capacity.

The NSW 'no wrong door' approach also means that any service can provide intake and assessment for specialist homelessness services. All organisations use the Common Assessment Framework. Referrals into case management are then made directly to an appropriate service with a vacancy.

## Access to social housing

Housing Pathways was introduced in April 2010 as the multi-provider delivery system for social housing assistance in NSW. It is a partnership between Housing NSW, the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) and 26 participating Community Housing Providers (CHPs).

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<sup>2</sup> NSW Government 'Housing Pathways Strategy Overview'  
<http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/About+Housing+Pathways/Housing+Pathways+Strategy/>

Housing Pathways created a single form to apply for properties managed by Housing NSW or participating community housing providers, as well as private rental assistance. People can choose to apply for public, community or both types of housing. Applications are placed on a single state-wide waiting list, the NSW Housing Register. Housing Pathways assessments and applications can be done at any Housing NSW or Community Housing Provider office. The evaluation of the reform recommends allowing clients to apply for housing assistance online.

### Gaps in the system

Neither the homelessness services assessment nor the housing assessment, cover temporary accommodation. This is a separate program that provides a limited number of nights of accommodation in hotels, motels or other temporary accommodation such as caravan parks. This means services are often unable to manage risk or provide clients with the appropriate level of support when they are entering temporary accommodation.

The independent evaluation of the reforms shows that only 67% of workers believe there is really 'no wrong door'<sup>3</sup>. Services suggest that this may be due to the fact that Going Home Staying Home reformed the front end of the system (homelessness services) without reforming the back end (the affordable housing system). While the doors may all be open, the queue is so long it prevents many at-risk people from entering.

KPMG conducted a useful analysis of reforms which provide some recommendations, including on how to share information with other human service agencies in order to support the housing applications of clients with high needs, as well as on making providers' allocation policies more readily available, for example on the Housing Pathways intranet.

## Conclusion

The Victorian Government has indicated an interest in reforming the sector to create an 'integrated front end for homelessness and social housing'<sup>4</sup>. Better understanding of intake and access provisions in other states may allow us to deduce some lessons about what this may mean and how to improve the front-end client experience.

Getting the right help at the right time can be a frustrating process for consumers. However, this is not always because they haven't found the right service, but because

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<sup>3</sup> NSW Government 'Housing Pathways Outcomes Evaluation Summary' 2012  
<http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/5D556131-EAA7-4FF3-B9C2-53D93242420F/0/HousingPathwaysOutcomesEvaluationSummaryPaper.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> DHHS 'Potential reforms to homelessness and social housing - a discussion: Presentation to the homelessness sector' 7 Sept 2015

the service is constrained by program eligibility requirements, funding and service demand. Any changes seeking to further integrate entry points to homelessness services should also expand the availability of services and the suite of available responses.

In Tasmania, connecting housing and homelessness support services has created a system that seems simple to administer and easier for clients to navigate. There are clearly defined roles, with homelessness and housing assistance closely linked. However, this service and contracting arrangement is undoubtedly enabled by Tasmania's smaller population, with approximately 500,000 people in the entire state, in contrast to Victoria's 5.7 million. While this simplification may be desirable, it's unclear if it is easily replicable with a larger population.

South Australia has created niche gateways providing specialist homelessness services for youth and people escaping family violence. Early anecdotal evidence does not provide strong support for the specialized telephone gateways however more interrogation of this model is necessary before drawing any conclusions.

Housing and homelessness support are located through different access points in NSW. Reforms to the homelessness sector were broad and as such it is difficult to identify the challenges that have arisen with front-end access arrangements as opposed to back-end arrangements or the way the two integrate. The fact that only 67% of workers believe there is really 'no wrong door' challenges the efficacy of this arrangement; however, as stated above, this may be an issue of the doors being blocked due to surplus in demand as opposed to doors being 'wrong'.

Only Tasmania has truly brought together access to social housing and homelessness assistance. Reforms in other states appear to have bought service delivery arrangements closer to Victoria's existing access systems. Any reform to Victoria's homelessness and housing system should be adapted to the local context and existing service systems.

Key questions when considering changes to access arrangements should include:

- How do people find out about the help that is available and how can we improve access to that information?
- What are the most effective services for different household types, and what is the best way to get people the assistance they need as quickly as possible?
- Within a resource constrained system, what sort of assistance can and should be available quickly and for whom?
- How do we ensure that the system has the flexibility to offer assertive engagement with complex client groups? How do we ensure that no one falls through the cracks during system reform?