



A stable home, and a brief period of support; intervening early to end homelessness

Homelessness doesn't just happen. It is usually the result of a crisis escalating to the point that a person can no longer sustain housing. People have an incredible capacity to overcome hardship and work towards achieving a good life. But when people lose their housing, attending to their immediate needs overrides the need to achieve higher order goals. By intervening early, we can arrest a deepening crisis, and set people up to continue to work towards a stable, contributing future.

Ending homelessness doesn't mean that people will never find themselves without shelter. It means that homelessness will be rare, the experience brief and well supported, and that it will not recur in a cycle of repeated homelessness. In the previous chapter we explored measures that can ensure that crises are prevented from escalating, and ways to support the sustainment of housing for those doing it tough. In this chapter we explore measures to ensure that where homelessness does occur, that the experience is brief.

In responding to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Victoria is leading the way in early intervention. Family violence is the second largest contributor to homelessness in Victoria,³⁶ and the largest contributor for women and children. New responses to family violence are delivering access to affordable housing and support to ensure that women and children's experience of homelessness is brief. It is important that this work to achieve the Royal Commission's aims remains a priority for the next Victorian Government.

Resolving the major causes of homelessness, like family violence or financial trouble, can be complex. It takes time and substantial initiative to navigate complex systems such as the family court, banks, justice, Centrelink and employment. It is a challenge to achieve refinancing and deal with utilities companies, while attending to your child's wellbeing, separating assets and responding to debt collectors. The onset of homelessness is a particularly difficult period for most people, and as well as a stable home from which to attend to these challenges, many people need short periods of support to resolve these issues

Outreach into marginal accommodation: a low cost support with big outcomes

There are 1,184 registered rooming houses in Victoria³⁷ and 128 supported residential services (SRS's).³⁸ While some operators of marginal housing like rooming houses and SRS's provide safe environments, others are unsafe and of poor quality. Residents' health and wellbeing can suffer as a consequence.³⁹

Even a small support resource can make a huge difference to the lives of people living in marginal accommodation. One Victorian program found that when a specialist homelessness service partnered with a homelessness outreach nurse to provide a fortnightly social meal at privately operated rooming houses, it allowed them to engage with residents and link them in with agencies to support their health, employment, volunteering, legal, and housing needs.⁴⁰ Other critical support service referrals included dental, antenatal, drug and alcohol, social inclusion, mental health, education, pest control, financial and clothing.⁴¹

This approach has support from specialist homelessness support agencies, rooming house operators, and rooming house residents.⁴² With all stakeholders in agreement, the next Government should fund outreach support workers into rooming houses and other forms of marginal accommodation. This simple and low cost intervention can support many of Victoria's most marginalised people to live healthier lives, participate in our community more fully, and be better connected.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 7. Improve the health and wellbeing of people living in marginal accommodation by providing outreach support.**

Emergency response capacity: keeping pace with demand

The Victorian Government's Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) provides flexible funding for accommodation for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Funds can be used to prevent homelessness, to provide an immediate crisis accommodation response, or to establish a longer-term housing option.⁴³

Rapid growth in demand for homelessness services in Victoria, which grew 28 per cent from 86,150 people to 109,901 between 2012 and 2017, has put pressure on the Housing Establishment Fund.⁴⁴

Preventing homelessness and assisting people to find a new permanent home will always be the main priorities of those working to end homelessness. However, when a person or family do experience homelessness, an immediate short-term response must be available, while more permanent arrangements are made. As demand has increased, this has increasingly meant scarce HEF funds are primarily used to accommodate people who have no other option but rough sleeping, in short stay temporary accommodation options, such as motels.

Since 2012, the cost of these temporary accommodation options has increased significantly. This means that the Housing Establishment Fund must support more people, while support costs more. Add to this the increasing difficulty that those on low incomes face in obtaining long-term housing such as private rental, which tends to result in longer reliance on HEF, and hence the resource is under enormous strain.

The Housing Establishment Fund is now too small to be effective, with many highly vulnerable people being turned away from homelessness services without receiving immediate crisis support.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 8. Increase Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) and or flexible funding, to reflect increased demand and costs of crisis accommodation.**

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