



[October 2008]

Homelessness Position Statement

The AASW supports:

- the principles and aspirations of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration including the right to housing¹;
- the formulation and implementation of an integrated homelessness policy, based upon effectively integrated planning and community development;
- the development of an integrated national affordable housing strategy to reduce the number of homeless Australians;
- an urgent increase in the supply of affordable rental housing and the reform of rental assistance;
- the promotion of private sector investment in low cost housing; and,
- a focus on housing issues within a framework of urban and regional design that addresses issues facing people on low incomes in areas of economic disadvantage.

Introduction: The Social Work Platform

1. The social work profession is committed to maximising the well being of individuals, families and the community in socially inclusive communities, which emphasise principles of social justice, respect for human dignity
2. In carrying out their professional tasks and duties, social workers strive to act in ways that give equal priority to respect for human dignity and worth and the pursuit of social justice. This commitment is demonstrated through service to humanity, integrity and competence, which characterise professional social work practice.
3. The AASW is the only national organisation for social workers in Australia, who are involved in the delivery of a range of community services including health, family, child welfare income support, in the public, private and not for profit sectors.

¹ Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Adequate Housing



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4. Many of the AASW's members are involved in the delivery or planning of housing support and homelessness services in a range of fields of practice. They work within Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP) crisis accommodation, housing information and referral, assistance with care and housing for the aged, for example-youth and women's refuges. They also work across non-SAAP services involved with discharge and accommodation planning.

Role of Social Workers

5. Housing stress directly affects the health, educational, employment, and emotional well being of individuals and families. It impacts upon both current and future wellbeing and life-chances. Social workers have a commitment to working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources and this includes equitable access to the housing resources of the country. Social workers are directly involved with assisting individuals and families to locate and maintain secure and affordable housing but are experiencing increasing difficulties in achieving these outcomes.
6. Social work practitioners working at the direct service delivery level have experience with many clients whose circumstances are made much more difficult by the lack of affordable housing. Examples include women and children who are unable to leave situations of domestic violence², parents who face interminable delays when seeking to be reunified with their children, and people unable to leave temporary accommodation services due to the unavailability of more permanent accommodation.
7. Social workers in acute health and corrections settings³ involved in discharge planning also regularly report that many of their clients remain for longer periods than required or are discharged into absolute homelessness due to the unavailability of affordable housing. This can also occur when young people are leaving state

² Nunan & John 1996 in "Homelessness: Women & Children- from "Home safe Home: The Link between Domestic and Family Violence and Women's Homelessness" Nov 2000 Partnership Against Domestic Violence Initiative" in *Relatewell, Journal of the Family Relationships Institute* Vol 5 No.2

³ Baldry, E., McDonnell, D., Maplestone, P., Peeters, M., (2003) Ex Prisoners and accommodation: what bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration, Final Report No. 046, AHURI



care. The result is a cycling through services, temporary accommodation, and homelessness for many of these clients.

8. Groups at risk of homelessness include people residing permanently or semi-permanently in caravan parks, and those among the "...lowest 40 per cent of the income distribution with a mortgage or renting who are spending over 30 per cent of their income on housing, the established benchmark for 'housing stress' placing them at risk of homelessness" identified by the Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia 2008.⁴
9. Social workers are also involved in undertaking research, social policy development, administration, management, consultancy, education, training, supervision and evaluation within different levels of government and non-government services. This includes developing housing and homelessness policies impacting upon individuals and families experiencing difficulties accessing or maintaining their housing. This work is guided by AASW professional aims of raising awareness of structural inequities, promoting policies and practices that achieve a fair allocation of social resources and acting to bring about social change to reduce social barriers, inequality and injustice.

Key points

10. Homelessness is the experience or situation of not being able to access safe, secure, affordable or accessible housing consistent with the widely used culturally relative definition which identifies three levels of homelessness. This definition has been broadly adopted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its regular Census of Population and Housing, and governments at all levels. In addition to those already experiencing homelessness, research has identified a number of other groups vulnerable to, or at risk of, homelessness.⁵
11. Social workers seek to promote distributive justice and social fairness, acting to reduce barriers and expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, oppressed, or have exceptional needs.

⁴ Senate Select Housing Affordability Committee Report, (2008) "A good house is hard to find: Housing affordability in Australia" © Commonwealth of Australia 2008 ISBN 978-0-642-71930-0
http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/hsaf_ctte/report/index.htm

⁵ Chamberlain, C. and Mackenzie, D. (2004) Counting the Homeless: 2001 (Queensland), Swinburne University and RMIT University, Hawthorn



The social work profession understands social justice to encompass:

- The satisfaction of basic human needs;
- The equitable distribution of resources to meet these needs;
- Fair access to public services and benefits to achieve human potential.⁶

12. Housing is a basic human need and homelessness is a human rights violation.⁷ In light of our commitment to social justice and recognition of housing as a basic human need and an inalienable human right, the AASW endorses the recent recommendations of Homelessness Australia (May 2008 National Homelessness Conference):

- The immediate expansion of specific homelessness responses to include more flexible service delivery models with greater duration of support;
- The nature and extent of flexible models should respond to the range of age cohorts – including flexible case management model for older people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- Building upon many of the joined-up initiatives and whole-of-government approaches that currently occur around the country; and
- Ensuring significant investment in a range of accommodation and housing models that are safe and affordable. This housing would ideally be accessible to people experiencing, and at risk of, homelessness.

Current Actions

13. The AASW endorses the following recommendations from the recently released Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia report: *A good house is hard to find: Housing affordability in Australia* (June 2008):

- the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program be enhanced as a 'national response to the needs of households at risk and people experiencing homelessness (recommendation 10.7);

⁶ AASW Code of Ethics 1999 (2nd edition 2002)

⁷ Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Adequate Housing



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- The Australian Government reconsider the level of increased support to the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program being offered under the '*A Place to Call Home*' initiative in seeking to address the level of unmet need, and increase support to emergency assistance programmes provided by charitable organisations to assist the growing numbers experiencing financial crisis. The \$150m committed within *A Place to Call Home* needs to be increased to adequately address the actual demand for immediate housing assistance by including people experiencing homelessness not currently presenting to SAAP services (for example 6000 are assisted annually through Assistance with Care and housing for the Aged ACHA).
14. The AASW welcomed the release of the Government's Green Paper, "Which Way Home"⁸, and its broad consultation with State, Territory and Local Governments and the non-government sector and looks forward to the release of the White Paper.
 15. The AASW welcomed the Government's announcement and implementation of the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS).
 16. The AASW also welcomed the implementation of the Government's First Home Saver Accounts; and,
 17. The AASW calls for an urgent review of Commonwealth Rent Assistance to ensure that it meets the needs of low income people in private rental accommodation.
 18. The AASW calls for the Household Organisation Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Scheme be expanded nationally to provide early intervention services for families at risk of homelessness. The scheme should be evaluated after five years, including a comprehensive economic evaluation, to ensure that the expanded programme continues to provide economic and social benefits to the community.

⁸ Australian Government, (2008) "Which Way Home: A New Approach to Homelessness", Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/housing/new_approach_stage1.htm



Conclusion

The AASW considers that current data collection should be reviewed to include integrated data collection/mixed data sets regarding recurring homelessness and its impact on health, employment, education and social participation and supports targets be considered in seeking to prevent and/or reduce homelessness.

Suggested targets include:

- The number of people moving from public housing to crisis accommodation decreases;
- The number of people leaving private rental for crisis accommodation decreases;
- The number of women and children experiencing domestic and family violence who are enabled to stay safely housed in the family home increases;
- The inappropriate and unplanned discharge of people from institutional and state care ceases;
- Specific projects that extend understanding of the causes of homelessness and include longitudinal studies re outcomes (are they sustained) are supported;
- People who have experienced homelessness are involved at all levels to develop measures of success which have meaning to them;
- All local governments develop homelessness strategies-to be informed by Capital City Homelessness Strategies (Cities of Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney) as a local response to national and state responses to homelessness.

Disclaimer: Position statements



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References

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United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11(1) General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Adequate Housing http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm

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Approved by the AASW Senior Executive Officer: [Nov 12 2008]

Approved by the AASW Board: [Nov 22 2008]

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