

Scope of Social Work Practice Homelessness

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AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

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Introduction

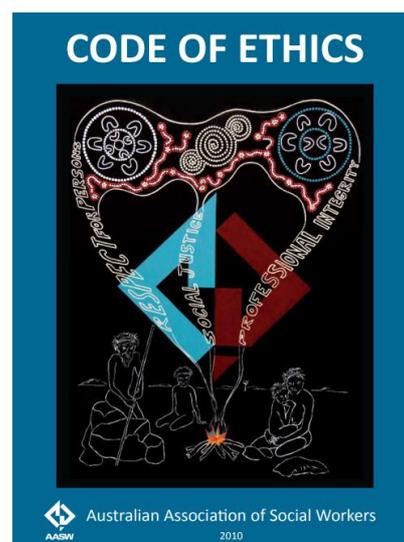
The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) *Scope of Social Work Practice: Homelessness* document provides an overview of the scope and contribution of social work practice in the housing and homelessness field. The aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect. Social workers, policy makers, managers and academics can use this scope of practice to articulate and promote the role of professional social workers in this field.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, communities and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, political, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing; and addressing any external and structural issues that may be negatively affecting it, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

The AASW's **Code of Ethics 2010** is the core document which informs and guides the ethical practice of social workers. The Code expresses the values and responsibilities which are integral to and characterise the social work profession.



Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The AASW is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs.

The academic qualifications accredited by the AASW include: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work Qualifying Master's degree. The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing the knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW.

Understanding homelessness

Social workers work with those who are homeless, those who are at risk of homelessness and at the societal level, to reduce the factors that lead to homelessness. In Australia, there have been several definitions of homelessness. Social workers have used the cultural definition of homelessness in terms of three inter-related categories:

- Primary homelessness which is experienced by people without conventional accommodation (e.g. sleeping rough, squatting)
- Secondary homelessness which is experienced by people who frequently move from one temporary shelter to another (e.g. emergency accommodation, 'couch surfing')
- Tertiary homelessness which is experienced by people staying in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards (e.g. boarding houses, caravan parks, overcrowded housing)¹

“Social workers work with those who are homeless, with those who are at risk of homelessness and at the societal level to reduce the factors that lead to homelessness.”

Although this has been a useful categorisation for measuring homelessness, it does not capture the meaning of homelessness for those who are experiencing it. Neither has it reflected the cyclical nature and iterative trauma experienced for people moving in and out of the different categories. In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics developed a new definition.

Homelessness is when

“A person does not have suitable accommodation and their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling which is inadequate; or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- Does not allow them to have control of or access to space for social relations”ⁱ

¹ Chamberlain C. & MacKenzie D. (2008). Counting the Homeless: Australia 2006. Australian Census Analytic Program. available at [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/\\$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/57393A13387C425DCA2574B900162DF0/$File/20500-2008Reissue.pdf)

Housing is internationally recognised as a Human Right and homelessness is a human rights violation.²

According to Homelessness Australia, on any given night in Australia, 1 in 200 people are homeless.³

While there can be several contributing factors, for the AASW the core of the homelessness problem is extreme poverty and a lack of affordable housing.⁴

Role of social work in homelessness

Social workers appreciate that the stress of homelessness is linked to widening inequality in the housing market that directly affects the physical and mental health, educational, employment, social, financial and emotional well being of individuals and families. It impacts upon both current and future wellbeing and life-chances. Social workers also recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples are over represented in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness and overcrowding, and that this has been influenced by their particular context of colonisation and dispossession.

Social workers work directly in homelessness support services assisting individuals and families locate and maintain secure and affordable housing where it is available. Social workers practice in various settings which address issues of homelessness including:

- Federal human service bureaucracies
- State, Territory and Local Government human services
- Hospitals and community health programs
- Accommodation providers
- Emergency relief
- Crisis services
- Mental health services
- Specialist homelessness services
- Youth services
- Specialist women's services
- Family violence services
- Drug and alcohol services
- Neighbourhood and community centres
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services
- Refugee and asylum seeker services
- Disability services
- Aged care services

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² Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 4 on the Right to Adequate Housing

³ Homelessness Australia. <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/homeless-statistics>

⁴ NASW (2012) Social work speaks: Homelessness. p.181.

<http://www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/swmonth/2012/toolkit/standards/Homelessness.PDF>

Social workers recognise the critical lack of affordable housing and have been actively advocating to expand housing assistance across a wide range of areas particularly in family violence services, youth services / young people reaching the age when out-of-home care is terminated and regarding increasing numbers of older people, especially women, being squeezed out of the private rental market.



Social workers work with many clients whose rights are compromised and 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 family violence, parents who are separated from and seeking to be reunified with their children, people unable to leave temporary accommodation, health facilities or prisons due to the unavailability of permanent secure and affordable accommodation. Some service users of psychiatric services are unable to access rehabilitation unless they have a fixed address; some are unable to be released from correctional services when legally entitled until they have a fixed address.

Social workers are active, engaged and reflective professionals who skilfully use interpersonal communication, assessment, ethical and political processes and change strategies to build trusting relationships in order to assist clients. In this context, social workers apply evidence-based approaches, skills in counselling, case coordination/case management, advocacy, policy analysis, community development, networking, lobbying and critical thinking. These are underpinned by the social work values of respect for persons, social justice and professional integrity.

Social work assistance will vary according to the practice setting and presenting issues. Assistance may involve addressing the individual's immediate care needs, accessing crisis accommodation and/or linking to agencies that can provide longer term support. Alternatively, assistance may be provided to help clients to access and maintain a stable home.

Social workers also engage in research to better understand the interrelationships and intersectionality of homelessness.

Scope of social work practice in homelessness

The **scope of social work practice in homelessness** includes:

- Psycho-social assessments that in addition to the standard psycho-social assessment include an understanding of what led to homelessness and any available accommodation options, and barriers to returning to previous accommodation or family.
- Counselling
- Case management
- Community development



- Developing resources
- Advocacy
- Skill development
- Network providing and linking to resources
- Supporting people navigate services (health and housing)
- Discharge planning for persons who are not only homeless but may also be struggling with mental health, physical health and drug or alcohol misuse
- Policy analysis, advocacy and development
- Effective referrals for persons without an address, mailing address or mobile phone and who have great difficulty attending regular appointments
- Research.

Contribution of social work

Social workers, through their professional qualifications, or training and adherence to the Code of Ethics bring with them a commitment to social justice, respect for persons and professional integrity. With their focus on holistic support and the ability to consider the complexity involved from multiple perspectives, social workers offer a unique contribution by providing appropriate and targeted services to meet the whole of life needs of people and families who find themselves experiencing or at extreme and imminent risk of homelessness.

“Social workers engage in assertive programs that help people move from a state of homelessness to one in which they have affordable and sustainable housing.”

This multi-focused approach includes knowledge of human functioning and behaviour, and how socioeconomic, historical, political, legal and cultural factors interact and impact to produce homelessness.

With their psycho-social perspective, social workers are also alert to the wide range of people who find themselves homeless and their unique needs and strengths. Social workers thus work with women and children fleeing family violence including sexual violence, people with psychiatric or intellectual difficulties, individuals receiving inadequate levels of government financial support and those receiving low rates of pay, those who are socially isolated, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, youth alienated from their families or leaving the care of the State, people with drug or alcohol dependencies or gambling problems, and refugees and asylum seekers.

Social workers engage in assertive programs that help people move from a state of homelessness to one in which they have affordable and sustainable housing. Whether or not housing can be achieved in the short term, social workers also advocate for other rights such as health care and income security and to be treated with dignity and respect.

Social workers are collaborative in their approach and have particular skills in bringing together the various stakeholders to achieve good housing outcomes. They are committed to breaking down silos and ensuring the holistic needs of clients are met.

At the highest policy and political level, this is reflected in advocacy and lobbying with regard to reducing poverty, investing in affordable housing with a coordinated strategy at all levels of government and private, public and community sectors.

This advocacy is grounded in relationships with people who find themselves homeless both at individual and systemic levels.

Conclusion

Social workers play a key role in positive change at individual, organisational, community and political levels to reduce the risk of homelessness for some of the most vulnerable members of society.

Social workers are ideally placed to work in homelessness because they maintain a focus on both the wider socio-economic factors that lead to difficulty in accessing or maintaining a home, while at the same time being sensitive to individual's stories that reveal both vulnerabilities and strengths. Hence they work at the political level to change policies that negatively impact such as low levels of investment in affordable housing and low base rates of government income support. At the same time, they work sensitively with individuals and communities to overcome the complex psycho-social factors that put people at risk of homelessness or lead to it. Accordingly, the social work profession has a clear role in the continuum of housing and homelessness services.



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