

Targeting the problems of Homelessness

There was a period in Australia when the right to housing went unquestioned. In post WW2 Australia, State Housing authorities, with support from the Federal Government, invested in social housing throughout our country. At that point in time, we seemed to understand as a nation that all people and all families, even those in low paid work or unable to work deserved the dignity of housing. That Australia, lost for the past few decades, can and must be recovered.

Physical and mental illness, addiction, misfortune, low wages, poor choices and lack of educational opportunity can lead to poverty, as do social services structured to deliberately create and sustain poverty. Homelessness itself is a direct result of poverty and unaffordable housing options. Understanding this can inform policy that will put an end to both.

Addressing the impact of mental illness requires specific types of support. Current support services, including short and long-term accommodation are grossly inadequate, with under-resourced charities, our streets and our prisons taking up the slack.

Women and children are particularly vulnerable to homelessness due to family relationship breakdown and violence. Current welfare and unemployment benefits that now rest below the poverty line are a major, avoidable contributing factor.

A disproportionate cohort of older women are finding their superannuation savings are inadequate to house and keep them because of lifelong disparity in wages, in superannuation savings, and in many cases having an interrupted working life to care for children.

First Nations people are disproportionately affected by homelessness and inadequate housing.

Asylum seekers and refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds face additional barriers to finding accommodation and support, primarily due to Government policies that deny them employment, support, and accommodation. The New Liberals will end this gratuitously cruel practice.

Having no permanent address makes it almost impossible to find employment or retain a job. The means of maintaining presentation and finding transport are usually insurmountable. Almost 10% of homeless people live rough. The task of protecting personal safety and protecting possessions from theft is difficult if living rough or in marginal housing. Health issues in relation to nutrition and exposure are a concern.

In 2019, there were 148,500 households on the waiting list for public housing, with 45% of those with special needs waiting for more than one year (11% more than 5 years) to be housed¹ even though the cost to the community of homelessness is substantial, and not simply in monetary terms.

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2020/contents/priority-groups-and-waiting-lists>

Research published in 2015 reported that in the 12 months prior to moving into permanent supportive housing, long-term homelessness resulted in a cost to the community of \$48,000 in government services². These included police and health service interactions. In the 12 months after living in permanent supportive housing, that same group utilised \$35,000 of such services, including the cost of permanent supportive housing.

The monetary and human cost of imprisonment of the homeless and mentally ill is even worse, and approximately 40% of prison entrants have a diagnosed mental health condition, with an estimated 37% leaving incarceration by the prison's revolving door at the end of their sentence³.

According to the Productivity Commission in a 2018 report⁴, the annual cost of prisons in Australia reached over \$4.6 billion in 2017-18, equating to \$302 per prisoner per day, or \$110,230 per annum.

As can be seen, it costs the public significantly more to keep people homeless. More importantly, it costs people experiencing it their dignity and health, and has a corrosive effect on civil society and safety.

Successive Governments have increasingly shifted responsibility for the homeless onto charitable agencies. While these agencies can assist with food and short-term shelter, they are not in a position to address long-term homelessness, low wages and the casualisation of employment, and a policy of stripping away Australia's social safety net. In fact, any attempt by charities to challenge these policies have been met by Government threats to withdraw their charitable tax status.

Freeing charities from the burden of providing housing and other material support will enable them to fund, develop, and pursue support services complementary to government re-engagement with its responsibilities.

The New Liberals recognise there will always be individuals and families who go through times of crisis and may become homeless. That experience should and can be prevented or be experienced as briefly as possible. Establishing a national response that aims to keep people housed or return people back to secure housing as rapidly as possible is a priority for The New Liberals, as is addressing the structural causes of poverty and homelessness.

The New Liberals Will Take the Following Steps to Remedy Homelessness and its Causes:

- Increase social security benefits to a level where recipients can secure suitable, secure accommodation, and meet reasonable expenses of living, including participation in job-search and/or educational activities.
- The New Liberals, having regard to the National Industry Development Framework for Community Housing will work to support and develop

² <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/240>

³ <https://www.svha.org.au/newsroom/media/new-report-paints-sorry-picture-of-australian-prisoner-health>

⁴ <https://www.ceda.com.au/NewsAndResources/Opinion/Economy/Australia-pays-the-price-for-increasing-rates-of-imprisonment>

responses to homelessness in different regions and in different communities, including First Nations and asylum seeker/refugee communities.

- We will provide tied funding through the States to ensure an adequate supply of appropriate housing at sites where it is needed and where it allows continued social connections for its clients. Adequate and continuing support for these clients will be made available where needed.
- We will promote and fund alternatives to imprisonment, where safe. We will ensure all persons within the Federal and State corrective services and youth justice jurisdictions receive support, educational opportunities, addiction treatment, restitution, and rehabilitation services to help reintegrate them as productive members of society, thereby reducing homelessness and recidivism.
- We will properly fund preventive and psychiatric treatment services in prisons and in society in general.
- We will properly fund emergency accommodation services for the victims of domestic violence and for their transition to long-term secure accommodation where necessary.
- The New Liberals will NEVER threaten to or withdraw the charitable status of any charitable body merely on the basis of criticism of our policies.
- The New Liberals will address gender inequalities in income that lead to risk of homelessness in later life by ensuring equal pay for work of equal value, and by the maintenance of full superannuation contributions during periods of parental leave. Fully subsidised childcare for lower to middle income families will be available to ensure minimal career disruption for those women and men who have primary childcare responsibilities.
- The New Liberals will provide targeted policies and support services to assist people to escape the poverty/homelessness trap, in consultation with affected communities of people. This includes policies regarding our Job Guarantee, a living wage, and social support services that will not plunge ill, disabled, under or unemployed people into poverty or homelessness.

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