

## EDITORIAL: Homelessness in WA



by Karel Eringa

According to census data there were around 11,700 homeless people in Western Australia in June 2001. This figure does not include:

- people living in overcrowded conditions,
- people living in caravan parks,
- people living in housing stress (ie. in accommodation that they cannot afford), and
- people that live in housing that is inappropriate to their needs.

Around 2,200 people (19%) were classified as primary homeless, ie. living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. Some 2,700 people (23%) were staying in boarding houses or in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). However, by far the largest group (6,800 people or 58%) were staying temporarily with friends or relatives because they had no other place to go.

A series of four surveys by Shelter WA have found that WA's homeless people are mainly young and Indigenous. Around two thirds of the homeless people in the surveys were under 25 years of age. Around half of the households in each of the surveys identified as Indigenous.

A paper released by Shelter WA in December 2003 found that "the main problem appears to be ... a lack of safe and secure medium and long term housing that is accessible to homeless people. This is partly because of an increasing shortage of affordable accommodation in Western Australia in general, and partly because of a lack of transitional support services assisting homeless people to establish themselves in long term accommodation."

The paper also found that addressing the problem of homelessness would require increases in Government funding "in the order of tens of millions of dollars per year for support services, and hundreds of millions of dollars per year to build affordable housing."

Despite some worthwhile funding increases initiated by the State Homelessness Strategy (for instance, see the article on the launch of the Private Rental Support and Advocacy Service in News In Brief), the situation has got worse, rather than better. In particular, housing affordability has deteriorated since the last census. For instance, in December 2002 there were 31 suburbs in the Perth metropolitan area where a family on an income at the top of the second quintile (\$45,305) could afford to purchase a median priced home.

One year later, the same family could only purchase a median priced home in 12 suburbs. Over the course of the year, a combination of rapidly rising house prices and increases in interest rates put purchasing in suburbs such as Balga, Clarkson, Gosnells, Kelmscott, Koondoola, Lockridge, Midland, Two Rocks and Warnbro out of the reach of low to middle income families.

At the same time, low cost housing stock in the private rental market remains low, with a sizable proportion of families in private rental living in housing stress. Finally, State and Commonwealth funding for social housing has declined by more than 25% in real terms since 1996/97. As a result, there has been next to no stock growth in this sector.

In other words, it is clear that low cost housing options for people on low incomes have deteriorated over the last few years. This has put increased pressure on vulnerable groups of homeless people, including young people, older people and people with disabilities.

This edition of the newsletter contains articles on the impact of homelessness on older people, and the extent of homelessness in WA. In addition, there is an article providing some detail on Shelter WA's recent work in the area and an overview of the work of the Homeless Help Line.

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# Where Did the Homeless Go, Minister?

by Paul Pendergast



Many housing researchers have warned of the dangers of taking homelessness counts and how seemingly minor changes in the collection methodology can result in major changes in the population count. The latest example of this problem has been highlighted in *Counting the Homeless 2001* and it involves a large apparent reduction in Indigenous homelessness despite falling expenditure on housing provision.

In February this year *The Australian* newspaper reported that family homelessness had increased by 16% between 1996 and 2003 according to the most recent Supported Accommodation Assistance Program figures. In response, a spokesperson for Kay Paterson, Minister for Family and Community Services, sought to allay community concerns about rising family homelessness by countering the SAAP data with ABS data.

The spokesperson said that there had "been an increase in service provisions for families, who can apply for assistance multiple times." He added that "an increase in SAAP services does not denote an increase in the number of homeless people" and "a more accurate figure was the ABS estimate that the number of homeless was now 99,900, which was lower than in the previous census of 1996."<sup>1</sup>

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data referred to by the Minister's spokesperson was the recently released and long awaited, *Counting the Homeless 2001* by Chris Chamberlain and David Mackenzie. The report provides time series data about homelessness in Australia based on the 2001 Census and updates the findings from the authors' landmark report *Counting the Homeless 1996*.

A superficial reading of the ABS report does reveal that the number of homeless people in Australia declined from 105,304 in 1996 to 99,900 in 2001<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the decline is accounted for in large part because of a fall in the number of homeless Indigenous people living in remote communities. This is a point that the authors themselves appear to feel uncomfortable with.



What the Minister's spokesperson failed to mention, however, is that the bulk of this decline is accounted for by the ABS changing its counting rules between Censuses. In fact, the report clearly states on numerous occasions that "there was a decline of about 6 400 people in improvised dwellings, tents and sleepers out. This was largely a result of a change in the counting rules in remote Indigenous communities."

Specifically, the 2001 census no longer counts Indigenous people in remote communities living in dwellings without toilet facilities as homeless. This change had most affect in the States with the highest Indigenous populations.

For instance, in the Northern Territory it was the chief factor in reducing the number of homeless people from 6 000 in 1996 to 1 300 in 2001. The change in counting rules also reduced the number of homeless people in WA, from 12 252 to 11 697.

However, this still left WA with the third highest rate of homelessness in the country at 64 per 10 000 of the population.

Shelter WA is disappointed by the ABS's decision to change the counting rules midstream and the implication that Indigenous people should be satisfied with a lesser standard of housing than other Australians. Shelter WA's research has consistently identified housing disadvantage amongst Indigenous people as one of our most pressing housing issues.

At the recent *Housing Indigenous People in Regional WA Forum*, Shelter WA highlighted that in Western Australia, 20% of Indigenous households are living in overcrowded conditions. The evidence suggests that the level of overcrowding among Indigenous people increases with distance from Perth.

For instance, ABS data indicates that in Perth, 11% of all Indigenous households live in overcrowded conditions, compared to 2% of non-Indigenous households. This increased to 18% (Indigenous) and 4% (non-Indigenous) in Geraldton, 20% / 5% in South Hedland, and 31% / 12% in Broome. In Kununurra a similar proportion (48%) of Indigenous households lived in overcrowded conditions, compared to 8% of non-Indigenous households. Finally, in Warburton, overcrowding stood at 50% for Indigenous households and 2% for non-Indigenous households.

Resolving the issue of homelessness will take a substantial financial commitment. For instance, recent research conducted by Shelter WA suggested that in the Shire of Broome alone there was a shortage of more than

# Homeless Helpline Update

by Department of Housing and Works

The Department of Housing and Works' Homeless Helpline established in Perth in May 2001, has proved to be a success story in many ways.

Not only has there been significant numbers of people housed, but there are now strong bridges built between both Government and non-government agencies addressing this difficult problem.

There is an excellent reciprocal relationship with Helpline staff, and staff from the Department Community Development, Centrelink, the Salvo Care Line, Wesley Homelink and all the non-government welfare agencies.

The Helpline also links people to various support services where possible, and these then work with the client to address the problems which made them homeless in the first place.

By January this year, almost three thousand, (or fifty nine percent) of people who have contacted the Helpline have found some form of accommodation. This is either permanent through Homeswest or the private rental market, or short-term through crisis accommodation. Most of other 41 per cent have been offered Bond Assistance to search for private rental accommodation.

By all accounts, the close work between the Helpline staff and other agencies has ensured this marvellous success rate in assisting people who in the past,

would have either had to stay in overcrowded situations with family or friends, or on the street.

Housing people who are homeless, or are about to become homeless, can be quite difficult as many have multiple problems. This includes debt, poverty, poor tenancy histories, domestic violence and the transient nature of some people.

Many people find it difficult to access the private rental market because of their inability to address these issues, their appearance, discrimination or other barriers like finding the 4-weeks bond, 2 weeks rent in advance and letting fees.

One of the greatest success stories of the Homeless Helpline, occurred in November 2002, when it negotiated to lease up to eight properties from Perth Management Services (PMS). These properties are Department of Housing and Works properties managed by PMS for short-term private rental purposes prior to them being used in the Departments redevelopment and new living programs.

This was to accommodate families who could not gain entry to the private rental market because they could not produce references, had debt problems, problems with extended family, or could simply not break the barrier to accessing private rental.

The result is that 20 Aboriginal families, as well as a disabled person have now been placed into these properties. The Homeless Helpline coordinated tenancy and social support for these families from the non-government agencies, and monitored their progress to ensure that they complied with their tenancy agreement.

As at December 2003, sixteen families have successfully completed their initial three-month tenancy, thus entitling them a reference to access the private rental market if they wished to leave. During this time, the Homeless Helpline also arranged for them to access financial councillors who would work with them to repay their debt.

There is no doubt that the key to the success of the Homeless Helpline program has been the co-ordination of support when the tenant first moves in, the strict guidelines and the ongoing monitoring carried out by the helpline co-ordinator during the three months initial tenancy period.

Also contributing to the success is the use of Centrepay, which is a direct payment arrangement between Centrelink and the landlord.

The principal finding though, is that this program gives people another chance and the majority have proven that with support they can make it in the private rental market.

## Where Did the Homeless Go, Minister? (cont'd)

350 units of affordable housing. Providing this quantity of housing would cost over \$85 million immediately and then \$5 million annually.

Shelter WA believes that the ABS's change in counting rules has shifted attention away from the main issue, namely that the

rate of homelessness among Indigenous people is unacceptably high. The statements from the Minister's adviser indicates that the Commonwealth Government seems happy to exploit changes in Census counting rules rather than recognise that significant increases in the provision of social housing are required before

we can hope to have any real impact on the extent of homelessness in Australia.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Australian, *Surge in homeless families*, by Patricia Karvelas and Michael McKinnon, February 17, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Chamberlain & David MacKenzie, *Australian Census Analytical Program: Counting the Homeless 2001*, Canberra 2003

# "I just want a nice place to die in"

## Issues affecting Older Homeless People in WA

by Bernadette Brady, Anglicare Housing Advocacy Support Service

Anglicare's Housing Advocacy Support Service (HASS) has been providing flexible outreach and in-home support services to homeless and insecurely housed older people in the Perth Inner City and surrounding northern suburbs since 1994.

Initially part of the Australia-wide Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) pilot program, HASS now receives recurrent funding for an Outreach Worker and also administers 20 Housing Linked Community Aged Care Packages, providing in-home case management, advocacy and support to people who require a higher level of care and who would not otherwise be able to live independently.

The development of the program was based on the hypothesis, (formulated after research into access of mainstream services by older people), that insecurely housed or homeless older adults are at greater risk of premature entry into residential care due to their reduced access to mainstream support services. [2].

More contemporary documentation still identifies older people as one of the key groups at risk in relation to housing. [1.]. On average, older Homeless (ie those aged 50 years and over, or 45 years and over for Indigenous people [4.]), represent

around 9 per cent of metropolitan SAAP clients, indicative of a large number of older people in crisis, including a lack of long-term accommodation. Older people generally present to SAAP services with a number of difficulties, many of them common to other client groups.

However, the ageing processes and the long-term, chronic nature of some of the presenting problems means

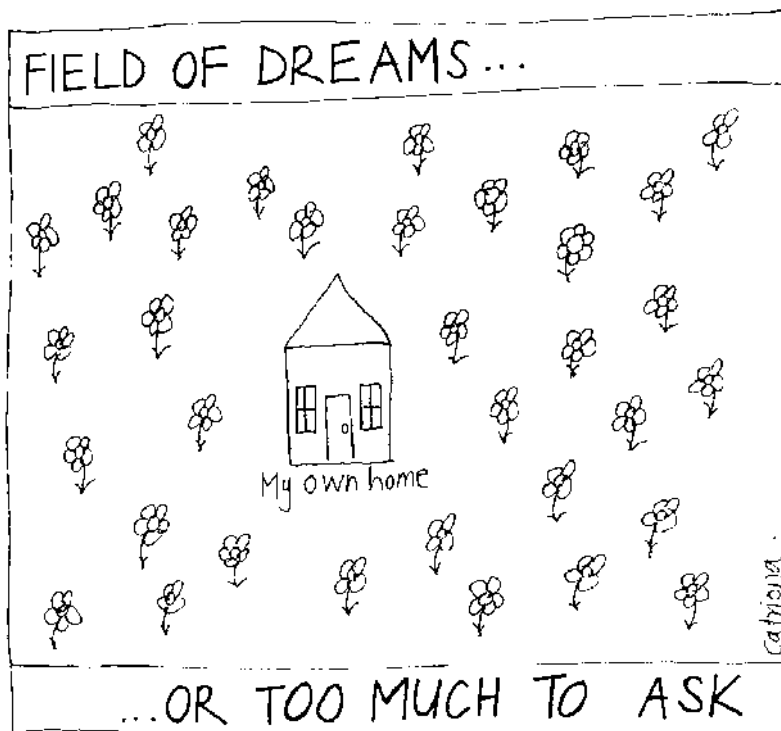
**A lack of affordable, accessible accommodation and flexible support options to maintain independence and social connections.**

HASS has identified many older homeless people for whom independent housing is possible if they are securely housed and have consistent community based care, case management and support. For these

people, maintaining their independence is important. Few have a history of accessing mainstream services and their lifestyle and behaviour makes this difficult. They often refuse to accept such services, and are frequently not accepted by service providers (including public and private housing and residential care providers), because of behavioural factors.

In addition, as is well-known and articulated, there is insufficient public housing stock to

meet the needs of people seeking assistance, and much of the stock is not suitable for older clients with mobility and health problems who need to be housed in smaller, low maintenance accommodation units near community support facilities.



they require specific interventions often beyond the current resource capacity of SAAP services. This was clearly articulated in a recent (July/August, 2003), informal survey between HASS and local SAAP funded agencies. Those spoken with acknowledged the difficulty in addressing the needs of older people who presented as homeless. The following were identified as significant in contributing to this difficulty.

## "I just want a nice place to die in" (cont'd)

**Financial management** issues are a major concern in the management plan for older people accessing support services. Many present with varying degrees of cognitive impairment due to long term alcohol or other drug use, or with dementia, and with a long term pattern of financial mismanagement in their lives. Facing the ethical and legal implications of making assessments and interventions in this area, so that accommodation and health issues can be addressed effectively, is time consuming and presents service providers with many dilemmas. It is challenging negotiating in what, for most people, is a deeply personal and private area of their lives.

### **Health.**

Co-morbidity of acute and chronic health problems requiring complex management strategies, substance use issues and an often poor nutritional status present challenges to service providers. It is often necessary to assess the need for personal care, hygiene and nutrition requirements alongside the assessment for housing needs.

Clients also often present with a diagnosed, or more often, undiagnosed and/or unmanaged psychiatric illness that may affect their behaviour and decision-making capabilities. These issues compromise the capacity of workers to provide assessment and ongoing support.

### **Social Isolation.**

Itinerancy, eccentricity, addiction and psychiatric illness contribute to the lack of establishment of socially supportive links. It is often assumed by other service providers that older people have built up, over a lifetime, a network of friends and family who can support them in maintaining health and housing. This is simply not true for many older homeless people. They have few people to assist with often complex regimens of medical and other care required. For service providers, this is problematic.

### **Training and supervision for workers**

Dealing with entrenched patterns of violence, aggression and other socially unacceptable behaviour, and the grief and loss issues associated with ageing, often in uncontrolled and potentially unsafe environments, is a challenge. Workers need time, supervision and support to debrief and reflect on their work.

Setting and maintaining personal and professional boundaries, questioning what constitutes care, and developing the capacity for a rapid, holistic and effective assessment are important tasks in the work. Often this aspect of providing effective service is unacknowledged in funding submissions, workplace structures and job descriptions.

These issues have been articulated through consistent, practical, outreach experience with this client group. They have been identified and named by many other service providers and researchers, [1.], [2.], [3.], [4.], and have been articulated with passion at forums, conferences and workshops for many years.

It is easy to take a challenging and critical position in relation to these questions, and how they are dealt with by service providers and funding bodies. In this we may reflect similar characteristics to our clients, who often take such a stance in relation to life. I suspect that, behind this, for both clients and ourselves, is a fear of being invisible, of not being heard.

Who will hear and synthesise the needs of recipients and service providers, especially when they are challenging the status quo and demanding a greater share of seemingly scarce resources?

It is not so easy to offer answers. There are complex political, social, economic and personal issues involved in provision of all welfare services that are not easily negotiated. Ultimately, however, the

simplicity, power and urgency of the statement "I just want a nice place to die in" and the grief and isolation it implies, is what somehow needs to be responded to, in meeting the needs of homeless older people.

To do so requires a concerted and creative effort by State and Federal departments and funding bodies to identify the changing needs of a rapidly growing older client group, and develop flexible programs that are adequately funded and reflect the complex nature of the work.

The Housing Advocacy Support Service, is at present, recognizing the need to explore the broader picture of service provision to this target group. Discussions with major stakeholders such as the Department of Housing and Works, Disability Support Services, SAAP funded services and Mental Health Services are increasing the awareness of the issues and hopefully will lead to an effective and wide ranging strategic response.

### **References :**

- [1.] Addressing Homelessness In Western Australia. (2002). State Homelessness Task Force Issues Paper. Western Australia.
- [2.] Connecting Aged Care and Housing : An Evaluation of the Assistance with Care and Housing For the Aged Program (ACHA). (1996). Department of Health and Family Services Aged and Community Care Division. Development and Evaluation Reports. No 23. March 1996. Canberra.
- [3.] Meeting the Needs of the Elderly Homeless. (2000). Parity. Journal of Council to Homeless Persons. Volume 13, Issue 2, February 2000. Victoria.
- [4.] SAAP Monograph : Older SAAP clients . Monograph No 3. February 2003. Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. Canberra.

# Homeswest Page

## Income Confirmation Scheme

The Department is pleased to report the Income Confirmation Scheme (ICS) with Centrelink is working very well for those tenants who agreed to participate. The participation rate is very pleasing and tenants have provided positive feedback to the Department. The most common comment from tenants has been in relation to not having to fill out more forms.

The Department will shortly write to all those tenants who are in receipt of Centrelink payments but did not take up the offer to participate at the commencement of the scheme in February 2003 to again offer the opportunity to participate in the scheme.

All public housing bodies across Australia have reported positive feedback from tenants and community groups on the scheme. The benefit of not having to complete forms and having the information provided by Centrelink direct to the relevant housing body is seen as a bonus to most participants.

## Bonds

The Department has just approved an increase in the cash asset limits for Bond Assistance. The increase in the cash asset limit is due to the costs associated with clients renting in the private market.

Singles: from \$1500 to \$2500

Couples or parent with children:  
from \$2500 to \$5000

Applicants are required to provide evidence of saving account balances, eg account statement, or ATM balance slip.

## Priority Assistance

The Department is currently trialing a new Priority Assessment Form, the trial locations are Bunbury, Karratha, Kalgoorlie and Fremantle offices.

The aim of the form is to ensure there is consistency and uniformity across the State in the assessment of all applicants for priority assistance. The form is used to assess the applicant's housing circumstances and their ability to access accommodation.

The form includes a section for the applicant to add further comments and provision has also been included for an advocate or support person to make any additional comment in relation to the applicant and their circumstances.

The Department is evaluating the form and feedback from the trial before making a final decision on the form layout. The form has been presented to members of the Homeswest Operational Standing Committee (HOSC) for information. The Department will present the final layout of the form to the HOSC members following the evaluation of comments and feedback.

## Seniors Accommodation

The Department receives numerous requests from single seniors' for two-bedroom accommodation. Until recently the Department's seniors construction program has been 60% two-bedroom and 40% one-bedroom accommodation.

The Department received a request from Regional Managers and the Council for the Aging to build more two-bedroom accommodation for seniors. The Department has agreed to this request and will from 2004/05 build 80% two-bedroom and 20% one-bedroom accommodation.

This increase in two-bedroom accommodation will assist to meet the demand for seniors who require a carer, have a medical condition that requires an extra bedroom and / or who have family commitments.

The allocation of two-bedroom accommodation to seniors is currently determined in the following manner:

### *Allocation Policy 3.18:*

Seniors (55 and over) may be allocated two-bedroom accommodation this will be dependent upon the availability of stock and the needs of the applicant. Consideration will be given to applicant's medical condition and requirements, family responsibilities and couples.

# News in Brief

## Fifth Homelessness Survey

Shelter WA is currently conducting a follow-up survey among agencies dealing with homeless people in Western Australia.

Shelter WA conducted similar surveys in June 2001, March 2002, September 2002 and February 2003. These surveys were initiated to identify changes in the composition of homeless households in WA over time and to measure the impact of the Government's response to the Homelessness Task Force Recommendations.

Some key findings from the last survey were:

- Low incomes continued to be a principal feature of homeless households with 96% of households having an income of less than \$408 per week..
- There was significant growth in the proportion of children (<14 yrs) who were homeless, increasing from 30% in March 2002 to 45% in February 2003. Children accounted for 60% of homeless Indigenous people in the 2003 survey.
- Housing affordability continues to be a crucial issue. The proportion of income required to access median priced rental housing in Perth for all homeless households was 78% in 2003.
- There was a doubling in proportion of single parent households experiencing homelessness, up from 20% in September 2002 to 42% in February 2003.

Full findings of the four previous surveys are available from [www.shelterwa.org.au](http://www.shelterwa.org.au) (publications). In addition, Shelter WA is finalising an overview of homelessness in WA based on the surveys and external statistical information.

## Experiencing Homelessness

In December last year, Shelter WA released an Occasional Paper called *Experiencing Homelessness in WA*.

This report aims to enrich this quantitative research with the views of homelessness agencies and the people accessing these agencies.

This report outlines and explores the responses from the homelessness agencies to the problem of addressing homelessness and to compare this to the experiences of those people who are homeless and in contact with these agencies. The agencies were interviewed in regards to the services that they provide, the people using the services and the perceptions of homelessness within the agency. The names of participating agencies and individuals have been withheld, as the study was conducted under an agreement that anonymity would be maintained.

The agencies included women's refuges, single men's accommodations, youth hostels, community housing providers, youth outreach centres, counselling services, single people's outreach and accommodation centres and community development organisations. These agencies are located in both Metropolitan and Rural areas within Western Australia. In addition, interviews were conducted with service users from a single men's hostel, a youth accommodation service and a women's refuge, located both in Perth and in rural WA.

A variety of responses to the interview questions were obtained from the interviews with the agencies and the service users, and are included to highlight the views, the personal stories, and differences between the thoughts

of the providers and users of the service. Four common themes were identified:

1. Inadequate funding of support services;
2. Multiple problems with no one simple solution;
3. Solution starts with a stable living environment; and
4. Lack of exit points and appropriate accommodation.

## Private Rental Support and Advocacy Service

On 15 March, Community Development Minister Sheila McHale officially launched the Private Rental Support and Advocacy Service. An initiative of the WA State Homelessness Strategy, this new service aims to support landlords, property managers and tenants to work in partnership to prevent homelessness.

The seven services funded through the program will "work with people having difficulty in maintaining tenancies and provide assistance structured around the needs of each person or family." While the service is primarily aimed at private rental tenants it is also available to tenants of community housing.

Services are available in the Perth metropolitan area, as well as Peel, Busselton / Margaret River and Geraldton / Greenough. A specialist Support and Advocacy Service for migrants has also been funded. Contact details are as follows:

South East Corridor:  
Ruah Tenancy Support  
Anna Paris, 9493 7305

Balga to Midland:  
Centrecare Support & Advocacy  
Karri Hillier, 9440 0400

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## News in Brief (cont'd)

Rockingham:  
STAR (Anglicare)  
Karoline Stent, 9527 5322

Peel:  
WAASP  
Lynn Rodgers, 9582 9920

Busselton / Margaret River:  
CASA  
Peter de Bruin, 9752 2855

Geraldton / Greenough:  
PRAC  
Mark Rowe 9964 3533

Multicultural (metro wide)  
Multicultural Housing Advocacy  
Service  
Jasbir (Jas) Mann, 9328 2699

### Services First

We are in what is likely to be a federal election year. The Australian Government has a hefty budget surplus. One of the biggest issues will be whether this is used to improve health, education and community services or to fund income tax cuts.

The Government and the Opposition seem eager to compete over who can offer more generous tax cuts, even though taxpayers received their 'milkshake and sandwich' tax cuts just a year ago. Public opinion is taking a different tack. A recent Newspann poll published by The Australian on 23 February found that 72% of respondents preferred more spending on health and education while only 9% preferred a tax cut.

How can we get the parties to listen?

A new group called *Services First* has been formed to raise awareness in the community of the importance of health, education and community services, the serious problems that beset them,

and the risk to their viability posed by another round of tax cuts at this time.

Membership of *Services First* is diverse. It includes organisations representing services providers and consumers. At this stage, participating organisations include the National Public Hospital Clinician's Task Force, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Disability Federation of Australia, Aged and Community Services Australia, the Australian Council of State School Organisations, the Australian Education Union, the National Tertiary Education Union, the Australian Council of Social Service and National Shelter.

The goal of *Services First* is to get the parties to give priority to investment in services, and better family and social security payments instead of tax cuts, at least over the term of the next Government (the next 3 years).

*Services First* is non-partisan. It will not endorse or support any political party or candidate for election. However, it will focus on media and marginal electorates to ensure that our message – the need to improve services – gets through in this election year.

From 24 March 2004, you can get further information about *Services First* from its web site at [www.servicesfirst.org.au](http://www.servicesfirst.org.au). The site offers an opportunity to:

- participate in a public survey on services and taxation.
- register your interest in the work of the group by lodging an email address to be kept up to date with activities at the national and local level.

## Shelter WA

Shelter WA is Western Australia's peak independent housing organisation. Shelter WA is community managed and represents the views of consumers and community groups on major housing issues. Shelter WA aims to ensure that every person has access to affordable, appropriate, secure and safe housing that is free from discrimination.

*We do this through:*

- ⊙ co-ordinating and representing community sector views to government;
- ⊙ developing and responding to policy;
- ⊙ providing education and information ; and
- ⊙ promoting alternative housing models.

### Newsletter Production

Publisher Shelter WA  
Editor Karel Eringa  
Contributors Karel Eringa,  
Paul Pendergast,  
Bernadette  
Brady, Anglicare  
HASS, Dept of  
Housing & Works

If you have any queries or comments regarding the articles in this newsletter, or if you would like to contribute to future Shelter WA newsletters, please contact Karel Eringa (details below).

While we are happy to consider any articles submitted for publication, we reserve the right to edit material in consideration of space, content and relevance.

**The views expressed  
in this newsletter do  
not necessarily reflect  
those of Shelter WA.**

### Shelter WA

1st Floor  
33 Moore Street,  
East Perth WA 6004  
Ph: 08 9325 6660  
Fax: 08 9325 8113  
Mob: 0417 295 896  
[shelterwa@shelterwa.org.au](mailto:shelterwa@shelterwa.org.au)  
[www.shelterwa.org.au](http://www.shelterwa.org.au)