



Experiencing Homelessness in WA

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Homelessness has been an issue of ongoing concern to Shelter WA. Over the past two years Shelter WA has conducted four surveys of agencies providing services to homeless people and these have provided valuable information on households experiencing homelessness. 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.

Methodology

Between July and November 2003 Sarah Durell and Chelsie Lowery, two Social Work Students from Curtin University, undertook qualitative research into homelessness as part of a placement with Shelter WA. This paper is based on face-to-face interviews with 10 agencies as well as 12 people currently experiencing homelessness. The research was conducted as part of Shelter WA's research project into the nature of homelessness, *A Profile of Homelessness in WA*.

The agencies and groups of homeless people to be interviewed were identified by reviewing past survey results and participation of agencies in Shelter WA's *Counting the Homeless Surveys*. From the agencies that had previously participated the final selection was based on the agencies primary target groups matching with those identified within the surveys. In addition, the researchers sought to achieve a balance of city and rural agencies.

The agencies interviewed assisted the researchers to make contact with people experiencing homelessness and to organise interviews with them. The interview questions were devised with the need to identify common themes and structures

within the agency. To do this past reports were reviewed and common themes identified, these in turn set the focus for the questions.

An interview guideline was developed that was sensitive to the personal experiences of service users and would assist the researchers to gain insights to the service user's views on the agency and their perception of housing issues. These provide a comparison to the views of the agency. It was also an opportunity for the interviewee to share their story and explore and reflect on their current situation.

All interviews were recorded in writing and common themes were identified. Prior to the interviews taking place, consent forms were signed to guarantee confidentiality.

Common Themes

1. Inadequate Funding of Support Services

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) funds organisations that aid homeless people or help people to gain safe and secure housing. The Department of Family and Community Service (FACS) offers this description:

SAAP is a support program assisting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, through a range of support and supported accommodation services. It is an important part of Australia's overall response to homelessness and of the broader social safety net designed to prevent disadvantage in the community.

The overall aim of SAAP, as set down in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act, is to provide transitional supported accommodation and a range of related support services, in order to help people who are homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence.

Within this aim the goals are to:

- *resolve crisis;*
- *re-establish family links where appropriate; and*
- *re-establish the capacity of clients to live independently of SAAP.¹*

All agencies interviewed as part of this research expressed a concern that the level of funding they receive from SAAP was not sufficient to meet the ever increasing demand on their services. They also noted that grants and other funding, provided through corporate or small business, are minimal and hard to obtain.

The level of funding received by agencies impacts upon and restricts the services provided. Some of these impacts, as reported by the agencies, include:

- an inability to employ an appropriate level of staffing to meet the needs that are presented;
- employees being overworked; and
- agencies are not always able to provide a safe and secure environment in which those seeking assistance are able to adequately gain support and succour.

¹ FACS, SAAP – the supported accommodation assistance program, Canberra.

What the Agencies Said

One agency providing services to young people suggested that it is imperative that there be an increase in funding in order for the agency to expand to meet the growing housing needs, and to adequately provide assistance to those seeking it. Another agency that provides crisis accommodation to women said that they have to turn away a substantial number of women because there was not enough staff and funding to extend their service.

The agencies believed that a range of services is required, including crisis, medium and long term housing. This theme was common for both metropolitan and rural agencies visited. A related theme among workers within the city agencies was a lack of funding. Some relevant quotes were:

“A lack of funding results in a shortage of resources and therefore staff, which restricts the quantity of services provided by the agency”

youth service

“The funding within this agency is not enough to meet the needs of the men that access the agency and want to use the services”

men’s refuge

By contrast, some rural services indicated that funding was adequate for the services that they currently provide, but that funding was inadequate to allow these agencies to respond to demand by providing a broader range of services. However, other rural agencies indicated that the funding was inadequate for the services that they currently provide. Some quotes:

“It is my belief that the service is adequately funded. Donations to the service provide enough money so that we are able to run cars for the workers and thus access an increased number of people who would like to use the service”

rural counselling service

“Our agency is only just surviving on the money that we receive”.

“More funding would mean that we would be able to offer more services to the young people, including recreational activities”

rural youth accommodation and support service

What the Service Users Said

Agencies are restricted in the types of services that they can offer. Some of the single men and youth suggested that recreation and other activities would improve the services offered by agencies. Some believed that increasing housing provision was the main priority.

“It would also be good to have more entertainment – at the moment we have table tennis and board games, but it would be nice to have something else to do as well. Not all of the men know how to play the board games, nor do they participate so it would be good to have some more choice.”

“I think there needs to be a greater amount of cheaper housing for low income earners in Perth.”

“It would be good to have more frequent recreational activities that we can participate in.”

Both agencies and service users agree that there is a higher demand for housing support services than is currently provided in both country and metropolitan areas. In order for this to change, increased funding is needed by those services that want to expand the accommodation and support they are providing.

2. Multiple Problems with No One Simple Solution

Homeless people presenting at agencies often deal with many varied and complex personal problems. Many of the agencies reported difficulties coping with this demand as there is not one solution that fits all. Ideally, every individual would receive a unique response appropriate to his/her personal issues. However, this is a costly and time consuming approach, and generally not feasible taking into consideration the lack of funding and staff available.

There is a complex dichotomy of issues that an individual presents with, and generally the combination of issues presents a professional dilemma. The provider needs to assess whether a range of underlying factors need to be dealt with before the lack of housing can be addressed or, alternatively, to obtain housing for the individual and subsequently work through some of the non-housing issues. The advantage of the latter approach is that the individual will be in stable and secure housing whilst addressing underlying factors, but this does present the problem that users are likely to require substantial support to live independently.

Given the complexity of the issues and the limited resources available, many agencies report struggling to adequately assess and determine individuals' needs. In addition, they report difficulties providing a range of services required to address the broad variety of needs, which are not always immediately obvious.

Several agency workers expressed a belief that some individuals band-aid or cover up problems through the use of drugs and alcohol and other unsafe behaviours (whether to themselves or to others). This contributes to difficulties understanding the causes of the individual's behaviour as well as its effect on housing issues and homelessness. In both rural and metropolitan areas, agencies suggested that, with very few exceptions, individuals will present with more than one issue or problem. Some quotes are as follows:

“It is known that fifty percent of the men within the boarding house have mental health issues as well as drug and alcohol problems”

rural men's accommodation service

“Mental health, drugs and family breakdown are the three common causes for young people to be homeless”

metropolitan youth accommodation and support service

“There is never one problem – coexisting problems such as transmitted debt from previous relationships, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse are common.”

metropolitan women's refuge

“Men that access the service have a variety of problems or issues that are across the board. Sexual abuse is noted as a commonality as is a dysfunctional family of origin. Drugs and alcohol are also seen frequently and are used to bandaid or blot out another painful issue that may have occurred in the past”

metropolitan single men’s boarding accommodation

“Family breakdown, youth pregnancy and a lack of suitable employment and housing in the area are the main reasons why young people access the service”

rural youth accommodation and support service

3. Solution Starts with a Stable Living Environment

The basis of any real solution to homelessness must be a stable living environment. In addition, many of the support agencies felt that users’ need for a stable living environment should be addressed immediately, in conjunction with working through complex personal issues and problems. Agencies also recognised the need to work from a psychological model of human rights to have access to basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing and warmth.

Individuals present at support agencies with an immediate problem, ie. homelessness, yet they often also have underlying issues or problems that generally are not evident on the surface. It appeared that many of the individuals that access the services that we visited are band-aiding the underlying problems that they have. Common issues that agencies see are mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse, dysfunctional families, recent prison release, gambling, sexual, physical, emotional, verbal abuse, isolation, education, law and order conflict, debt, unemployment and unpaid fines.

Agencies aim to provide a safe and secure environment where individuals are able to access support and assistance. It is acknowledged that there is the need within the agency for a sense of community and therefore try to foster this within the agency and support networks. A stable living environment brings security and a sense of belonging, whereby an individual is able to develop and attempt to address personal predicaments.

In a safe environment an individual is going to feel more open to accepting help and support. The agencies see this need and try to address this in their service and support provision. For example, a young man accessing medium to long term housing and support presented with a range of circumstances contributing to homelessness. Once the individual was comfortable within the service and his housing situation was addressed, mental health and family issues could be looked at and worked through with the support of the agency. This provided a safe and secure environment in which he felt comfortable and also where he was able to access appropriate support.

In order to allow individuals to maintain autonomy once they have left the agency, a holistic attempt is made in assisting individuals to develop independent living skills such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and developing and maintaining social networks. Agencies achieve this by placing a certain amount of responsibility onto the individuals whilst within the agency such as maintaining living areas, paying rent and adhering to agency rules.

“If there was accessible and affordable housing for the women, they may be better able to deal with their problems once they have a safe and comfortable place to live. Being able to access affordable housing would also provide a

better alternative for the women than to return to their husbands in an abusive environment”

metropolitan women’s refuge

“Housing is an important factor to firstly achieve a basic standard of living, in order to work on more deeper, complex, personal issues”

metropolitan youth hostel

4. Lack of Exit Points and Appropriate Accommodation

It is evident that there is a growing shortage of affordable, safe and secure housing within the metropolitan and rural areas in WA.² Rising house prices mean that home purchase is become more and more difficult for households earning below the median, the stock of affordable private rental housing is falling, and the waiting list for Homeswest housing is in excess of three years for some household types. In addition, there are non-financial factors that further restrict access to appropriate housing in all three tenures, such as age, condition, cost, availability and location.

Homeswest provides housing for low income earners, however the demand greatly exceeds the availability. This can result in individuals or families residing in unsuitable and unstable accommodation whilst waiting for a Homeswest house to become available. Accessing public housing is problematic for individuals under the age of eighteen who cannot provide a guarantor. This poses a problem, as they are also unable to access housing within the private rental market due to age and income discrimination.

Within the metropolitan area, there is a growing lack of affordable private rental housing stock. The private rental housing that does exist is expensive and difficult to obtain for low income earners and young people.

In addition to long term housing options, it is apparent that there is a lack of transitional housing services. An increase in the amount of transitional housing is needed to give individuals options, time and support whilst finding safe and appropriate housing. For example, a woman escaping domestic violence who is not in need of crisis accommodation but needs a safe place to live, could benefit from the services that a transitional housing support service could provide. This would mean that the woman would not have to return to an abusive household just because she has nowhere else to live.

For many public and private tenants, there are limited external support services available to assist with personal issues or problems. It was mentioned that there is a need for external support services in both the metropolitan and rural areas to address areas such as parenting, child development, relationships, household management, counselling and social networking. These areas need to be addressed in order to maintain a sense of self development, assistance and security.

“In order to cater for low income individuals and families, there needs to be an increase in low cost housing options due to the high costs associated with the private rental market”

metropolitan women’s refuge

² See, for instance, M.Wulff, J.Yates & T.Burke, *Low Rent Housing in Australia 1986 to 1996*, 2001, Office of Policy and Planning, *Supply of low cost rental housing in Western Australia*, Housing Strategy WA Occasional Paper, August 2001 and Karel Eringa, *The State of Affordable Housing in WA*, Shelter WA Occasional Paper 2003-2, August 2003

“For youth, it is difficult to obtain private rental housing, due to a low income and a lack of references. In the rural areas, there is a lack of housing for single people and they are sent to outer areas where there is less support, jobs, and recreation”

rural community development perspective

“I would like to have access to suitable and stable housing, however because I am under eighteen, unemployed and unable to sign a lease I have not had any luck obtaining a private rental”

young person living in a rural area

“Due to the increase in demand for housing, our waiting list at the moment stands at approximately one hundred and fifty people and due to a lack of funding and resources, we are unable to meet the expectations”

rural housing association

“There needs to be an increase in transitional or mid-term housing with support to aid the women make the move from short term accommodation within the agency to private housing. The services provided could include budgeting and life skills as well as assistance to maintain the house, so that the women do not take a step back and fall back into old patterns”

metropolitan women's refuge

“It was brought to our attention that there is the need to provide comprehensive services within the community that look to achieve the basic human rights that all people deserve, as listed by the United Nations (1948).”

Some responses from people that are seeking housing:

“The waiting list for housing is too long for young people who are keen to access suitable, stable housing”

“The housing that is made available to young people is inappropriate, in areas of rioting, high levels of unemployment and crime. We want to have a choice in regards to the areas that we live in, rather than being placed in housing where we don't want to be.”

“It is important to us to have a house. The only problem is that we are unable to get a house that is suitable and in an area that we like and want to live in.”

Conclusion

Perhaps surprisingly, this project has revealed a high degree of consensus between service providers and service users regarding the root causes of the problem and the required solution. Both groups viewed homelessness as a complex problem that requires a multi faceted solution, and both groups identified increased support services and accommodation options as key elements of any solution. In addition, despite some differences in emphasis, these views were held by interviewees in both metropolitan and regional areas.

With regard to support services, it appears that the problem is one of quantity, with demand exceeding the capacity of existing services. In addition, support services

should be restructured in such a way that the multiple problems faced by many homeless people can be dealt with effectively.

With regard to accommodation, again the main problem appears to be one of quantity, as both support services and users report 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,³ and partly because of a lack of transitional support services assisting homeless people to establish themselves in long term accommodation.

Overall, both the lack of support services and the lack of accommodation options require significant increases in Government funding. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide precise costings, previous work by Shelter WA suggests that there is a shortage of 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.⁴

³ For instance, see Karel Eringa, *The State of Affordable Housing in WA*, Shelter WA Occasional Paper 2003-2, August 2003

⁴ See Karel Eringa, *The State of Affordable Housing in WA*, Shelter WA Occasional Paper 2003-2, August 2003