

27th of August 2019

Letter of support: WACOSS Submission to the Department of Health: Climate Health WA Inquiry

Shelter WA would like to express our support for the submission and recommendations made by WACOSS to the Climate Health WA Inquiry by the Department of Health, especially in regard to the severe impact of climate change on the health and financial stability of very low- and low-income households.

Shelter WA is an independent peak body, based in Perth Western Australia, that advocates for social and affordable housing and ending homelessness. Shelter WA takes a strategic leadership role, championing the development of an effective housing system and bringing all parts of the system together to achieve this. We advocate for housing affordability for all, with a focus on low to moderate income earners.

Shelter WA's vision is that all people in Western Australia have housing that enables them to thrive.

Shelter WA is concerned about the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable households in Western Australia, especially when it comes to housing, as people experiencing poverty and inequality are already socially and financially disadvantaged. Climate change will exacerbate this as utility costs can increase dramatically and impact a household's ability to maintain the living costs of their home. Climate related housing costs are an issue for every household, however those on very low and low incomes are disproportionately impacted as they are often residing in older housing stock, whether that be in the private rental market, or public and community housing.

Factors such as socioeconomic position, conditions of employment, power and social support—known collectively as the social determinants of health—act together to strengthen or undermine the health of individuals and communities. Housing is acknowledged as a social determinant of health. Access to appropriate, affordable and secure housing can limit the risk of Australians being socially excluded by factors such as homelessness, overcrowding and poor physical and mental health. Poor-quality housing influences physical and mental health. Evidence supports the close relationship between people's health and the living and working conditions which form their social environment¹.

The evidence shows that the housing options for people in social housing and for people on incomes who rent in the private rental market tend to be characterised by poor housing quality and design. This impacts on the costs of operating the home. People living on low incomes spend a greater proportion of their total weekly household budget on energy and water, compared to wealthier households. These are essential services for all households, but those with low incomes and facing financial hardship risk losing access to them. People on low incomes are less able to reduce their energy consumption by investing in energy efficiency measures in their homes, and face increasing

¹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/746ded57-183a-40e9-8bdb-828e21203175/aihw-aus-221-chapter-4-2.pdf.aspx>

prices for electricity, gas, water, food and insurance. This leads to the concerning observation that people living on low incomes are being further trapped into poverty.

People on very low, low and low to moderate incomes in social housing and private rental properties and are therefore less able to be able to afford adapting their homes to climate change.

Well designed, secure, safe and affordable housing is needed to protect against heat and cold and other effects of extreme weather. It is a prerequisite for coping with and adapting to extreme weather and disasters driven by climate change. People who are sleeping rough, are particularly at greater risk to adverse weather, due to their exposure, than the general population.

Their risk is also increased by higher rates of chronic disease, smoking, respiratory disease, mental illness and substance abuse than the general population. This renders them profoundly vulnerable to climate change related weather events. In particular, extreme heat increases health risks of those experiencing homelessness. This is especially problematic for people with pre-existing health conditions. This vulnerability is made worse by inadequate access to medical services and in some circumstances, being forcibly 'moved on' by security personnel and police.

People on low incomes living in sub-standard private rental properties, public or community housing, and vulnerable people living in boarding or rooming houses, hostels, caravan parks, residential parks or camping grounds, can lack the money, capacity or choice to cool their homes in periods of hot weather, or heat their homes in periods of cold weather.

This strong connection between appropriate and adequate housing and its link to the overall wellbeing of individuals and the community highlights the arguments brought forward by WACOSS. When designing responses and initiatives to deal with the impact of climate change and health, it has to be seen in the broader context of wellbeing, for which adequate, climate responsive housing is the foundation.

If you would like to discuss this letter of support further, please contact Dr. Klaudia Mierswa, Policy Officer, at research@shelterwa.org.au or 08 9325 6660.

Yours sincerely,



Michelle Mackenzie
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