

ENDING HOMELESSNESS IN WA

Housing First is the key to achieving a functional end to homelessness

Shelter WA believes that everyone has a right to a home and that a functional end to homelessness, where episodes are rare, brief and one-off, is achievable.

We know that the key to ending homelessness is prevention, early intervention and a rapid response, informed by a strong evidence base of what works.

According to the 2021 census, there were 9729 people experiencing homelessness in Western Australia. There has been a doubling of people sleeping rough since the 2016 census, with Western Australia recording the highest proportion of people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (24 per cent of all people experiencing homelessness).^[1]

Government data also highlights the significant over-representation of Aboriginal people accessing specialist homelessness services in Western Australia. **While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent just 4% of the WA population, they represented 50% of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) clients in 2022-23.**^[2] There are currently higher rates of homelessness in regional Western Australia compared to metropolitan areas.

The drivers of homelessness are both structural and individual.^[3] On any given day in 2022-23, 205 Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in WA were assisting 5100 clients.^[4] The latest data shows the top three reasons for clients seeking assistance were family and domestic violence (42 per cent), financial difficulties (34 per cent) and housing affordability stress (25 per cent).^[5]

The WA SHS system is currently unable to meet demand for services. An average of 75

requests for assistance are unable to be met each day and only 39 per cent of rough sleepers on the Perth By-Name List have an active case worker. This is a result of historic under-investment in the sector as well as ballooning costs of service delivery, impacted by increasing client complexities, higher levels of demand and indexation formulas that do not reflect true increased costs.

Ending homelessness **is a collective responsibility of all levels of government.** The current work at the federal level to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Plan provides a critical opportunity to coordinate a functional end to homelessness, driven by the evidence of what works. There is also an opportunity for a greater role for local government in addressing homelessness, given their unique front line position and local focus, however councils require greater support to realise this potential.^[6]

For those with complex needs or reoccurring homelessness, **Shelter WA endorses the principles of Housing First.** The implementation of Housing First principles requires greater sector coordination and robust data management across the SHS sector informed by the Advance to Zero framework that sets out a collaborative, evidence-based approach to ending homelessness.^[7]

State and territory governments have increasingly embraced the Housing First model, including the *All Paths Lead to Home: Western Australia's 10 Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030*. The implementation of this plan, however, is constrained by the severe shortage of accommodation across the entire spectrum in Western Australia, from crisis and supported accommodation through to social and affordable housing options. This is causing service bottlenecks and preventing exits from the SHS system.

[1] ABS (2023) Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness. 2021

[2] Productivity Commission (2024) Report on Government Services. Part G: Housing and Homelessness. Table 194.A

[3] Flatau, P et al (2021), Ending homelessness in Australia: an evidence and policy deep dive. Centre for Social Impact, UWA, p.xxi

[4] AIHW (2022) Specialist Homelessness Services: monthly data. Released 25 May 2022.

[5] AIHW (2024) Specialist Homelessness Services: annual report 2022-2023. Released February 2024.

[6] For more information see: Mitchell, L (2023) Everybody's business: what local governments can do to end homelessness. Winston Churchill Trust.

[7] For more detail, please see: <https://aaeh.org.au/atoz>



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Ongoing work and investment are required to embed Housing First into everyday service delivery and design in WA. **This would require greater application of the no wrong door approach to service delivery that recognises the importance of early intervention, low barrier and rapid response.** Greater coordination and integration of the SHS with healthcare and justice systems is also critical.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an international model for housing and supporting people who have experienced long term and reoccurring homelessness and who face a range of complex challenges. Taking a Housing First approach involves providing housing upfront without conditions while also providing individualised, recovery-focused, wrap-around support services for those who need it.

The 8 Principles of Housing First in Australia are:^[8]

1. People have a right to a home
2. Housing and support are separated
3. Flexible support for as long as it is needed
4. Choice and self-determination
5. Active engagement without coercion
6. Social and community inclusion
7. Recovery-orientated practice
8. Harm reduction approach

A set of Housing First principles has also been developed for First Nations people and can be found [here](#).

Crisis and emergency accommodation remains a critical infrastructure now and into the future.

There is an urgent need for more crisis and emergency accommodation in WA, especially in the regions. A diversity of services is essential, including a need for youth-specific services and accommodation, and short stay options for First Nations people.

In light of the changing demands on homelessness services, the sector would benefit from the development of a workforce strategy, accompanied by additional resources to enable implementation. It is essential that the

recommissioning of SHS service contracts and new investment into the sector take account of the current costs and expectations of service delivery.

Shelter WA recommendations:

- That the Commonwealth, state and local governments, including government agencies, commit to ending homelessness, not just managing it. This would include setting targets and timeframes for ending homelessness.
- That the WA State Government increase SHS funding to be commensurate with increased demand and complexity of service delivery, and reform contract indexation formulas to ensure SHS contracting arrangements remain fit for purpose over time.
- That the WA State Government and Commonwealth Government significantly boost investment to increase crisis and emergency accommodation options, including youth-specific and regional accommodation and support services. Greater investment is also needed in supported accommodation options for people and families escaping family and domestic violence.
- That the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government increase investment in evidence-based prevention and early intervention initiatives to end homelessness.^[9]
- That the WA State Government and Commonwealth Government commit to improving the quality and consistency of service data to track homelessness, including a state-wide roll out of the Advance to Zero framework including By Name Lists.
- That the Commonwealth Government National Housing and Homelessness Plan adopts and embeds the principles of Housing First and drives a coordinated, evidence-based approach to ending homelessness. This would include setting targets.

[8] For more detail see: <https://www.ruah.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Housing-First-Principles-web.pdf>

[9] As the housing crisis deepens, early prevention is becoming even more critical, especially for emerging cohorts at risk of homelessness including families, seniors and the 'working poor'.



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- That the WA State Government implement system reform and increase investment to ensure WA homelessness services are aligned with Housing First principles, as outlined in the *All Paths Lead to a Home* strategy.
- That the WA State Government co-create a workforce strategy in partnership with the SHS sector to increase service capacity and quality and provide additional funding to enable implementation.
- That the State Government invest in and improve coordination between the healthcare and justice systems and homelessness services, in particular around discharge/release planning and integrated care.^[10]
- That the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government adopt a principle of self-determination and embed this principle across housing and homelessness services for Aboriginal people.
- That all governments ensure people with lived experience of homelessness are central to the design and delivery of homelessness services.
- That the WA State Government, in partnership with the housing and homelessness sectors, develop and implement an emergency response plan for rough sleepers during extreme weather, including storms, bushfires and heat waves.

[10] The 2023 parliamentary inquiry into the funding of homelessness services in WA highlights a range of existing health programs and services that have been demonstrably successful, such as the Mental Health Homeless Pathways Project (MHHP) and the After Hours Homeless Support program (AHSS) run by RUAH. Despite their effectiveness, however, such programs have not received long term government funding to enable their successful continuation.