Towards 2020: Election Statement 2013

Ending Homelessness is everyone’s responsibility

Each night in Australia, more than 105,000 Australians do not have a secure place to call home; over 40% of those are aged under 25. Of those, nearly 30% are children and young people aged under 18.

Despite over a decade of continuous economic growth in Australia, the number of Australians who were experiencing homelessness on Census night increased by 17% between 2006 and 2011.

While traditional perceptions of homelessness may conjure images of single older men sleeping on park benches or ‘street kids’ living in squats, the reality is that homelessness can happen to anyone.

There are many reasons why people continue to experience homelessness in Australia including domestic and family violence, declining housing affordability, family breakdown, poverty and the failure of government agencies to always meet the needs of those with mental illness and other disabilities, older people and the needs of young people leaving care.

Getting out of homelessness can be tough, especially if you’ve been homeless for a long time. Getting and keeping a job, staying in school, staying healthy and free from violence is made much harder if you don’t have a stable home. In addition, particular groups in Australia face greater discrimination in the housing market, making finding a safe and secure place to call home even more difficult.

The good news is that we can end homelessness for people.

To do that, people need a home they can afford and a decent, livable income. Many also need support to get back on their feet and keep a permanent home. For this to happen, we need government commitment and ongoing investment in homelessness programs and services and initiatives that will boost the supply of affordable housing now and into the future.

The homelessness White Paper has given us an historic opportunity to commit to ending homelessness in Australia by setting the goal of halving homelessness by 2020. The White Paper and the resources that came with it have made a great start.

The social housing initiative in the Nation Building and Economic Stimulus Plan has provided more than 10,000 new homes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness including women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Without further ongoing investment in affordable and social housing over the next decade, however, there is a serious risk that people most in need will continue to be locked out of the housing market with no safe and secure place to call home.

We know that it does not have to be this way. We call on all candidates and all parties to commit to the fight to end homelessness.
Ending Homelessness – Don’t Stop Now

Sign up to the target to halve homelessness by 2020
And the following actions to achieve it

Strengthen our homelessness system to get the best results

1. Extend the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) beyond 2014, with a minimum funding allocation of $953 million over 4 years shared with state and territory governments. New funding should include a requirement for States and Territories to match Australian Government investment dollar for dollar.

2. Commit to a rolling out a second A Place to Call Home initiative that would provide 1000 new homes with 12 month support packages for people experiencing homelessness over 4 years.

3. Ensure all social and community services including Government funded specialist homelessness services can meet the true costs of service delivery by providing ongoing funding backed by adequate and planned indexation.

4. Recognise that NAHA-funded specialist homelessness services have a unique role to play in supporting more than 200,000 people who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness each year. They continue to provide the bulk of the homelessness response in Australia and have done for more than 25 years. They provide the safety net and the capacity for immediate response and have a range of proven, effective strategies that assist with the provision of immediate safety, family restoration and reconciliation where appropriate, skills development, time and safety to address issues that may exacerbate the homelessness.

5. Ensure that our homelessness response meets the needs of diverse groups including young people, older Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Prevent homelessness before it starts

6. Make sure people have enough money to live on by increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance by a minimum of 30% pending a Productivity Commission review of its efficacy.

7. Immediately increase Newstart Allowance by at least $50 a week (Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy should also be increased); and double the maximum amount of crisis payment from one week to two. Allowance payments must also be indexed using the same formula as pensions.

8. Guarantee funding for the expansion of proven early intervention programs, such as Reconnect, HOME Advice Program, Assistance with Care and Housing for Aged (ACHA) and family violence prevention and early intervention initiatives that have a proven track record and a strong evidence base. A comparatively small investment in funding certainty for these programs and services now will save significantly more money in the long term. These programs, with a solid evidence base and a proven track record of delivering good outcomes must be provided with funding agreements of a minimum of 3 years duration and realistic indexation that allows services to meet the true costs of service delivery.

Ensure people experiencing homelessness can access mental health services

9. We welcome the tri-partisan commitment to improving the provision of mental health services as well as system access and coordination. We call on all parties to commit to ensuring that people at risk of and experiencing homelessness have the same opportunity to access mental health services as other Australians. This includes step up, step down models of housing/support.
Ensure that preventing domestic and family violence and homelessness that can result from it remains a priority in the national homelessness response

10. We know that domestic and family violence is a serious problem in Australia and a leading cause of homelessness amongst women and children. Preventing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence requires a systemic and whole of community response. All parties must commit to ensuring that women and children are supported to remain safely in the family home or at least in their community following the decision to leave a perpetrator. The national plan to reduce violence against women and their children needs to link more closely to national homelessness and housing affordability agreements. All parties must commit to ensuring that preventing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence remains a national priority.

Implement policies and programs that provide pathways out of homelessness and poverty

11. Expand access to education, employment and vocational training for people at risk of and experiencing homelessness. Such programs provide a vital pathway out of labour market exclusion and poverty. This should include specialist job participation, employment and training programs for young people that are delivered by youth specialist agencies and practitioners such as Specialist Homelessness Services, Services such as Foyers, and Indigenous youth services that are separate but link to the broader employment services system.

12. Establish an ongoing affordable housing growth fund on a ‘per capita’ basis that will deliver an additional 20,000 homes that are affordable each year (including for people experiencing homelessness).

13. Ensure that the operational subsidy for public housing is funded on a ‘per dwelling’ basis to provide incentive for States and Territories to stop selling off public housing. We need a strong public housing system. For many people public housing is the safety net that is preventing them from tipping over into homelessness.

Key Facts and Figures

- In 2011, the homelessness census count identified that of the 105,000 people counted homeless, 40% were living in severely overcrowded dwellings posing a risk to health and wellbeing, 20% were staying in homelessness services, 17% were living in boarding houses, 17% were staying temporarily with family and friends and 6% were sleeping rough.

- Between 2006 and 2011, the number of children aged 0-12 counted as homeless increased by more than 15% from 15,715 to 17,845. We know that high numbers of Australian children seek assistance from specialist homelessness services each year. Over the course of the 2010-11 financial year, 1 in every 60 Australian children received assistance from specialist homelessness services, rising to 1 in every 38 children aged 0-4. Most of these children are with their mother escaping domestic or family violence.

- Indigenous Australians experience significantly greater homelessness than other Australians. On Census night 2011, 26% of people counted experiencing homelessness identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, compared to 2.5% of the general population. In specialist homelessness services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were over-represented when compared with the general population (21% of all clients including 25% children supported in 2010/11 were Indigenous, compared with 2.5% of the general Australian population aged 10 years and over and 5% of children aged 0–17 years, respectively).

- Large numbers of young people who experience homelessness belong to the group of ‘hidden homeless’ who couch surf from one friend’s house to another. Unless we ensure that young people in this group are identified as quickly as possible after leaving or being forced out of home, we risk losing them to a cycle of homelessness and poverty. This is because disengagement from education, employment and training happens quickly. 1 in 50 young people are supported by specialist homelessness services every year.
Domestic and family violence is the most often cited reason for seeking help from a homelessness service. 45% of women with children, 34% of single women aged over 25 and 15% of women aged under 25 who seek assistance from specialist homelessness services are escaping domestic or family violence. The majority of children who accompany an adult to a homelessness service are in the care of a woman, usually their mother, escaping domestic violence.

Recent research has found that older Australians, particularly women who are renters are an emerging group at increased risk of homelessness. The 2011 Census found that older people accounted for 1 in 7 Australians experiencing homelessness on Census night. They are underrepresented in service use data.

In many areas there is a significant lack of crisis accommodation and/or medium term transitional supported accommodation for adult males aged 25 and over. Fewer than ten percent of Government funded specialist homelessness services are funded to support single adult males and there are virtually no services for adult males who are fathers to stay with their children.

In June 2011 there were almost 250,000 households on social housing waiting lists across Australia. Over 200,000 of these were waiting for public housing, with the remainder waiting for community housing. In addition, 42% of low income households are in housing stress and 350,000 are in housing crisis spending more than 50% of their take-home pay on housing costs.

The National Affordable Housing Agreement which provides funding for the operational subsidy for public housing as well for the operations of specialist homelessness services was in and of itself not sufficient to enable jurisdictions to add to their public housing stock. The ‘per capita’ funding model meant that States and Territories with a higher proportion of public housing received less money per property. This funding arrangement must change to encourage States/Territories to stop selling off stock.

End Notes

viii AIHW 2011, op cit, p.9.
ix AIHW, 2011, op cit, p.7