

Eastern Homelessness Service System Alliance (EHSSA)
Submission to the Productivity Commissions review of the National
Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)
March 2022



The **Eastern Homelessness Service System Alliance (EHSSA)** welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Productivity Commission review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

The EHSSA is a partnership comprising of twenty specialist homelessness and family violence funded services in Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne. The EHSSA is committed to achieving better outcomes for vulnerable members of the community who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and/or family violence.

Its purpose is to

- provide strategic leadership for homelessness and family violence services in the Eastern Metropolitan Region
- bring together relevant agencies to achieve an agreed vision and mission
- Build on consistency and quality for service delivery practice amongst member agencies
- Make evidence-based recommendations to the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and Homes Victoria and Family Safety Victoria (FSV) about responses to service gaps.
- Monitor service provision (via data collection and/or client satisfaction reviews) through the establishment and feedback of EHSSA working groups for the purposes of identifying gaps and opportunities for enhancement in service provision.

Key statement

The EHSSA believes that the lack of adequate affordable and social housing, financial insecurity, and the lack of a National Homelessness strategy are the key drivers of homelessness in this country. We believe that the Federal Government is well placed to lead a national approach to address these issues with the NHHA being one of the major mechanisms for Governments to implement such a strategy.

Summary of recommendations

1. That the Federal Government work, in conjunction with State, Territory and local governments, to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy that:

- **Prevents homelessness** by developing policies and programs across government and universal services to reduce the numbers of people becoming homeless
- **Provides affordable housing** across the country that includes adequate and appropriate supply for people experiencing long term or recurring homelessness.
- **Creates a national framework for a homelessness service system** with the appropriate resources and evidence-based programs to effectively prevent homelessness and support enduring pathways out of homelessness.
- **Prevents child and youth homelessness** and delivers effective rapid response and ongoing housing and support interventions that meet the specific needs of children and young people.
- **Supports universal services** to better meet the needs of people already experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness

The EHSSA agrees with the *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs 2021 Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia* recommendation to establish a ten-year national strategy on homelessness and that a national housing and homelessness strategy should be developed alongside, or integrated with, the next NHHA¹.

2. Increase funding to housing and homelessness services to enable them to implement the recommended National Housing and Homelessness Strategy.

Funding should provide for a more flexible spectrum of support rather than a time limited support period that may not equate to the actual needs of people experiencing homelessness. For example, for complex clients with multiple needs who may require longer term support.

The NHHA should promote Housing First approaches which provide housing **and support** (at different intensities) for effective program and client outcomes as a strong evidence-based approach to ending homelessness. Currently, agencies trying to implement a Housing First approach struggle to obtain funding for either the housing or the support component of these successful programs as usually Government funding provides either housing or support, not both.

The NHHA should prioritise the expansion of funding for programs that create better outcomes for highly vulnerable groups, including people experiencing chronic homelessness (including those with significant mental health issues), victim survivors of family violence, those exiting acute health or mental health facilities or prison, and for young people leaving care or unable to live at home.

It is worth noting that people experiencing mental ill health are not currently identified as a priority cohort in the NHHA. The proportion of people seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services who have

¹ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. (2021). Final report- inquiry. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024522/toc_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

an identified mental health issue has increased overtime, to 32% in 2020-21². We also know that one of the biggest obstacles to recovery in the lives of people experiencing mental ill health is the absence of adequate, affordable, and secure accommodation. The NHHA should consider how mental ill health can affect all priority cohorts and how to resource adequate integrated services. The NHHA should also consider including people with a disability and refugees as priority cohorts.

The current measures used to allocate homelessness funding under the NHHA (Census 2006) are outdated and need to be reviewed.

3. Increase capital funding to the states and territories to grow social housing stock across the country.

Rents and house prices have been increasing much faster than people's incomes, particularly over the past two years, pushing more families and individuals into financial hardship and homelessness. There's currently not enough supply of affordable rental housing. AHURI estimate the current shortfall of social housing at 433,400 properties, growing to 727,200 by 2026.³

The lack of housing options is also the most common and severe block to funded homelessness agencies achieving NHHA outcomes/outputs. There is a lack of suitable affordable housing accessible for people at risk of and/or experiencing homelessness, including those identified in the NHHA as priority cohorts such as Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people, victim survivors of family violence, older people, children and young people leaving care.

4. That NHHA increase capital funding to targeted prevention and early intervention programs which address the underlying drivers of homelessness

Increase effective prevention and early intervention programs under the NHHA. Prevention of homelessness occurring in the first place and early intervention when people are at risk of, or first become homeless, are two key areas that could boost the efficiency of the NHHA. Prevention and early intervention programs reduce the inflow of people into homelessness by diverting them quickly and effectively into sustainable options.

Programs such as Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP), PRAP Plus, Private Rental Brokerage Program (PRBP) and Tenancy Plus are proving successful programs in Victoria in the prevention of homelessness and are working to capacity and have waitlists. Working with people to assist them to maintain their tenancies rather than waiting for them to become homeless (and require a homelessness funded response) should be a priority practice reflected in the NHHA.

Early intervention and prevention of ongoing homelessness, poverty and transience requires focused support for children accompanying their family into the homelessness system. We would strongly recommend the funding therapeutic work with children who have experienced homelessness. An example of a Therapeutic model/approach is outlined in the evaluated Victorian Homeless Children's Specialist Support Service.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2020–21 (2021) <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-with-a-current-mental-health-issue>

³ (2019) Understanding the experience of social housing pathways, AHURI Final Report No. 324, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.