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Homelessness is Solvable: How We Can End it in Australia

Ending homelessness is not just a hopeful aspiration for me; it is a tangible and achievable goal. This conviction stems from the research I undertook during a Churchill Fellowship where I travelled through six countries and 12 cities, participated in over 80 meetings, visits, and events and met with over 112 people over eight weeks.

During my travels I asked everyone two simple questions — whether they be philanthropists, academics, CEOs, social workers, heads of government agencies, or people previously or currently living on the streets: *'Is ending homelessness possible?'* and *'Based on your experiences, what are the three most important things you think it would take to end homelessness?'* The overwhelming consensus was that ending homelessness is indeed possible.

In summary they answered that we need:

- Community and political leadership.
- Reliable, quality, real-time, person-centred data.
- Collaboration at all levels, including service delivery, improvement, and governance.
- Providing preventive care before it is needed.
- Instilling a sense of hope.
- Funding to address homelessness.
- Better coordination of health and support services with housing.
- Permanent Supportive Housing that provides stable and supportive housing.
- Person-Centred Approaches.
- Curiosity, Improvement, and Ongoing Learning
- Addressing the economic factors contributing to homelessness.
- Recognising and addressing trauma.
- Affirming a fundamental right to housing.

Despite the optimism and positive attitude among those working to address homelessness, the reality is that, in most places, it is a bad situation getting worse. A particular low point was during a roundtable meeting in Los Angeles when staff

members dedicated to helping the homeless were themselves experiencing homelessness due to the challenging housing market and low wages in the sector.

Homelessness is not the problem itself; it is the result of other systemic failures. When mental health, corrections, child protection, drug and alcohol, private rental, social housing, family violence and other systems fail, homelessness results. More housing, case management or outreach will not solve the problem. Homelessness is a complex problem that requires solutions that match its complexity.

One of the simple realisations from my Fellowship was the lack of a clear definition for an end to homelessness. Despite homelessness having been around for some time, little thought or effort has gone into defining what exactly an end to homelessness entails. Of all the countries I visited, Australia is the only country without a housing and homelessness strategy. The Albanese Labor Government has thankfully committed to developing a new national housing and homelessness plan but to date, there is no word if this plan will have an ambition to end homelessness or if it will simply add up to a range of measures that ultimately just manage it a bit better.

In Australia not only do we not have a national strategy, but we also have no national systems in place to measure the rates of homelessness across the country. It is currently measured every five years through the Census and the day the latest Census was released, it was already

19 months out of date. Imagine how we'd manage problems like unemployment if we estimated the rates every five years and then took 588 days to release this information.

This is why communities in Australia, inspired by the successful efforts in the United States (US) and Canada, have begun to collect their data — known as a by-name list. It is called a by-name list because it literally lists everyone experiencing homelessness by name and identifies their needs. Importantly this is done with the consent of the people experiencing homelessness, for the primary purpose of supporting them into housing. We not only need to measure the rates of homelessness, but we also need to be able to measure if our efforts are working. As homelessness is a complex, constantly changing problem, we need to track our progress dynamically.

Ending homelessness requires system change because homelessness is not merely a single-issue challenge but a complex outcome of various interconnected factors. System changes entail addressing the underlying structures, policies, and interactions that contribute to homelessness. Various stakeholders in the homelessness system often see only a part of the whole picture. To end homelessness, we need to step back and view the entire system comprehensively — this is what a by-name list helps with, and what a collaboration or zero project enables in terms of the various players in the system being able to 'see' the complete system.

Once you can see the system, you need a plan of action or 'theory of change' to drive collective impact

towards a shared goal. A theory of change can help illustrate what has been described as the 'missing middle' between what a change initiative does and how these activities add up to the desired outcome being sought. It does this by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then working back from this to identify all the conditions that must be in place (and how these relate to one another) for the goals to occur. The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness has developed a theory of change called the Advance to Zero Framework to help guide efforts to end homelessness in Australia, based on what is working around the world and what we've learned from efforts so far in Australia. It is our theory of change that has evolved based on what we are learning.



No More War, Tarik Dallinger-Dimizio

My Fellowship also highlighted for me that we need the whole of government and whole of society system change. Government and society need to work together to change the way local systems operate. Coordination and integration across homelessness services is crucially important, but if the goal is to end homelessness, then the homelessness service system alone is insufficient, as this system can't solve the problem alone.

Generally, no one is responsible for the whole system. A backbone focuses on supporting the system change with a specific measurable aim of the collaboration being to make homelessness rare, brief, and once off — our definition of an end to homelessness. Backbones take many forms and can be in local governments, in service delivery agencies or in independent agencies like think tanks, universities and

other dedicated system change agencies — but wherever they sit, their role is to think of the system.

Figuring out what the role of Housing First is in ending homelessness was probably the most contentious issue I discussed when I met with people. Australia doesn't by and large have the problem of very large-scale crisis accommodation in the way that colder climate countries in the Northern Hemisphere have. We need to reduce barriers and improve the quality of crisis accommodation in many Australian communities, but I found there was no role for transitional accommodation in a Housing First system, and any services providing them should seek to transition them to permanent housing, or better yet Permanent Supportive Housing.

Youth Foyers are a good example of this. I was pleased to be able to play a small role in supporting the establishment of Foyer Port Adelaide and we could see that the model was working. Eighty per cent of young people were exiting into work or education. They are successful as young people have different needs and they can be tailored to match their aspirations.

Meeting with people in the US showed me that ending homelessness was possible. The US did it by shrinking the change, focusing on one place and a particular population group. It still surprises me that so many people's reaction to this is to downplay and diminish it. This approach resonated with politicians. So often the housing and homelessness sectors go to the government and make the problem bigger. It's no surprise then that political leaders are hesitant to prioritise the issue because it's so easy to get lost in the complexity and because no matter what they do it will never be enough. A proof points advocacy strategy,¹ as developed in the US, flips that on its head. It makes the problem smaller, more digestible and more local.



Also, in the US I saw that healthcare has been integrated into homelessness services in a way that would be the envy of many communities in Australia. In the US they treat homelessness as a public health crisis. In Australia, we need to see homelessness as much of a public health issue as it is a consequence of the housing affordability crisis.

The Canadian stakeholders I met with said that ending homelessness should be the ambition, but we must also realise that this is a long-term effort, particularly in large cities. Setting milestones along the way is the key to maintaining momentum, using milestones that measure the reduction in the percentage of homelessness per head of population is important. Prevalence is how public health issues are measured, and homelessness is amongst other things a public health crisis.

The UK is a lot stronger at integrating employment and homelessness efforts than Australia, including supporting social enterprise and social procurement, both of which provide significant opportunities for more flexible employment arrangements to aid in the recovery of people who have experienced homelessness, particularly chronic homelessness.

If there is one single conclusion that my Churchill Fellowship has left with me it is this: ending homelessness is possible, but it is not something that can be achieved by one individual, one agency, one level of government, one program, building, policy or pill.

The call to action is clear. We need to:

- Have a strategy to end homelessness.
- Define clear indicators of success and regularly measure progress.



A home beyond words by JR

- Foster collaborative effort, learning from others' experiences.
- Commit and believe that it is possible to end homelessness.

Ending homelessness has and can only be achieved by coalitions of like-minded leaders, people and organisations standing together and saying enough is enough — that we will no longer accept homelessness in our community. Not only is homelessness solvable — solving it is necessary. Having a safe, secure, affordable home is not a luxury. It is a fundamental human need. There is no time to lose and much to be done.

'You could make many homelessness responses twice

as effective if you managed the system better, but the inclination is always there to fund direct services, it's inefficient. If you want to shift the dial, fund the improvements to the systems.'

— Norman Suchar,
United States Department of
Housing and Urban Development

'To end homelessness, you need to join up government policy and community-led organising.'

— Laurel Blatchford,
Former Chief of Staff at the
US Department of Housing
and Urban Development

Endnote

1. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100349524>