



Fact sheet: An introduction to Advance to Zero (AtoZ)

What it is, who's involved and why it matters

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Audience: General – anyone unfamiliar with Advance to Zero or seeking to understand the basics.

What is Advance to Zero (AtoZ)?

Advance to Zero (AtoZ) is a national initiative of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) that supports local communities to end homelessness, starting with rough sleeping – one community at a time.

AtoZ helps communities move beyond managing homelessness to making it rare, brief and once-off. Communities work together to:

- develop a shared local strategy to end homelessness
- build and maintain real-time, by-name data on people experiencing homelessness
- coordinate housing and support using this data, guided by Housing First principles
- continuously improve how the local system works, not just individual programs.

Why does AtoZ exist?

Australia is one of the most prosperous and liveable countries in the world, yet thousands of people experience homelessness every night. For people who sleep rough, homelessness is often chronic and life-threatening.

Australian Census data shows patterns of homelessness, but it is collected only every five years and is already out of date by the time it's released. It does not reflect the day-to-day reality in local communities. Other national data tells us how many people receive homelessness services, but not how many people are actually experiencing homelessness at any given time.



Research suggests that a large majority of people who sleep rough have a chronic or ongoing experience of homelessness, and that hundreds of people die each year with a recent experience of homelessness.

This is not only a human tragedy, it's also costly. Studies show that providing permanent housing with appropriate support is significantly cheaper than leaving people to cycle through emergency departments, hospitals, justice and crisis services.

AtoZ exists because communities need better data, better coordination and better ways of working together if we are serious about ending homelessness, not just responding to its consequences.

Why start with rough sleeping?

AtoZ starts with rough sleeping, but it doesn't stop there. Rough sleeping is not more important than other forms of homelessness. However, people sleeping rough are often the most visible and vulnerable. Many have chronic and complex needs and are over-represented in mortality data.

Focusing first on ending rough sleeping helps communities to:

- build the systems, data and partnerships required to end homelessness
- demonstrate that change is possible in a challenging housing and policy environment
- create momentum to then expand efforts to other groups (for example, young people, families, older people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people leaving institutions) and other forms of homelessness.

What does “rare, brief and once-off” mean?

AtoZ communities define an end to homelessness as when it is:

- **Rare:** very few people experience homelessness at any point in time
- **Brief:** when people do lose housing, they are supported quickly back into safe, permanent housing
- **Once-off:** systems and supports are in place so that people do not return to homelessness.

To measure this, AtoZ uses the concept of functional zero. Functional zero means that, for a defined population in a defined place, the local system is housing more people than are becoming homeless, and sustaining this over time, based on clear measures and verified data.

Functional zero does not mean that nobody will ever face a housing crisis again – it means the community has a system that can respond effectively whenever homelessness occurs, so that it doesn't become long-term.



Learning from international evidence

AtoZ is informed by what's working in communities around the world that have driven sustained reductions and, in some cases, ended homelessness for particular groups. International examples include:

- Finland, which has invested for decades in social housing and pioneered the Housing First approach
- communities in the United States, where a growing number have achieved functional zero for specific population groups
- communities in Canada, which have also achieved functional zero using real-time data and coordinated local action.

These places are very different to Australia in their political and housing systems. However, they show that homelessness is not inevitable, and that real-time data, Housing First and coordinated local systems can reduce and end homelessness – even in the context of wider housing pressures. AtoZ adapts these lessons to the Australian context.

AtoZ in Australia

AtoZ is implemented through local communities, also known as Zero projects. A community or Zero project is usually a local government area or a group of neighbouring areas working together. Each community:

- defines the population groups it will initially focus on (for example, people sleeping rough, people aged over 55 or other specific cohorts)
- establishes collaborative governance and decision-making structures
- builds and maintains a by-name list – a regularly updated list of all known people in the community experiencing homelessness within the defined scope
- tracks inflow (people entering or returning to homelessness) and outflow (people housed or no longer experiencing homelessness) over time
- uses this data to guide decisions, target resources and track progress towards functional zero.

Across Australia, dozens of communities are now engaged in AtoZ, with many regularly reporting by-name data and driving measurable reductions in homelessness. Collectively, AtoZ communities have supported thousands of people into housing through local Zero projects.

How AtoZ works

AtoZ is a community-led, data-driven and improvement-focused approach. Systems change is complicated, but AtoZ can be simplified into three key steps for communities getting started:

1. Develop system-wide collaboration (get everyone on the same page)

Homelessness is caused and sustained by many systems – housing, income support, health, justice, child protection and more. No single program or organisation can end it alone. AtoZ therefore supports communities to:

- build broad local collaborations, including people with lived experience, government, service providers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, community groups, philanthropy and business
- develop a shared local strategy for ending homelessness, not just managing it
- establish service coordination forums, where partners:
 - ◆ review the by-name data together
 - ◆ allocate housing and support based on vulnerability and need (a Housing First approach, not “first come, first served”)
 - ◆ troubleshoot barriers and coordinate action case by case and across systems.

This collaborative approach helps everyone see the full system rather than only the part they work in.

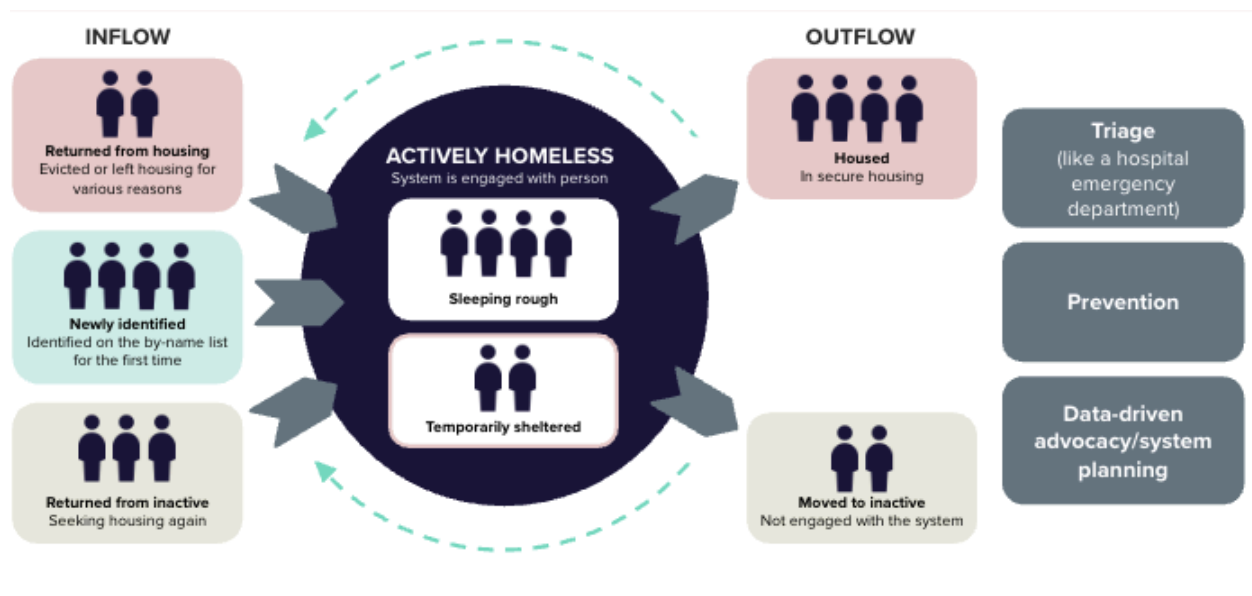
2. Build a local community by-name list (establish and maintain your data)

Traditional data sources are important, but they are too slow and too broad to guide day-to-day decisions. AtoZ communities therefore:

- build a by-name list of everyone known to be experiencing homelessness within the agreed scope
- identify and add individuals to the list through outreach and service engagements, typically including those currently sleeping rough or, depending on local policy, those with a history of rough sleeping in the community
- regularly update this list through service coordination, tracking individuals as they engage with outreach, services and partner agencies
- A by-name list tracks:
 - ◆ **inflow:** who is entering homelessness for the first time, who is returning, who has re-appeared after losing contact
 - ◆ **active:** individuals actively experiencing homelessness, who may reside in temporary or emergency accommodation, transitional housing or forms of rough sleeping
 - ◆ **outflow:** individuals who have been stably housed or moved to inactive.

This allows communities to understand what is happening in their system in real time, identify trends and problem-solve quickly and also hold themselves and other systems to account (e.g. justice, health, child protection).

Crucially, AtoZ encourages communities not just to count how many people they house, but to count down the total number of people experiencing homelessness. This shift is vital if we want to end homelessness rather than simply move people through services.



3. Commit to continuous improvement (slowly change the system!)

AtoZ sits in what we describe as the “improvement space”. The technical space is day-to-day programs and practice, like outreach, case management or tenancy support. The structural space includes big policy drivers, such as income support, housing supply and intergenerational disadvantage. The improvement space is how the local system works together – the focus of AtoZ.

While communities continue to deliver services and advocate for structural change, AtoZ – and specifically improvement projects – helps them use data to test ideas, learn and adapt, break complex problems into manageable pieces and eventually, embed approaches that work and stop doing things that don’t. Continuous improvement helps communities move from reactive responses to proactive, planned system change.



The role of the AAEH

The Australian Alliance to End Homelessness is an organisation focused on improving practice and supporting communities to end homelessness. Through AtoZ, the AAEH:

- provides the AtoZ framework, guidance and tools
- offers training, coaching and peer learning opportunities
- supports communities to build and use by-name data
- facilitates national communities of practice, including:
 - ◆ an Improvement Community of Practice
 - ◆ a Data Community of Practice
 - ◆ a national Large-Scale Change Community of Practice for leaders
- works with allied networks focused on health, housing and large-scale change.

We use the data and learning generated through AtoZ to inform and support the advocacy of peak bodies and allies at all levels of government. Learn more about the AAEH in our [strategic plan](#).

Who is involved with AtoZ?

AtoZ involves a wide range of partners at national, state/territory and local levels, including:

- specialist homelessness services and housing providers
- health, mental health and alcohol and other drug services
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- local governments and state and territory agencies
- people with lived and living experience of homelessness
- philanthropic partners, community organisations and others.

How to get involved

- **Contact** us at info@aaeh.org.au
- **Learn** more at: aaeh.org.au/atoz-resources
- Stay up to date with our **events**: aaeh.org.au/events
- Sign up to our **mailing list**: aaeh.org.au/mailling-list