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Known Knowns: Towards a National Housing and Homelessness Plan

As this article of *Parity* will demonstrate, there is no lack of understanding of what contributes to the continuing rise of homelessness in Australia or the diversity of solutions that can enable people to access and sustain affordable housing.

I believe that our greatest challenge is to overcome the idea that homelessness is an intractable ‘wicked problem’, and instead come to a shared vision where homelessness is understood at a solvable problem, one that by no means unique in its complexity. There is more than sufficient research and sector knowledge, expertise and experience to say that we have a pretty good grasp of the many causes and consequences of homelessness for individuals and families as well the different cohorts that make up the

population experiencing or at risk of homelessness. However, and while there is no simple fix or one corrective action, we know that in order to move forward, we need to create a more inclusive and equitable housing system, and when necessary, couple this with the required social, health and community services tailored to meet the needs of individuals and families.

We know that homelessness can be both an intergenerational experience and a first-time experience, one that many on low incomes are now facing due to increases in rent, or simply because of the absence of housing supply that is affordable.

While homelessness can happen at any stage of life, in order to respond effectively we need to ensure that we know and understand the make-up and details of the whole population experiencing homelessness so that we can then break down the data with each individual in mind and plan the right housing to solve the problems at a local place-based level.

During the earlier global financial crisis, the economic stimulus package implemented by government at the time focused largely the creation of one-and two-bedroom units and we did see numbers of homelessness go down. However, our future planning for creating more supply cannot simply focus on the percentage of growth in populations who are homeless. Future planning must focus on the cohorts of the homeless population such as single mothers and children, families, and First Nations people that consistently, and over a decades, have had the greatest need for appropriate housing and support. Poverty, domestic and

family violence, family breakdown from child abuse, continue to be the drivers and we need our housing system to be connected to effective pathways linked in with the systems where people are seeking services and protection.

We know we must scale up our housing response and focus on all the evidence we have accumulated alongside all the experience we have gained in developing solutions that demonstrably work. The solution is not that one size fits all — rather, it is about creating diversity with housing design across small, medium, and high-density solutions appropriate to location with the provision of support services when necessary. We know that to involve the private sector we must crack the problem of housing subsidy so that the poorest and most vulnerable are housed.

When people experience adversity resulting in homelessness, our goal needs to be that when it occurs, is rare, brief and non-reoccurring. The experience of homelessness does not need to become long-term homelessness.

For most of the past ten years there has not been any national framework for the response to homelessness. However, the advent of COVID-19 saw governments lift the incomes of the poorest in Australia, and in most jurisdictions provide emergency housing for everyone sleeping rough in our major cities.

The question that I can’t stop reflecting on is why it takes a major public health, economic and social crisis for this to happen? Why isn’t providing an adequate income and housing seen as good for

the economy, the individual or family and the community as a whole? This sort of policy response to a crisis should be seen as an investment into the lives of all Australians, including our most vulnerable and poorest citizens. This should not just be a stop-gap measure, but rather something that can and will generate community wellbeing and economic growth.

A National Housing and Homelessness Plan could, if developed properly, provide the framework in which we can do the work, the problem solving, the negotiating and the scaling up of solutions that we already know work, and we already know, make a real difference.

It would be wonderful to have as a foundation to a housing and homelessness plan that every adult has a liveable income so that we can work together creating an inclusive, equitable and safe housing system that do not require people to pay more than 30 per cent of their income in rent. This would enable a quality of life and the access to the services needed to thrive and not just simply survive.

I have always thought that homelessness is like a cracked mirror, reflecting back to us ongoing impact of colonisation on First Nations people and how multiple systems of healthcare, corrections,

child protection, justice, juvenile justice, domestic, family and sexual violence, unemployment, early childhood, education, access to training, participation in community and housing, all fail to work working for everyone. The poorest and the most vulnerable are inevitably forced to rely on crisis/emergency services. This only leads to higher presentations and repeated presentations in all services: emergency departments hospitals, mental health institutions, the justice system, higher rates of recidivism, mental health problems, child protection systems, and specialist homelessness services. The list could go on. So many adults are living with the consequences of child abuse and too many children are being exposed to multiple adverse traumatic life events. Women and children are cycling between domestic and family violence systems and homelessness services. Children and adults are experiencing significant trauma, and many are facing premature death due to early onset chronic disease, suicide and drug overdoses or violence. We should and need to be concerned about the prevalence of these multiple impacts which if not corrected, leave people trapped in poverty with the consequences of multiple traumatic events on their lives, and years of homelessness. Instead of it being a brief and non-reoccurring event. This represents such a loss of potential

in so many lives, and the failure to address these issues costs a lot more money from governments and the community than it would take to make a real and significant change to their life chances and to the multiple systems that often share a problem that we could solve together rather than in isolation.

To support a National Housing and Homelessness Plan we also need an Inter- Departmental and not of profit organisational mechanism at local State and Federal level to bring more effective healthcare and services closer to where people are in the community.

As we work together on a new plan, I hope it will become one that:

- develops a shared vision that homelessness is solvable
- reimagines new systemic responses to problems that are a consequence of the unnecessarily high rates of homelessness in our community
- creates the forms of collaboration that we need to build an inclusive, diverse and equitable housing system, one accessible to all Australian, one that is safe, affordable and supported that will enable individuals, children and families to thrive in their community and culture.

