

The Future of Homelessness Service Delivery

The major issues facing homelessness services and future policy and program options



**By Dr Heather Holst,
General Manager,
Client Services,
HomeGround Services**

To be asked to write about such a broad topic gets you thinking, and it seems to me that there are some significant themes at the base of all our work: working together against a tendency to

isolation; developing new responses; drawing in consumer experience; the demand for services; the significance of housing; and leadership.

The *Opening Doors* reform has assisted homelessness service delivery in Victoria to operate more as a system oriented around the person who is homeless. It is far from perfect, and not every area has developed their responses as much as others have, but it is a solid base structure that just was not there before.

Nevertheless, the tendency to fragmentation definitely remains one of our challenges. Prior to *Opening Doors*, we had come to a point where cooperation between agencies was so limited, and few agencies were large and varied enough to offer a complete package of assistance 'in house' that it was only the most persistent and lucky who were receiving help. The programs offering supportive housing to people sleeping rough are a great addition in being able to go out to the most disengaged and vulnerable people, and combine well with the more coherent access arrangements for people who are able to approach a service. Many places as well as inner Melbourne could use such a program.

It is no wonder that this situation of fragmentation and disconnection had emerged a few decades after most organisations began delivering homelessness services. The current service providers originate out of a huge range of places and ideas, and while this lends itself to strong local relevance, it certainly does not make a linked-up system easy to form and maintain. Some agencies are big, some small, some have roots in the nineteenth-century charities, others in the human rights, de-colonisation and women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s, some specialise in young people or Indigenous people, others are generalist, most of us are pretty sure we are the best at what we do – we are a disparate lot loosely bound together by the type of funding we receive.

If we can keep working on the challenge of connecting up, we can also make the most of our ability to innovate as individual agencies or groups of providers. That we are seeing significant innovation in permanent supportive housing, the family violence emphasis on keeping the victim in their homes and the Creating Connections reforms of the youth sector is pretty encouraging.

Other sectors look to the universities for research and development, or to venture capital, but the homelessness sector pieces it together from voluntary effort, fundraising, time-limited philanthropic grants and sometimes slightly desperate lobbying of government to fund new approaches. You can stake a lot on

a good idea and fail to get backing now that government directs what it will purchase rather than having much scope for responding to proposals. We hope the new Homelessness Action Plan marks something of a return to the opportunity to get a good idea funded.

There is another challenge that we could certainly meet, but have so far largely failed to answer – drawing on the advice of people who have experienced homelessness. Other sectors can teach us something about this, there are some good examples already under way in our own sector and many people who have been homeless are generous in their willingness to help. We all need to find ways to put this experience at the centre of our services if we are to know how to respond to homelessness.

The biggest and much more difficult challenges will continue to be levels of demand for services and the supply of affordable housing with which to respond. The recent release by the ABS of the homelessness prevalence figures puts the national figure of people experiencing an episode of homelessness in 2010 at a minimum of 300,000 and estimates that most of the 40 per cent who sought assistance approached a housing agency.¹

While deinstitutionalisation certainly made homelessness increase in size, the state of the Australian housing market and its legislative underpinnings are the other big factors that have pushed more people over the edge of affordability and security of tenure into homelessness.

Nation Building provided a welcome although temporary boost, but it would take quite a few more years of the same amount of houses to get through even the current waiting lists. We can keep pointing out the link with housing supply and hopefully obtaining more social housing, but the amount of money tied up in Australian houses makes that very hard to crack.

The introduction of Housing First approaches is very exciting but we will need to keep the firm link to housing to further develop this work. There is another challenge that sits behind this fact – the difficulty of workers and agencies remaining optimistic that they really can end homelessness when the demand for services just seems to keep flooding in and the available resources are so scarce.

All this will take leadership, by which I mean peak bodies and regional networks that can work closely with all the sector agencies, researchers and people who have been homeless to develop solutions to these tough challenges. I also mean government working openly with the funded sector and consumers to design programs based on the evidence of what works and funding them on the evidence of where the demand is greatest.

This is possible and not particularly complicated. The mechanisms are now in place through the *Opening Doors* work. My hope is that enough of us understand that we can keep working together and although this may be hard at times, it is really the only way.

Footnote

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cat. No. 4159.0 – General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2010.*