

Chapter 3: Consumer Voices

Foundations for Change: Homeless Consumers Perspectives on the New South Wales Government's Proposed Homelessness Strategy

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In early September the New South Wales (NSW) Government released its discussion paper *Foundations for Change — Homelessness in NSW* as part of the process of developing a comprehensive strategy to reduce homelessness across the state. The strategy represents a once in a decade opportunity to tackle increasing rates of homelessness, and to deliver meaningful initiatives across government to prevent people falling into housing crisis and homelessness.

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare, was actively involved in the development of the discussion paper. In September and October, StreetCare will build on this contribution by undertaking extensive interviews with people experiencing homelessness to ensure that their views are heard as part of the consultation process.

The Importance of Homeless Consumer Participation in Policy Development and Implementation

PIAC strongly believes that the active involvement of those who are or have been homeless leads to the development of more effective public policy in response to issues facing homeless people, as well as assisting in the empowerment of participants. PIAC also recognises the fundamental right of people to 'take part in the conduct of public affairs', as enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹

In recognition of this human rights principle, PIAC established its homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare in 2009. Underlying this initiative is the belief that the active involvement of people

who have experienced homelessness leads to the development of more effective public policy in response to issues facing homeless people.

StreetCare is made up of ten people who reflect the diversity of homelessness in NSW, and includes men, women, young people, Aboriginal people, and representatives from inner Sydney, outer suburbs and rural and regional areas. StreetCare enables PIAC to obtain direct input from homeless people into its policy advocacy, and also provides a mechanism for PIAC to engage actively with other people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, to facilitate their input into public policy and law reform initiatives.

Homeless Consumer Participation in the NSW Government's 2016 Homelessness Strategy

The discussion paper *Foundations for Change — Homelessness in NSW* was released by the NSW minister for Family and Community Services, Brad Hazzard in September 2016 to initiate a community discussion around how the NSW Government can deliver better outcomes in terms of tackling homelessness. As part of the consultation to develop the NSW Government's homelessness strategy, StreetCare members have been actively engaged with consultations and interviews with homeless people, to facilitate their contribution to this process. At the time of writing, a total of 65 consumer consultation interviews had been undertaken.

At the time the discussion paper was released, several StreetCare members articulated their main concerns about what wanted to be addressed in the Homelessness Strategy.

'There has been a long overdue need for the Government to develop a clear narrative and plan to respond to the rapidly increasing levels of homelessness in New South Wales. The rise in rough sleeping in the inner city in recent years is inexcusable in Australia in 2016.'

'As part of the Strategy, the Government must set clear, specific measurable targets to reduce the number of rough sleepers over the next two years. Why can't we just commit to reducing homelessness by at least one person per week for the next two years?'

— Ken Hamilton

'It's about people on the streets at the moment. There are some very unwell people on the streets right now. They don't see a future. They need help now. They've gotta be the priority. We can't forget about the people on the streets right now.'

— Daryl Smith

'With 37.5 per cent of people experiencing homeless being under the age of 24 years of age, I would like to see a focus on addressing youth homelessness. I would like to see an approach to homelessness that considers the unique experiences, and diverse needs of young people experiencing homelessness.'

— Melissa Wolfshoerndl

'For decades different governments have failed to address the shameful crisis of homelessness in Australia. They have stuck their heads in the sand, refusing to recognise the full extent of this tragedy. Their failure is disgraceful! The number of

homeless people in Australia should never have go to this level.'

— Carol Carter

'As Government is increasingly looking to non-government community housing to address the need for more social and affordable housing, there is a pressing need for better, clearer and more accessible information for homeless people about their housing options with community housing providers. A lot of homeless people just don't understand the pathways to community housing as an option for getting into stable accommodation.'

Homeless people need information that is clear, understandable and accessible so they can find out about their housing options.'

— Dave Jeffery

'Homelessness organisations need to be more accountable for providing the services that they are funded to provide. People who are homeless need to have confidence in the services so they can move on with their lives. If they haven't got the confidence in the services that are there to help them, how can they have confidence in themselves to get back on their feet?'

— Penny Graham

'There's a real problem with rental cost in Sydney. Without affordable rent, more people are being forced in to public housing, making the waiting list longer, and this forces more people in to short-term accommodation or crisis accommodation. Until this can be fixed and more affordable long-term rental is available, the demand on homeless services and crisis accommodation will far out-strip the supply, forcing more people on to the streets or into couch surfing.'

— Adrian 'AJ' Jansson

'There needs to be more advocacy support services, particularly for women fleeing domestic violence in regional areas. Having somebody there to navigate the services for them, because it is hard to reach out to anyone when

you're a battered women. Someone taking that extra step for women who are about to become homeless because of domestic violence. Because those women just don't know what else to do. You can't just give her a pamphlet, because when you are traumatised you can't read a pamphlet.

Support services need to be able to maintain that contact with that woman once she has been housed to make sure she is alright and can maintain that accommodation.'

— Past StreetCare member
(Anonymous)

While many homeless consumers have approached the current consultation with a level of cynicism, given the lack of progress from similar

initiatives over the last 15 years, the importance of ensuring a strong consumer voice in this current initiative is vital. For members of StreetCare, the importance of developing clear measurable targets by which the success of the strategy is to be assessed, is paramount in holding the NSW Government accountable for its commitment to address homelessness.

Endnote

1. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171 (entered into force 23 March 1976) ratified by Australia on 13 August 1980 (entered into force for Australia on 13 November 1980, except article 41, which entered into force for Australia on 28 January 1993). The full text of the ICCPR is available at: <<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/ccpr.htm>>.



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