



## Call for a New South Wales Homelessness Strategy

HomelessnessNSW.ACT, the NSW Women's Refuge Movement, the Youth Accommodation Association and the NSW Council of Social Service commend the Lemna Government in developing a State Plan to guide the growth of NSW over the next 10 years.

As part of this State Plan, we are calling for the NSW Government to develop a Homelessness Strategy to ensure a better coordinated response to homelessness. In his media release following the consultation on the NSW State Plan, Deputy Premier Watkins stated that there was "a strong sense that we need to address homelessness in NSW. The call for there to be a priority on this issue has been a strong one and it has been heard."<sup>1</sup>

Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. For example, the system's inability to protect women and children against domestic violence results in this group being the highest sufferers of homelessness in NSW. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services.

This range of factors means a multi-dimensional integrated response to homelessness is required. A NSW Homelessness Strategy would coordinate key Departmental and NGO partners in the development of an integrated approach to assisting homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless.

The current NSW response to homelessness is the Partnership Against Homelessness (PAH), which brings together 12 government agencies. PAH projects currently operate under a 'place management' approach, which results in pilot or contained projects in particular locations. Under PAH the community and non government sectors are not able to participate in an active and planned way in efforts to address homelessness across NSW. This provides neither an integrated nor a holistic response to what is a broad community problem.

Despite recording the highest number of homeless people in the 2001 Census, NSW has not developed a homelessness strategy<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, States such as Victoria and South Australia have made significant progress in addressing the issue of homelessness through the development of State strategies. These strategies have facilitated initiatives that provide an integrated response to homeless people, particularly those with complex needs. For instance, the South Australian strategy includes an intensive program for homeless street drinkers to support them to move into and sustain independent accommodation<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Victoria has established a Homeless Drug Dependency Program which provides housing linked to long term support for people who have chronic drug or alcohol problems and who use inner city

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<sup>1</sup> News Release: Lemna Government Welcomes Feedback on State Plan, Deputy Premier John Watkins, 25 August 2006

<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D, Australian Census Analytic Program, Counting the Homeless 2001, Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Catalogue No. 2050.0

<sup>3</sup> Haggerty, R. "A proven Strategy for Ending Homelessness", Parity; Vulnerable, At Risk, In danger, Supporting People with Complex Needs, Vol. 19. Issue 6. p. 6-7.

crisis accommodation. This has successfully provided a long term response to build pathways out of homelessness and drug misuse for homeless people<sup>4</sup>.

At the time of the 2001 Census, it was estimated that there were 26,676 people homeless in NSW<sup>5</sup>. Of this group 29% were staying in boarding houses, 45% were staying with friends and relatives, 11% were sleeping rough and 15% were staying in services funded through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

Australia has one of the most advanced homelessness data collection programs in the western world, allowing for an accurate picture of the 15% of the homeless population in SAAP. This data identifies some of the key factors impacting on homeless people.

It is estimated that SAAP services in NSW supported 24,150 clients in 2004-2005<sup>6</sup>. During this period, 55% of SAAP clients were female and 45% were male. Seventeen per cent, or approximately 1 in 6, identified as Indigenous Australians. This figure compares to a relative population size of 1.7% in NSW.

Domestic violence is the largest main reason cited for seeking assistance from a SAAP agency in NSW. Children and young people accounted for over two-fifths (43%) of people accessing a SAAP service in 2004-05<sup>7</sup>. Other main reasons for seeking assistance from a SAAP service were drug, alcohol and substance abuse, usual accommodation unavailable, financial difficulty and relationship breakdown.

Over the last two decades NSW homelessness services have recorded increased demand for services. This demand has not been matched by an adequate service response, which has resulted in significant unmet demand. On an average day 150 people have valid unmet requests for accommodation in SAAP services in NSW<sup>8</sup>.

### **Key Recommendation**

We propose that the NSW Government in partnership with the NGO sector develop a ten year Homelessness Strategy for NSW July 2007 – June 2017. This will establish the blueprint for providing a coordinated and responsive service system for people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness.

To overcome the fragmentation that currently exists between government agencies in policy development, planning, funding and service provision for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, the development and implementation of the strategy should be coordinated by the Premier's Department.

Whilst we acknowledge that the development of the strategy is likely to identify the need for additional resources, the intention of the Strategy is to increase the coordination of resources that are currently allocated to achieve more effective outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup> Couche, B. & Kelsall J. (2003), *The Homeless and Drug Dependency Trial, Building Capacity, Report 2*. Hanover Welfare Services, South Melbourne.

<sup>5</sup> Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D, 2004 Counting the Homeless 2001 New South Wales 2 2004 New South Wales At A Glance, Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Catalogue No.10303.1

<sup>6</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2004-05 New South Wales supplementary tables. AIHW cat. No. HOU 133. Canberra: AIHW (SAAP NDCA report. Series 10)

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006. Homeless children in SAAP 2004-05. Bulletin no. 48. Cat. No. AUS 85. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hou/dsaapahp03-04/dsaapahp03-04.pdf> p41

## **Policy Context**

The community will only be able to effectively deal with homelessness when the Government develops a robust service system rather than disjointed projects and planning mechanisms. A comprehensive homelessness strategy for NSW is required, bringing together separate programs under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, the Partnership Against Homelessness, services for victims of domestic violence, relevant supported housing programs and other inter-departmental initiatives. Such a strategy needs to be developed on a cross departmental basis, in partnership with the non government sector.

## **Planning for a NSW Homelessness Strategy**

The Premiers Department should establish a task force of both government and non government members with broad representation from the non government sector to develop the Strategy framework. This should be done as soon as possible.

Endorsement of the Strategy by the Premier would support its ability to engage a broad range of partners and the capacity to create change where required.

Director Generals and CEOs must be held accountable for implementing the strategy, and in line with the State Plan should be held accountable to this through performance contract measurements.

## **Key Principles of a NSW Homelessness Strategy**

Communities that are solving homelessness are recognising its complexity and multidimensional nature. There is no 'one size fits all' solution to homelessness, which means responses need to be flexible and responsive to individual circumstances.

## **Objectives underpinning the Strategy**

- To intervene to prevent homelessness
- To reduce the number of people who are homeless
- To provide a coordinated response to people who become homeless
- To ensure that strategy objectives are matched by adequate resources
- To ensure that responses to homelessness continue to match the needs of homeless people

**Homelessness and its impact on a range of key groups** (see Appendix 1 for more detail)

### **Women and children escaping domestic violence**

For ten years domestic violence has consistently remained the single most prevalent cause of homelessness in NSW<sup>9</sup>. There has never been an across government response to domestic violence with formalised reporting links between the law and justice system and the human service system. This is vital requirement to improve the NSW response to women and children who are homeless because of domestic violence.

The number of AVOs granted in NSW in 2005 was 19,467<sup>10</sup> and the number of recorded AVO breaches 11,678<sup>11</sup>. Combined with the fact that domestic violence

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, SAAP National Data Collection Agency

<sup>10</sup> NSW Bureau of Crime and Statistics Research,

[http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll\\_bocsar.nsf/pages/bocsar\\_lc\\_2005\\_avo](http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll_bocsar.nsf/pages/bocsar_lc_2005_avo)

related assaults have risen by 2.5%<sup>12</sup>, this demonstrates that AVOs current level of effectiveness is unacceptable. There is a need for increased law enforcement and justice responses to ensure the safety of women and children and to show perpetrators of domestic violence that NSW takes the crime seriously.

Refuges report that the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) and Police responses to mandatory reporting of children living with domestic violence too often results in punitive interventions targeted at the mother who is told to leave or her children will be removed. This can result in the woman and children becoming homeless. DoCS and Police interventions should focus on penalising the perpetrator, advocating to the courts to include the children's names on AVO's and supporting the protective parent to achieve safe living arrangements.

### **Young people**

Unaccompanied children and young people are homeless due to both structural and individual causes which are often beyond their control. Recent data tells us that children and young people 12-16 mainly seek assistance due to family/relationship breakdown, but as they get older it is more often due to eviction, lack of affordable housing or income<sup>13</sup>.

There are significant gaps for children and young people to fall through in the interfaces between homelessness and mental health, youth health, employment and income, education<sup>14 15</sup>, Juvenile Justice<sup>16</sup> and Out of Home Care services<sup>17</sup>. There are good programs for young people that are already well established and could be enhanced and extended by a more coordinated approach with regards to homelessness such as early intervention, Reconnect, JPET, CSGP programs, and Better Futures.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mental health and disabilities**

It is believed that one in five Australians suffer a significant mental illness. Australians with mental disorders may constitute up to three quarters of the homeless population in some areas.<sup>19</sup> The latest research undertaken by Teesson et al<sup>20</sup> documenting psychiatric disorder in homeless men and women in inner Sydney identified that the prevalence of any mental disorder is four times higher among homeless men and women in inner Sydney than within the Australian general population. A whole of government approach is needed to develop a linked system of accommodation,

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<sup>11</sup> NSW Bureau of Crime and Statistics Research, *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics 2005*, [http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll\\_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/RCS05,%20Table%204-32.pdf/\\$file/RCS05,%20Table%204-32.pdf](http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/RCS05,%20Table%204-32.pdf/$file/RCS05,%20Table%204-32.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> NSW Bureau of Crime and Statistics Research, *NSW Recorded Crime Statistics*, March 2006, [http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll\\_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/NSW\\_SD\\_SSD\\_2006Qrt1V4.pdf/\\$file/NSW\\_SD\\_SSD\\_2006Qrt1V4.pdf](http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/NSW_SD_SSD_2006Qrt1V4.pdf/$file/NSW_SD_SSD_2006Qrt1V4.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006. Homeless children in SAAP 2004-05. Bulletin no. 48. Cat. No. AUS 85. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>14</sup> Living Learning and Earning (1992) NYCH

<sup>15</sup> Thomson Goodall Assocs(1999) Appropriate responses for homeless people whose needs require a high level and complexity of service provision.

<sup>16</sup> Living Rough. Preventing Crime and Victimisation among Homeless Young People (1999) Attorney Generals Dept.

<sup>17</sup> Community Services Commission (2001) Issues paper: Issue 1. Out-of-home care and the role of SAAP and (2000) New Directions - from Substitute and Supported Care. Inquiry into the practice and provision of Substitute Care in NSW - Final Report

<sup>18</sup> Chamberlain, D and Mackenzie, C (1998) Youth Homelessness:Early Intervention and Prevention. ACEE Sydney.

<sup>19</sup> *Cycles of homelessness*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 39, March 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Teesson, M., Hodder, T. & Buhrich, N. (2004). "Psychiatric disorders in homeless men and women in inner Sydney", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 38: 162-168.

support, mental health and disability care to reduce the incidence of homelessness for these population groups.

### **Drug and Alcohol Misuse**

In 2004-05, more than 28% of males over the age of 25 years presenting to a SAAP service in NSW identified their primary reason for seeking assistance as drug, alcohol and substance abuse<sup>21</sup>. The issue of secure housing and the capacity for individuals to engage in drug treatment programs is significant. Without secure housing, it is virtually impossible for heroin users, for example, to access services providing maintenance, withdrawal and detoxification treatments<sup>22</sup>.

### **A lack of affordable housing**

There is a link between a lack of affordable housing, homelessness and risk of homelessness, both at entry and exit points from the homeless service system. The State Government acknowledges that some 175,000 low to moderate income households in Sydney are in housing stress, comprising 115,000 private renters and 60,000 home purchasers<sup>23</sup>. Evidence from homeless services indicates that homeless people are becoming trapped in crisis and medium term housing because there are few long term options available to homeless people and, in particular, those with a disability<sup>24</sup>.

### **People exiting the justice system**

Research clearly identifies significant failures in the exit planning from gaols for prisoners that increases their risk of homelessness. Exit planning processes must be enhanced to minimise the number of prisoners at risk of homelessness on release. Stable housing and support services are crucial to ex-prisoners' ability to re-engage in community life. Ex-prisoners are more likely to return to prison if they are homeless or transient and don't have accommodation support<sup>25</sup>.

### **Welfare to Work and Work Choices Legislation**

The Commonwealth Government predicts that 18,000 people across Australia will be subject to a non-payment period of 8 weeks in the first year of the Welfare to Work reform. Only 4,000 will receive financial case-management through the Government's contracted providers. There is concern that this will result in increased financial stress for individuals and families, which may result in homelessness.

There has been debate regarding how the Work Choices legislation will affect low income earners, particularly those in low or unskilled jobs<sup>26</sup>. We are concerned that such radical changes in the employment arena place a number of low paid workers at risk of homelessness.

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2004-05 New South Wales supplementary tables. AIHW cat. No. HOU 133. Canberra: AIHW (SAAP NDCA report. Series 10)

<sup>22</sup> *Heroin use and housing*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 31, November 2003.

<sup>23</sup> See *City of Cities: a Plan for Sydney's Future*, Department of Planning, December 2005 p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Robinson, Colin. Not Cheap, Reasonable – the development of not for profit boarding houses. A Discussion paper. Shelter NSW, November 2000, p 3.

<sup>25</sup> *The role of housing in preventing re-offending*. AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 36, February 2004

<sup>26</sup> <http://rightsatwork.com.au/thefacts/>

## Appendix 1: Key groups experiencing homelessness

Homelessness is experienced by a variety of people who become and remain homeless because of a range of issues.

### Women and children escaping domestic violence

Domestic violence has remained the single most prevalent cause recorded for women and children accessing homeless assistance services since the beginning of data collection in 1996.<sup>27</sup> Given the relationship between domestic violence and homelessness and the government's recent initiative in developing a domestic violence strategy, clear and measurable links will need to be developed between the two strategies.

The number of women and children homeless as a result of domestic violence in NSW is not decreasing under current strategies. Since 1997, the rate of recorded domestic assaults has increased by just under forty per cent (39.5%) in the Sydney Statistical Division and by over fifty per cent (50.7%) in the rest of NSW.<sup>28</sup> Accompanying this calls to the Domestic Violence Line have increased from 10,831 in 1996 to 22,192 in 2003-04.

The number of women and accompanying children who received accommodation at least once from SAAP funded domestic violence services in NSW in 2004-05 was 4,145 and 5,485 respectively.<sup>29</sup>

A growing number of women and children homeless as a direct result of domestic violence cannot be accommodated in our homeless service system. In 2003-04, around one in two women<sup>30</sup> and around two in three accompanying children<sup>31</sup> were turned away from services for women and children escaping domestic violence.

Many of the women and children turned away do not have the financial capacity to seek other accommodation and have no alternative but to remain living in a violent relationship. Approximately seventy per cent (70%) of female SAAP clients in NSW are not in the workforce, and eighty per cent (80%) receive some sort of Government pension or benefit.<sup>32</sup>

Given the number of children accompanying their mother or guardian into services, children should be seen as a priority group in responses to domestic violence and homelessness. The number of calls to the Domestic Violence Line from children has increased by forty three per cent (43%) in eight years (from 8,843 in 1996 to 12,607 in 2003-04). These children were experiencing domestic violence themselves, witnessing it, or were in a household where domestic violence was occurring.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA), 2006

<sup>28</sup> Crime and Justice Bulletin No. 89, 2005

<sup>29</sup> NDCA, 2006

<sup>30</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, Female SAAP Clients Escaping Domestic and Family Violence 2003-04, Bulletin, Issue 30

<sup>31</sup> Julie Oberin, Pamela Foster and Cara Kirkwood 2005, *Making Children Count: Children, Violence, Homelessness and the Law*, published by WESNET

<sup>32</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006, Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2004-05 New South Wales supplementary tables, AIHW cat. No. HOU 133. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>33</sup> NSW Department of Community Services, Domestic Violence Line, 2005

There are currently significant contradictions in the approach of DoCS and Police to children considered to be at high risk due to domestic violence. Where children are considered to be at risk by these agencies any intervention should be accompanied by protective measures including assistance in court to have the children nominated as protected persons on Apprehended Violence Orders. Some evidence suggests that since 2000 there has been a decline in the number of children less than 12 years being nominated as a protected person on Domestic Apprehended Violence Orders in NSW.<sup>34</sup> When children aren't cited on AVOs the perpetrator (particularly in the case of a biological father) still retains rights to access the children without the mother's permission and in some instances without her knowledge. In these circumstances some mothers are seen as failing to protect their children. The only recourse in such cases is for the mother to commence expensive and often protracted actions in the Family Law Court.

Where an AVO is in place the rate of recorded breaches in NSW sits at over fifty per cent (50%). Of the recorded breaches in 2005, fifty one per cent (51%) resulted in a guilty charge and only three per cent (3%) received a prison sentence.<sup>35</sup> Increased penalties and responses to domestic violence as a deterrent to offenders and potential re-offenders would reduce the number of women and children who have to leave their homes to seek safety.

Currently there is weak communication, planning and accountability between the Human Services CEO Forum and the Justice CEO Forum. A homelessness strategy that addresses the needs of women and children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness requires justice responses and human services responses to work in tandem.

### **Young People**

According to the studies of ABS data<sup>36</sup>, by Chamberlain and Mackenzie on any night there are 9137 unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness across every suburb of Sydney and in regional areas of NSW. These children and young people are sleeping in parks, under bridges, in youth homeless services, with friends or strangers, or in risky situations.

The latest reports by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare tell us that in NSW, 14,050 children and young people accessed homelessness services across metropolitan and regional NSW in 2004-2005<sup>37</sup>. It also tells that that the longer the support period the better the outcome for children and young people. However the chances of being turned away from agency for young people about 1 in 2.

Young people are homeless due to both structural and individual causes which are often beyond their control, such as family breakdown, mental health, lack of affordable housing and low income. The AIHW data tells us that the main reason for seeking assistance from youth homeless services (and the prevalent cause of homelessness) for unaccompanied children (12-16) and young people (16-19) is family / relationship breakdown.

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<sup>34</sup> NSW Commission for Children & Young People, 2006 at

<http://www.kidsstats.kids.nsw.gov.au/?RPT=23&MSTATS=Family>

<sup>35</sup> NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research (sac06-4638), 2006

<sup>36</sup> Chamberlain, C and MacKenzie, D, 2004 *Counting the Homeless 2001 New South Wales 2 2004 New South Wales At A Glance*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Catalogue No.10303.1

<sup>37</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006. Homeless children in SAAP 2004-05. Bulletin no. 48. Cat. No. AUS 85. Canberra: AIHW.

For young people 16 to 19 and older this shifts to problems with eviction and housing affordability. For young men 19-25 eviction and housing affordability is the main driver and for young women 19 –25, it is domestic violence.

This is compounded by the high private rent market and lack of affordable housing in Sydney, coupled with the well documented risks and disadvantage for young people entering the workforce posed by availability of employment and the new 'youth unfriendly' Work Choices and Welfare to Work reforms.

Children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness often have complex needs and face a multitude of issues including mental health issues, drugs and alcohol, intellectual and physical disabilities.

The national data tells us that the outcomes for children and young people are better the longer they stay in homeless services. However, pressure is on the service system on increasing 'through put' and reducing return rates. This pressure is not helpful for children and young people, in terms of preventing long term careers of homelessness.

Programs which assist and support children and young people experiencing homelessness provide an early intervention in preventing a longer term career of 'homelessness'. Young people should be offered the support and opportunities they deserve to aid them in gaining accommodation strengthening their potential for independence and contribution to our society.

### **Mental Health & Disability Issues**

It is believed that one in five Australians suffer a significant mental illness. Australians with mental disorders may constitute up to three quarters of the homeless population in some areas.<sup>38</sup>

The NSW Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) data for 2004-05 identifies that 12,726 specialist services were provided comprising referrals to psychological, psychiatric, disability services and drug and alcohol support and intervention services<sup>39</sup>.

Research undertaken by Teesson et al<sup>40</sup> documenting psychiatric disorder in homeless men and women in inner Sydney identified that the prevalence of any mental disorder is four times higher among homeless men and women in inner Sydney than within the general Australian population.

Seventy three percent (73%) of men in the study met criteria for at least one mental disorder in the past twelve months. Forty percent (40%) of men met criteria for at least two mental disorders. The most common disorders among men were substance use disorders, primarily alcohol, cannabis or opiate use disorders.

Eighty one percent (81%) of women in the study met criteria for at least one mental disorder in the past twelve months. Fifty percent (50%) of women met criteria for at least two mental disorders. The most common disorders among women were

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<sup>38</sup> *Cycles of homelessness*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 39, March 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2004-05 New South Wales supplementary tables. AIHW cat. No. HOU 133. Canberra: AIHW (SAAP NDCA report. Series 10)

<sup>40</sup> Teesson, M., Hodder, T. & Buhrich, N. (2004). "Psychiatric disorders in homeless men and women in inner Sydney", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 38: 162-168.

affective disorders followed by substance use disorders other than alcohol. Thirty six percent (36%) of women met criteria for one or more anxiety disorders.

There was considerable co-morbidity between mental disorders. One in five men (20%) and 29% of women met criteria for two mental disorders, predominantly alcohol and affective disorders in men and mood and anxiety disorders in women. One in five men (20%) and twenty one per cent (21%) of women met criteria for three or more mental disorders.

AHURI identifies that people with a mental illness can experience cycles of homelessness, moving chaotically through various forms of tenuous housing and periods of living on the streets. Stable accommodation alone will not 'fix' the issue of iterative homelessness for those with a mental illness.

A special bulletin reviewing homeless SAAP clients with a disability<sup>41</sup> identified that there were 24,900 clients in the SAAP disability group across Australia. SAAP disability clients were more likely to be male, older and from an Australian born non-Indigenous background than SAAP non-disability clients. Overall, the disability client group were more likely to come from and exit to a rooming house, hostel, hotel or caravan than the non-disability client group, and were less likely to come from and exit to private rental.

The disability client group received specialist services less often than the non-disability client group, suggesting that SAAP may not always be able to cater for the specialized needs of homeless people with a disability.

### **Drug & Alcohol Misuse**

The incidence of people identifying a drug and alcohol issue as the primary reason for them seeking assistance from the SAAP system is well documented<sup>42</sup>. In 2004-05, more than 28% of males over the age of 25 years presenting to a SAAP service in NSW identified their primary reason for seeking assistance as drug, alcohol and substance abuse.

The study by Teesson et al (2004) clearly identifies the incidence of co-morbidity between mental disorders. The issue of poor system response for people who have a co-morbid mental health and drug and alcohol problem has been acknowledged through the planning for new approaches to this issue such as the proposed co-location of mental health and drug and alcohol services in the inner city of Sydney.

The issue of secure housing and the capacity for individuals to engage in drug treatment programs is significant. Without secure housing, it is virtually impossible for heroin users to access services providing maintenance, withdrawal and detoxification treatments<sup>43</sup>. AHURI found that being homeless was shown to exacerbate problematic drug use. Stable housing allowed heroin users to look beyond their immediate survival to the consideration of longer-term issues such as employment, education, health and relationships.

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<sup>41</sup> AIHW: Murdoch F 2005. Homeless SAAP clients with a disability, 2002-03. Bulletin no. 23. AIHW cat. no. AUS 56. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>42</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006. Homeless people in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2004-05 New South Wales supplementary tables. AIHW cat. No. HOU 133. Canberra: AIHW (SAAP NDCA report. Series 10)

<sup>43</sup> *Heroin use and housing*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 31, November 2003.

## **A lack of affordable housing**

More than one third of low income households in Sydney are in housing stress, facing housing costs of more than 30% of their gross income<sup>44</sup>. For the rest of NSW the proportion is just under one quarter. The State Government acknowledges that some 175,000 low to moderate income households in Sydney are in housing stress, comprising 115,000 private renters and 60,000 home purchasers<sup>45</sup>.

Growth in the supply of private rental dwellings has been focussed on the high end of the market, with the supply of low to moderate rental dwellings declining. AHURI estimates that only 11% of low income private renters in Sydney are accessing low rent housing stock<sup>46</sup>.

There is a link between a lack of affordable housing, homelessness and risk of homelessness, both at entry and exit points from the SAAP system. Evidence from SAAP services indicates that homeless people are becoming trapped in crisis and medium term housing because there are few long term options available to homeless people and, in particular, those with a disability<sup>47</sup>. Similar numbers enter and exit SAAP from public or community housing with significant numbers of homeless people living with friends or relatives either in the short or longer term.

Estimates in a 1996 report suggest that there may be in excess of 250,000 older people at risk of homelessness across Australia as the number of older people on fixed incomes relying on insecure housing is increasing<sup>48</sup>. It has been identified that targeted programs are required to identify those older people at greater risk of homelessness and provide appropriate support in order to minimise the incidence of older people becoming homeless<sup>49</sup>.

## **People exiting the justice system**

A study undertaken by Baldry et al<sup>50</sup> of 340 ex-prisoners from NSW and Victoria highlighted the challenges involved in obtaining secure accommodation and employment for people exiting the justice system.

The study found that prior to imprisonment approximately twenty per cent of the NSW sample were homeless (compared to twelve per cent of the Victorian sample). A third had been in public or publicly assisted accommodation. Most had not arranged accommodation upon release but hoped they could stay with family or friends, or move straight into public housing. Only sixteen per cent (16%) expected to find themselves homeless. At nine months post-release the rate of homelessness for the NSW participants had almost doubled when compared with the pre-incarceration rate (20% to 38%). There was a highly significant relationship between being homeless and being re-incarcerated.

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<sup>44</sup> Yates, Judy and Gabriel, Michelle: *Housing affordability in Australia*, AHURI Background Report, February 2006, p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> See *City of Cities: a Plan for Sydney's Future*, Department of Planning, December 2005 p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> *Supply and demand in the low rent private market*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 50, February 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Robinson, Colin. Not Cheap, Reasonable – the development of not for profit boarding houses. A Discussion paper. Shelter NSW, November 2000, p 3.

<sup>48</sup> Alt, Statis and Associates (1996). *Connecting aged Care and Housing – an Evaluation of the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged program (ACHA)*. Aged and Community Care Division – Department of Health and Family Services.

<sup>49</sup> Judd, Bruce., Kavanagh, Kay., Morris, Alan & Naidoo, Yuvisthi: *Housing and support options for older people who are homeless*, AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin, Issue 61, August 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Baldry E., McDonnell D., Maplestone P., Peeters M., *Ex Prisoners & Homelessness*. Paper presented at the third National Homelessness Conference April 2003

Stable housing and support services are crucial to ex-prisoners' ability to re-engage in community life. Ex-prisoners are more likely to return to prison if they are homeless or transient and don't have accommodation support<sup>51</sup>.

### **Federal Impacts**

The 1 July 2006 Welfare to Work changes represent the most significant downgrading of income support in the Social Security system since the social security Act was introduced in 1947. The core of the new system involves cuts in payments, increased obligations on parents and people with disabilities, a harsh penalty regime and the removal of important protections and safeguards in the previous Act.<sup>52</sup>

People who are required to undertake activities or to fulfil certain participation requirements as a condition of receiving their income support are subject to penalties if they do not comply with the regime. The Commonwealth Government predicts that 18,000 people across Australia will be subject to a non-payment period of 8 weeks in the first year of the Welfare to Work reform, and only 4,000 of these will receive financial case-management through the Government's contracted providers. There is concern that this will result in increased financial stress for individuals and families, which may result in homelessness.

There has been much debate in NSW regarding how the Work Choices legislation will affect low income earners, particularly those in low or unskilled jobs. Under these industrial relations changes unfair dismissal protections have been abolished for all people working in work places with fewer than 100 workers.

We are concerned that such radical changes in the employment arena places a number of low paid workers at risk of homelessness. These reforms together with increases in interest rates will erode income security for low income earners, making more people more vulnerable to homelessness.

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<sup>51</sup> *The role of housing in preventing re-offending*. AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin Number 36, February 2004

<sup>52</sup> *Welfare to Work or unworkable welfare?* National Association of Community Legal Centres, June 2006