

The logo for Homelessness NSW features the text "Homelessness NSW" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below the text is a red graphic element that resembles a stylized arrow or a swoosh pointing to the right.

16 March 2020

The Hon Gladys Berejiklian MP
Premier of NSW
52 Martin Place
Sydney NSW 2000
Via email: admin@premier.nsw.gov.au

Dear Premier

RE: Urgent measures required to support vulnerable groups and non-government organisations dealing with coronavirus

We write in relation to the urgent need for a financial package to support non-government organisations in providing essential services to vulnerable residents of NSW as the coronavirus spreads. These are people who may have pre-existing health conditions, complex needs and other factors that compound the risk of coronavirus and can lead to devastating consequences.

Homeless community

High among those most at risk are the growing number of homeless people in NSW. According to AIHW data, in 2018/19 homelessness services in our state provided accommodation to 18,000 individuals, while a further 21,500 were turned away. And even where support was provided, the majority assisted (60%) were unable to find permanent accommodation and remained homeless.

For these people, their daily reality is rough sleeping, couch surfing, living in over-crowded conditions or staying in crisis accommodation. These conditions make it all but impossible to institute practices that would limit the spread of coronavirus such as social distancing, improved hygiene, access to testing and medical care. This has serious ramifications for this already highly disadvantaged group and for the broader population.

Urgent action is required to enable non-government organisations to develop targeted and specialised strategies to prevent disproportionate impacts for homeless people. First among these is providing rapid re-housing that removes them from high risk environments. Specialised, multi-disciplinary assertive outreach teams that can attend to health needs, undertake testing and have access to funding to source appropriate housing, care and medical attention need to be part of the response package.

People in social housing

People in social housing have the benefit of a roof over their head. However, they are likely to be at increased risk of coronavirus because of their age, likelihood of disability or chronic health condition, and lack of access to information and basic resources. They will also experience increased social isolation as further measures to contain the virus are instituted. They too will require interventions from trusted local

community organisations to monitor their situation, provide tailored assistance and ensure that they are not slipping through the cracks. Additional, time-limited resources provided to non-government organisations will safeguard this group until the crisis passes.

People in housing stress in the private rental market

Given NSW's well-documented shortage of affordable housing, further emergency measures will be necessary to ensure that people on low to moderate incomes in the rental market do not face the prospect of evictions at a time when a safe and secure home is a critical measure to staying well and containing the spread of the virus. A moratorium on evictions for people in private rental and social housing should be implemented for the foreseeable future, along with one-off payments to cover costs for people who are unable to pay their rent due to loss of income.

The social services sector

Separate to this, a range of measures also need to be developed for people being supported in residential care in the disability, alcohol and other drug, homelessness, mental health and out-of-home care sectors. These should be aimed at:

- Boosting staff numbers and enabling the development of a contingency/back-up workforce to continue providing essential care as the virus spreads
- Establishing alternative models of care for clients with COVID-19
- Providing financial compensation for casual staff who are unable to work due to COVID-19
- Upskilling staff in relation to infection control and provide compensation to allow staff to participate in training
- Setting up a dedicated hotline to provide advice to organisations providing residential care to vulnerable populations
- Providing priority access to personal protection equipment, including, but not limited to face masks and hand sanitiser

We reiterate that these measures are a starting point and address the most urgent issues being raised by frontline social services workers.

Non-government organisations are key partners in providing support to the most vulnerable members of the community. They stand ready to step up and face this unprecedented challenge, but require a boost to resources, and access to expert guidance, practical support, skills development and an enhanced workforce to do so.

NCOSS is keen to partner with the NSW Government in supporting the sector to prepare for and deliver on this urgent task. We have developed centralised resources for NGOs to access, are monitoring concerns, and continue to raise relevant issues with NSW Health and Department of Communities and Justice to get traction.

Homelessness NSW



ncoss
NSW Council of Social Service

It is vitally important that governments step up and help the frontline workers and organisations who help so many during times of crisis. It is also essential that the community services sector's expertise is recognised and drawn on in planning the emergency response and mitigation strategies when it comes to NSW's most vulnerable residents. NCOSS, Homelessness NSW and others in the sector are willing to provide input and contribute in this regard.

We look forward to your response and to working together to ensure appropriate protection and care for those who are at greatest risk from COVID-19.

Yours sincerely

Joanna Quilty
Chief Executive Officer
NCOSS

Katherine McKernan
Chief Executive Officer
Homelessness NSW