

Questions on Notice for Estimates Committee – ACT Shelter

Clarification of Indigenous homelessness / figures

Although the total figure for Indigenous homeless in the ACT according to the ABS 2011 census data is 261, it is widely believed by community groups to be a massive undercount due to the nature of Indigenous homelessness. Indigenous people make up 15% of the total homeless population in the ACT although their total numbers are only 1% of the total population so therefore they are highly over-represented amongst the homeless. At the time of Census, 160 Indigenous people were reported to be living in supported accommodation for the homeless and 85 were living in 'severely' overcrowded dwellings. These two categories accounted for 94% of homeless Indigenous people reported in the Census.

This is borne out by the SHIP data (Specialist Homelessness Information Portal) for 2012-13. Over the year, 772 Indigenous people sought assistance from the specialist homelessness system in the ACT. This represents 14% of all people who sought assistance. This is again considered an undercount as it is consistently advised by Indigenous groups that Indigenous people are widely reluctant to use mainstream homelessness services. Of the 772 Indigenous people,

- 458 or 59% were female
- 334 or 43% were aged 18 to 34 years
- 214 or 28% were aged 0 to 14 years

Data taken from 1 July 2013 to 31 May 2014 indicates that 211 presenting units to First Point were Indigenous in that 10 month period, or 11% of all presenting units. A presenting unit may be a single person, a couple or a family. While we cannot at this stage determine how many Indigenous people in total sought assistance, we can say that of the 211 presenting units,

- 102 or 48% are families with children with children under 18
- 149 or 71% are from the ACT
- 106 or 50% are contacting First Point for the first time
- 107 or 51% are couch surfing or living with relatives rent free

While official figures underestimate the scale of the problem, it is well known that overcrowding and couch surfing are features of the Indigenous homeless population in the ACT and it is also widely known that the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Old Parliament House often fulfils the role of an emergency accommodation provider.

Overcrowding issues, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overcrowding, are not addressed through the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* and are instead being specifically addressed through the National Affordable Housing Agreement and in the case of Indigenous people, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing

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How many additional public housing dwellings would be required to meet need?

For a number of years, the ACT has experienced a severe housing affordability crisis. ACT Shelter contends that the scale of this crisis warrants a response from across the housing continuum – from crisis and emergency accommodation, to transitional housing, public and community housing and significantly more affordable and appropriate private rental and mortgaged properties.

The current need and demand for public housing stems from the lack of truly affordable alternatives for individuals and families on low to moderate incomes. Public housing can continue to focus on supporting the needs of our most vulnerable citizens, as it does now, if other affordable alternatives are developed at a significant scale. There is therefore no critical number of public housing dwellings required – this depends on the government and community's preferred housing composition.

There is however, data that points to the significant shortfall in affordable housing whether private or public:

- There are currently 2,300 applications on the Social Housing Waiting list, with reported average waiting times of four months for the highest priority applicants and more than a year for standard applicants.
- At the 2011 Census, the ABS estimated that there were 1,785 homeless people in the ACT on Census night. This equates to 50 homeless people for every 10,000 ACT residents (the second highest rate in Australia).
- In 2012-13, 5,367 people accessed Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT.
- In 2011-12, 31% of low income households in the ACT were in rental distress – that is were paying more than 30% of their income in rent.

ACT Shelter project on Older Women's housing

Last year ACT Shelter was successful in obtaining a grant from the ACT Office for Women to undertake research into the issue of older womens' housing. A research officer, Dr Lisa Petheram, was employed at the beginning of the year and through a range of research methods (such as focus groups, interviews, survey etc) has been undertaking in-depth research for the purpose of road-testing possible solutions with the target group and for final consideration by government. Solutions being investigated include: community land trusts, boarding houses, and shared equity.

An online survey for the report was carried out by 77 women who are single, 45 or older and do not own their own home (or are unlikely to before they retire). Of these women, 91% were concerned about finding safe, secure and appropriate accommodation as they age. Interestingly, 73% of women who completed this survey are in employment and 75% have completed tertiary study. It is unlikely this sample is representative of women facing housing vulnerability, and homelessness, but it does suggest that many women without employment and high education levels (who have not completed this survey) may be having even more difficulty in meeting housing costs – as they are likely to have more financial pressures.

The results of this project so far indicate that older women facing housing vulnerability are not an homogenous group of women. Some women are experiencing housing vulnerability for the first time in their life and for others this is an ongoing issue. Many women in this situation for the first time have led relatively conventional lives punctuated by life shocks later in life, such as a long term relationship break down, death of a partner, or illness, or loss of job which have been difficult to recover from financially, emotionally and some cases physically in older age. These shocks have thrown many of these women into tenuous living situations with many losing previous housing tenure. Many have little savings, superannuation and low incomes, and have had long periods of time away from the work force to raise children (and in some cases are still raising or providing for children). Layered upon these life contexts are other pressures, such as high expense of accommodation and other living costs, as well as difficulties in obtaining or securing work into older age, and dealing with increasing health and mobility issues.

According to the ABS, there are 7494 women who are 45 and older, on low-median incomes, single and do not own their own home in the ACT. By comparison, there are 4003 men living in Canberra in the same situation. The ACT Government's Strategic Plan for Positive Ageing 2010-2014 suggests that the ACT has one of the fastest-growing populations of people aged 60 years and over in Australia, and this is expected to grow from 15.8 percent in 2010 to 19.6 percent by 2020, and to 22 percent by 2030. The ACT female population is increasing most rapidly in the 50 to 69 years age group. Currently by age 80, women outnumber men by 50 percent in the ACT.

The report is due to be released in early August this year and will be provided to government and community groups.