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Feedback on Performance Audit Report: National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

The purpose of the Audit report 4/2013 was to review the performance of selected programs in the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) with two clear objectives: that the ACT Government is meeting its obligations, and that the NPAH is making a difference for homeless persons.

The report provides a comprehensive overview of the current funding and statistical environment of homelessness in the ACT. It compares local data to national averages in areas such as:

- high expenditure per capita
- longer periods of stay
- lower levels of exit into independent accommodation
- higher levels of repeat accommodation
- higher levels of accommodation support
- higher level of persons with a case management plan.

The report emphasises that Census data stating that Canberra had the second highest per capita rate of homelessness in Australia was misleading and primarily occurred due to a change in definitions of what constitutes homelessness.

In terms of the analysis of the National Partnership it is the opinion of St Vincent de Paul that the audit report did not adequately represent or report on the outcomes of the NPAH and was a lost opportunity to review the value of this funding.

Our four core concerns with the report are:

- 1) The 'selection' of NPAH programs highlighted
- 2) Focus of reporting
- 3) Feedback from community organisations
- 4) Recommendations of report.

Selection of NPAH Programs

Of nine programs funded by the NPAH the three chosen were the 'Place to Call Home', 'Our Place' and 'HASI' programs. The other 6 programs including the St Vincent de Paul 'Street to Home' program were rarely mentioned beyond listing their names and funding amounts.

The reason given for these choices was that the 3 programs presented 60% of the total NPAH funding. However, in our opinion this was a poor criterion for determining an audit selection as the programs chosen are unrepresentative of the bulk of work provided through the NPAH.

- The Place to Call Home program itself constituted 50% of the total funding at \$10M over 5 years. However the vast majority of this money was spent on capital works, the program in fact consisted of only 20 houses that were used to assist homeless families
- Both Place to Call Home and HASI clients were in fact recipients of small amounts of funding in terms of support packages that were spread across a large number of community providers. These funding packages merely acted as minor expansions to existing support services
- In the first 3 years examined by the audit report the HASI program supported 27 persons, Our Place 57 persons, and Place to Call Home 19 families
- When this is compared with other NPAH services such as First Point, that has engaged thousands of persons and works with every homeless agency in the ACT, and programs such as Sustaining Tenancies, Leaving Prison program, and Street to Home that have each supported hundreds, it is difficult to determine why the focus was put on the programs that arguably had the smallest impact on the sector.

Focus of Reporting

When reviewing the focus of the reporting it is clear the majority of the focus was ensuring that the ACT Government had met its requirements to the Federal Government in terms of financial/output acquittals. This is possibly due to the fact that the report identified a poor level of potential performance indicators/outcomes articulated in contracts.

Feedback or reporting on actual program outcomes was limited. Under each of the 3 targeted areas the program/initiative outcomes section only consisted of one or two paragraphs. This compared to often several pages of reporting about whether the ACT Government had appropriately acquitted the financial requirements, or whether local program targets varied to federal targets.

After the initial statement of objectives the concept of 'is it making a difference for homeless persons' seems to have been lost and not reported against. It is also peculiar that the 5 key targets of the NPAH for 2013 (7% reduction in homeless persons, 33% reduction in homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders that are homeless, 25% reduction in those sleeping rough, 25% reduction in persons exiting prison that are homeless, and 25% reduction in number of persons using a homeless services 3 or more times in 12 months) that were agreed to and built into all homelessness funding contracts were never discussed or assessed in this report. This is a stark omission considering that there was a number of services established (Street to Home, Exiting Prison program) to specifically to address these targets.



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Feedback from Community Organisations

It is difficult to determine the level of involvement that community organisations and providers had in this audit report.

Some St Vincent de Paul employees were interviewed as part of the NPAH audit report as were presumably many other community agencies involved. However, there is no allocated section where aggregated or even anecdotal feedback from these interviews is provided or examined.

St Vincent de Paul was involved in 3 of the 9 National Partnership programs being Place to Call Home, HASI and Street to Home.

In trying to determine 'did these programs make a difference for homeless persons' we would consider that the feedback and reporting from Community Services that actually operated the programs and worked with the homeless persons should form a crucial part of this report.

Recommendation of this Report

Of the four recommendations made by the audit report two are around financial management, one around contract management, and the last on follow up of a review project.

The identified concern was that financial acquittals were not done as well as they could have been, that reporting for a service was late, that an operational agreement had not been completed, and a HASI review needed to be finalised.

While these may be important factors in analysing reporting obligations of the ACT, they provide no insight on whether the NPAH is actually making a difference for homeless persons.



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Summary

There are a number of significant gaps in the Performance Audit Report.

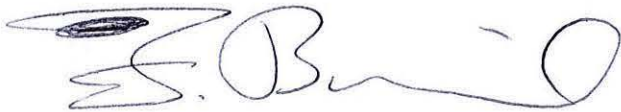
The services selected for review were poor choices. They represented a tiny fraction of the impact the NPAH funding made, and utilised two services that were difficult to withdraw definitive data from because of the nature of the funding.

The focus of the report seemed to be almost entirely on ensuring that the ACT Government had met its financial and contractual obligations to the Federal Government; indeed all of the recommendations made revolved on this premise.

Analysis of outcomes for and impact on homeless persons was cursory, and input from Community Organisations barely mentioned.

The initial comprehensive overview of the homelessness situation in the ACT clearly outlined the main issues (the primary of which, in the opinion of St Vincent de Paul, is a lack of affordable exit points from homelessness). The 5 reduction outcomes articulated in service contracts provided an initial target. This report did not address the issues raised, nor even mention the reduction targets.

St Vincent de Paul considers that the second objective was not met in this report, and that while the first objective was met, it only did so with reference to the reviewed services which only support a small percentage of homeless persons (even if they constitute a large percentage of NPAH funding).



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