

COVID-19 Working Group for Rough Sleepers -

Suggestions for accommodation

At the meeting of 26 March, participants were invited to forward suggestions about accommodation for rough sleepers to [REDACTED]. These are Safe Shelter's suggestions, and the reasons for them.

Background

Safe Shelter considers that, in the era of COVID-19, the term “rough sleepers” applies to *all* the ACT's homeless who are sleeping on the streets or in their cars. Such people cannot meet the requirements of any stringent “lock-down”, and they cannot “self-isolate”, so they *must* be provided with accommodation. It is irrelevant, with regard to legal requirements to “lock down” or “self isolate”, whether the homeless person has “high and complex needs” or just “normal” needs, ie needs a home!

While the total numbers will probably not become clear until attempts are made to house them, the rough sleepers in the ACT will be at least:

the 54 counted at the **2016 Census**, which included some Kiwis/asylum seekers/refugees, plus **couch surfers** ejected recently from their hosts' homes, some who have become **unemployed** in the economic downturn (particularly those who cannot access the Australian Government's increased unemployment support), and perpetrators *and* victims of the increased levels of **Domestic Violence** expected during COVID-19 self isolation and/or lockdown.

It is hard to believe that the total would be less than 100 for the ACT right now, split 50-67% men and 33-50% female. At least some of the female rough sleepers will have dependent children. Some will have “high and complex needs”, eg mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency but, from Safe Shelter's experience of homeless men in recent years, most will not.

Without more accurate data, it would be best to start by assuming a 50-50 split, men-v-single women and women with children who will need accommodation. There will also be some couples. Clearly, any accommodation model adopted will need to be scaleable, ie adaptable to changes in the makeup and numbers in practice.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has added complexity to what accommodation can be offered to rough sleepers. Now all homeless must be provided with individual rooms, both to slow the spread of the pandemic and to permit isolation if contracted.

The associated economic crisis has added a further challenge because the numbers of homeless that will need to be housed will almost certainly rise.

Aim of this paper

This paper aims to recommend a scaleable form of accommodation for the ACT's homeless.

Possible Accommodation Models

There seem to be five possible accommodation models to meet the needs of at least 100 homeless people: hotels, motels, vacant housing or “tiny houses” or caravans, an expansion of the current supportive accommodation services, and temporary facilities like tents. Let's compare their good and bad points, starting with the most unsatisfactory.

Tents on one or more campsites

Tents may be fine for Florida in Spring, but not for Canberra in Winter. They have no toilet, cooking, heating or washing facilities inside each tent and, depending on how closely they are pitched, privacy, both within and between tents, could be a problem. Prolonged exposure to the cold and damp would likely lead to health problems and may exacerbate COVID-19.

Vacant housing, “tiny houses” or caravans

All could provide reasonable toilet, cooking, heating and washing facilities. Vacant Housing ACT properties are apparently scarce and likely to be spread widely across the Territory. “Tiny houses” and caravans would require access to vacant land or existing caravan parks and, again, are likely to be spread widely across the Territory. Such dispersion could make administration and security problematic.

Without access to current Housing ACT statistics on available accommodation, it is difficult to know whether these options, either singly or combined, are realistic solutions to the possible scale of the problem.

Expansion of the current supportive accommodation services

The current supportive accommodation services are already stressed and often full. They seem to be detested and feared by many of the current homeless, apparently due to such factors as: physical danger, ie violence; prevalence of drugs; alcoholism; and their location and isolation. Even some men suffering from those conditions have preferred to sleep on a church hall floor at Safe Shelter rather than sleep in a bed in the Ainslie Village. It is extremely unlikely that facilities like those at the Ainslie Village would be acceptable to the anticipated numbers of the *newly* homeless.

The key point is that the ACT's current supportive accommodation services cannot be expanded easily or quickly to meet the likely need.

Hotels

Hotels are normally staffed to provide domestic services – cooking, cleaning, laundry, bedding, etc – although the availability of adequate hotel staff may be problematic at times during a health crisis. The provision of heating should be no problem but the associated use of ducting may contribute to the spreading of COVID-19.

Hotel rooms probably have adequate privacy to allow for self isolation if required, ie once COVID-19 is detected, but the physical layout of most hotels – shared corridors, lifts, common areas, etc – may contribute to the spread of the virus *before* cases can be diagnosed. An alternative would be to impose total isolation on everyone immediately upon arrival in the hotel *and maintain it for however many months the homeless were staying there*. That approach may be acceptable for newly arrived cruise ship passengers for 14 days but as, a someone's dwelling for several months, it is unacceptable – even prisoners are let out of their cells to exercise.

Unless an hotel is taken over completely to accommodate the homeless, at least in theory it will

presumably be able to take private guests as well. It is difficult to imagine what any paying guests of the hotels would think of the arrival of otherwise homeless guests who were required to pay much less to stay there.

The key point is that a hotel with guests is as dangerous as a stationary cruise ship if COVID-19 breaks out.

Motels

Motels are usually smaller than hotels, in terms of both the numbers of guests and the scale of the buildings; both factors should be of benefit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Smaller numbers of guests concentrated on one site should reduce the risk of an outbreak. The smaller scale of motel buildings reduces the number and size of common areas where infection can spread.

The smaller scale of motels also makes it possible to have separate motels dedicated to specific cohorts of homeless guests, such as: those with “high and complex needs”; males; females; guests with children; and/or couples. For example, depending on the numbers involved, those last three cohorts - females, guests with children, and couples – might, at least initially, share one motel without undue friction. Thus scalability can be achieved.

Motel rooms usually have adequate toilet and ablutions facilities, and are designed for self-catering, with independent heating and cooling arrangements. The rooms permit self isolation but, when that is not required then, because they often open directly onto open spaces, they reduce the need for guests to mix with other guests when going to and from their rooms. The complexes themselves usually have artfully concealed perimeter security and carefully placed Offices near the (usually) only exit.

The ACT has a history of housing newcomers to the city in “hostels”, somewhat analogous to motels but with more rules about behaviour. It was often remarked on how, after a few months living in a hostel in the 1950s, most public servants were very keen to find better private accommodation. It is for consideration that the use of motels during the COVID-19 crisis would engender the same responses by the ACT's homeless in late 2020.

Conclusion

The use of a number of motels, accommodating different cohorts of homeless guests, is the best short-term and long-term response to homelessness as it is likely to develop in the ACT.

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