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Acting on What Works: A Sustained Effort to Fund Success is Needed in Victoria

Uniting Vic.Tas, along with other homelessness service providers, is on the frontline of Victoria's escalating homelessness crisis and fully appreciates the urgency with which it must be addressed. The scale of the problem and its devastating daily consequences for Victoria's socioeconomic health means the situation is now nothing short of an emergency. Notwithstanding this urgency, only long-term, well-informed policy and funding frameworks will provide substantive change. The immediate action we must take to turn the tide of homelessness is to not dwell on short-lived crisis intervention alone, but to promptly establish and implement long-term strategies and practices that will sustain the changes required.

Reaping the bitter fruit of decades-long underinvestment in social and affordable housing by successive governments, Victoria now finds itself at a crossroad — to either

ignore or take sustained action on evidence-based measures we know work. While the sector faces unprecedented challenges today in terms of the lack of social housing, the rising cost of living, and poverty, there is much we now know about the multifactorial underpinnings of homelessness. We must now harness that knowledge and act on it.

Victorians Homelessness

While we know the Victoria's homelessness problem is significantly underestimated, the latest 2016 Census data is nevertheless depressing. On Census night, 24,817 Victorians were homeless, an 11 per cent increase on the 2011 Census.¹ Data collection problems with vulnerable groups, such as young people and Aboriginal Victorians, mean that both the overall number of homeless and their proportion of it are greatly understated. The recently released 2021 Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report found that Aboriginal Victorians are 13.1 times more likely to access homelessness services than their non-Aboriginal peers, with 17 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians accessing homelessness services in 2020-21.²

In 2020-21, some 105,500 consumers were provided specialist homelessness services (SHS) in Victoria - this represents 38 per cent of the national SHS population.³ After the Northern Territory, Victoria had the highest rate of consumers accessing SHS.⁴ This and other key data directly reflect the state's long-running underinvestment in social housing and homelessness services. In 2021, Victoria's proportion of social housing households was 30 per cent less than the national average of 4.2 per cent and this proportion has dwindled over time, dropping from 3.5 per cent in 2014 to 2.9 per cent in 2021.⁵

Chronic Housing Shortage

Victoria's Big Housing Build commitment to construct 12,000 new dwellings across metropolitan and regional Victoria over a four-year period is a critical intervention welcomed by the social service sector, including Uniting.⁶ The one-off Build, however, falls dramatically short of meeting the state's real social housing need. A 2018 Melbourne University study found the state faced a shortage of at least 164,000 housing units that are affordable and available to very low and low-income households. The study report recommended a target of 30,000 housing units by 2029.⁷ Uniting joins our peak body the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) in calling for the construction of 60,000 new public and community homes by 2031.⁸

Significantly, we are yet to see the Victorian Government formally respond to the in-depth report of the state parliamentary inquiry into homelessness, delivered in March 2021. Leader of the Reason Party, Fiona Patten MP, has described the inquiry as one of the most comprehensive she has been involved in. The inquiry received 450 submissions (including from Uniting) and conducted 18 hearings, most of which occurred during Covid-19 lockdowns.⁹ The delayed government response not only breaks with the parliamentary convention of responding to inquiry reports within six months but has also significantly eroded the confidence of the social service sector in the government's commitment to seriously addressing homelessness. The government should remedy this by responding to the inquiry report, including its 23 findings and 37 recommendations.¹⁰

Recognition at a state level of the international rights of Victorians to

adequate housing is well overdue.¹¹ Uniting supports the intent of the *Human Rights and Housing Legislation Amendment (Ending Homelessness) Bill 2022*, tabled by the Victorian Greens to eliminate homelessness in Victoria by 2030. The Bill facilitates amendment of the Housing Act to set a zero per cent homelessness target by the end of the decade and ensure the government creates a plan to achieve the target. As Uniting CEO Bronwyn Pike has said, *'Affordable, safe and secure housing for everybody is an essential human right. Safe and secure housing is a major factor in helping get a person's life on track.'*¹²

Homelessness in Regional Victoria

Given the high concentration and visibility of homelessness in metropolitan Melbourne, homelessness experienced across regional Victoria is too easily overlooked, yet the situation is acute and worsening. Uniting operates 13 dedicated homelessness programs across Victoria in both rural and metropolitan areas. It is the intake and assessment point for government-funded homelessness services in Southeast Melbourne, Sale, Horsham, Stawell and Ballarat.¹³

As my colleague Adam Liversage writes in this edition, in the 2021–22 financial year the Uniting Ballarat Street 2 Home team worked with up to 229 rough sleepers in the Central Highlands, including in areas without assertive outreach. In the same period, a team of three in the Ballarat intake service had some 2,879 contacts with people needing assistance and continues to see an increase of rough sleepers right across the western corridor of Victoria.¹⁴

In Horsham, during the last financial year alone, the entry point covering Ararat, Stawell and Horsham received 825 presentations. This follows the height of presentations during the COVID lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 when presentations were at 1,242 and 1,052 respectively. With a population of around 20,000, Horsham has a staggering estimated 5 per cent of its population experiencing homelessness or a housing crisis.¹⁵

Consumer Experience

Uniting, with consumer focus underpinning both policy and

practice, has found peer support workers especially effective in the early engagement and intervention with people experiencing homelessness. Those who have lived experience of homelessness, when equipped with appropriate community service training, provide invaluable engagement tools for intake teams. They not only encourage program participation by people experiencing homelessness but also embody the transformative potential of this engagement.¹⁶

In July 2020, the government announced it had allocated \$150 million to the Homelessness 2 Home (H2H) initiative, to provide housing to 1,845 Victorians experiencing homelessness and residing in emergency accommodation. Uniting delivers the H2H program in the Central Highlands, Wimmera, and southwest of the state. In research published in this edition of *Parity*, Professor Erin Wilson, Uniting Chair in Community Services Innovation at Swinburne University's Centre for Social Impact, recently surveyed people in these homes utilising the new and innovative Community Services Outcomes Tree.¹⁷

The survey found that since being placed in stable accommodation, 90 per cent of consumers reported an improvement to their mental health and having meaning and purpose, while 86 per cent were managing their health better and 81 per cent reported improvement in their employment status.¹⁸

The H2H program, founded on Housing First principles, was a highly worthwhile initiative, yet only about four per cent of the allocated packages were dedicated to the Central Highlands, Wimmera and southwest regions of the state. Many regional Victorians in need simply missed out, although the needs of some key vulnerable groups are being met.¹⁹ In April 2022, some 376 Aboriginal Victorians were supported through the H2H program. Of these, 264 moved into their new homes totalling 17 per cent of total program participants.²⁰ This proven successful program must be available to all Victorians experiencing homelessness, irrespective of their postcode and when they become homeless.

Housing First Principles

As Victoria's homelessness pandemic deepens our response must be based on Housing First principles and long-term investment. Recurrent and adequate funding is required in both social housing infrastructure and evidence-based service delivery frameworks. From experience across Victoria, interstate and overseas, we now have a strong working understanding of how we got here and a good measure on what it will take to address it. The time to act is now.

Endnotes

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20. Victorian Government 2021, *Short Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report*, Melbourne.