

National Housing Conference 2005

Where To When The Silos Come Down: Queensland Government Responses to Homelessness

Abstract

In June 2005, the Queensland Government announced the commitment of \$235.52 million over four years to implement a coordinated Queensland Government response to homelessness. The announcement followed several years of relationship and capacity building in State Government agencies and foreshadows some significant changes in the way Queensland responds to homelessness.

The coordinated response was informed by an analysis of Queensland Government policies that impacted on homelessness, and the concept of an integrated homelessness service system accessible to homeless people.

The process of developing the coordinated response to homelessness secured buy-in from 13 Queensland Government agencies. In 2004, a Chief Executives' Sub-committee on Homelessness (with reference to Public Intoxication) was established. The Sub-committee, which reports directly to the Premier, was tasked with developing an action plan to guide existing and newly funded responses to homelessness.

The new funds allocated to responding to homelessness and public space issues over the next four years will enhance the existing service system, improve service delivery, and secure greater collaboration and coordination across Queensland Government departments.

Introduction

Homelessness is a social issue that generates strong passion and much debate. Many of the fundamental questions remain unanswered in spite of considerable research and, more recently, policy attention. What exactly is homelessness and how can we best define it? What do we do about it once we've defined it? How does homelessness persist in an apparently prosperous country like Australia? How many people are affected by it and how are they affected? And perhaps the most difficult question of all: what do we need to do to respond to it?

There seem to be few areas of agreement – except the universal acknowledgement that homelessness is one of the most complex social issues facing Governments today, and one of the most difficult to respond to compassionately and effectively.

This paper:

- sets the scene by making some initial observations about the nature of homelessness;
- provides a brief overview of homelessness in Queensland;
- outlines the challenges facing the Queensland Government in responding to homelessness and describes how these challenges were met;
- describes the Queensland Government's coordinated response to homelessness; and
- reflects on the impact the coordinated responses is likely to have on the lives of people in Queensland experiencing homelessness.

Setting the scene

I want to start today by making some observations about homelessness. The observations are the result of 15 years of direct work with homeless people, research into homelessness issues and, most recently, policy development in the area of homelessness.

As such, they are personal comments that do not reflect the views of the Queensland Government or the Department of Housing. The remarks are intended to provide some context for the remainder of the paper and to describe the landscape in which responses to homelessness are developed and delivered.

The introduction referred to the complexity of homelessness. Some of this complexity 'goes with the territory' while layers of complexity are added by external factors like geography and location, community perceptions, media attention, and other policy initiatives and responses. In making these opening remarks, I want to focus on the complexity of homelessness and the challenges posed by this complexity before moving onto the remainder of the presentation. My focus in this section is specifically on the complexity of homelessness that arises because of:

- the lack of a clear definition about what constitutes homelessness (and what does not);
- the lack of clear separation of the causes from the consequences of homelessness; and
- the tensions between welfare based models and the emerging rights based approaches to homelessness.

A clear definition is an essential element in the development of responses to any social issue. A definition sets the parameters for policy and gives policy makers certainty about what policy is responding to. There are a number of definitions of homelessness and while Chamberlain and MacKenzie's definition (1992) is widely acknowledged and used in Australia, there are aspects of the definition that are particularly significant in the policy context. For example, the number of people enumerated as homeless dropped in Australia between the 1996 Census and the 2001 Census. However, Chamberlain and MacKenzie's analysis of the 2001 Census data attributes the drop in numbers to a change in the operational definition of an 'improvised dwelling', not to a drop in the actual number of homeless people in Australia.

Simply including – or not including - particular types of dwellings in the definition of an improvised dwelling, altered the number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia – and consequently the number of people whose homelessness Governments needs something needed to respond to. Expanding the definition to include people Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s analysis identified as ‘... marginal residents of caravan parks’ significantly at risk of homelessness would similarly increase the number of people considered to be homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The significance of definition is illustrated by the example of public space. The climate in many parts of Australia encourages an outdoor lifestyle which is taken advantage of by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In addition, many Indigenous people in Australia have connections with particular places where they have gathered traditionally and which are now considered to be ‘public spaces’. Their use of public space can be understood in a number of ways – as a form of homelessness; as a contested space issue; as a manifestation of housing stress; or in the case of Indigenous peoples as a continuation of traditional patterns of gathering in and using ‘public’ spaces. Public intoxication, homelessness and a range of other public space issues can be captured (rightly or wrongly) under the banner of ‘homelessness’. A definition needs to establish which are homelessness issues and which are public space issues, delineate one set of issues from the other, and the overlap between them.

Ideas about what ‘the problem’ is shape our ideas about what the remedy for the problem will be. If homelessness is defined as a lack of shelter (and nothing else), we provide only shelter as a response. If we see homelessness as a complex issue which is partly about accommodation but also about support, access to space, and legitimacy and inclusion in the community or an assertion of existing rights, the answers we seek reflect that complexity.

Not only do we not have clarity about what homelessness is, the causes and effects of homelessness are still imperfectly understood and there is confusion between the causes

and effects of homelessness. This is important because the explanations we adopt drive the responses we develop and implement.

The debate over whether people are made homeless by structural and systemic events, or by their own choices, illustrates the continuing confusion between cause and effect. The frequently cited causes of homelessness are not necessary or sufficient explanations for homelessness. For example, explanations that focus on the social disaffiliation of homeless people have never examined the interplay between homeless and housed community members (although Liebow 1993 notes that frequently it is housed affiliates who sever ties with people who become homeless); and there has never been a comparison of the level of disaffiliation between housed and homeless community members. Explanations that focus on individual choices, such as substance misuse, do not explain why some people who misuse substances become homeless while others never do; nor do they explain why people who do not misuse substances become homeless. And only occasionally do they take account either of the complex interaction of homelessness and substance misuse where substance misuse is as likely to be the outcome of homelessness as it is the cause.

Policy responses need to differentiate causes from effects, particularly if the aim of the policy is to prevent or to intervene early. Responding to the effects of homelessness as if they were causes does not produce good outcomes. Neither does it serve homeless people's interests because when our inappropriately targeted policies are ineffective, we resort to scapegoating and stigmatising people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness is also a complex issue to respond to because of the abiding belief that homeless people are significantly different to us, not part of our communities, and are, in fact, 'other' – a belief which has had currency in Western societies for quite some time. In 17th century England, the Poor Laws identified homeless people as 'outsiders' rather than community members. By this sleight of hand, responsibility for 'vagabonds' and 'vagrants' was transferred to the next parish whence the homeless had supposedly come (Jordan 1994, Beier 1985). In Australia through the Great depression, homelessness was

responded to in much the same way: bag-men and – women were moved on quickly to the next town to collect their dole entitlements. In some parts of Australia, these responses are still the ‘response of choice’. Such responses, however, fail to take account of the dynamics of contemporary life and of the vulnerability of certain social groups to being displaced in times of social upheaval and economic downturn. Moreover such responses are known to be no more than a ‘temporary fix’ that simply moves – rather than removes – the problem.

Homelessness itself is an elusive concept. It’s a difficult thing to understand – particularly if you have no experience of homelessness – and that makes it difficult to respond to. What may be viewed by many people as the most obvious disadvantage of homelessness – being without shelter - is not necessarily the worst experience a homeless person could imagine, especially one who has become accustomed to the lifestyle and has adopted the identity of a homeless person.

Responding to homelessness is complex because it is ‘unknown’ to most of us. Often policy makers and policy takers have quite a lot in common. If we consider health policy, most people have some experience of illness – either personally or through their family or social networks. The impacts of health policy are easily seen and widely understood. In the case of homelessness, the distance between the experience of homelessness and a more ‘normal’ life is vast – with little ‘shared’ or ‘common’ between. Development of policy that benefits homeless people and the wider community – in other words, policy that achieves its aims – needs to see the world from multiple perspectives.

Responding to the perceived needs of people who are homeless doesn’t necessarily result in policy that addresses what may be higher order priorities to people experiencing homelessness and reflects a welfare approach to homelessness – and to homeless people - where government is assumed to ‘know best’. This approach is being challenged by a rights based approach to homelessness which acknowledges homeless people as citizens (not outsiders) with the rights available to other citizens (Goldie 2003a, 2003b). The

resolution of the differences between these two approaches will continue to add complexity to the on-going debate about homelessness and how best to respond to it.

The complexities I've just described are innate to homelessness and there is little any Government can do about this complexity. In seeking to respond, though, Governments have often reduced the issue to what our view of the world encompasses, reducing homelessness to a simple issue with a single solution.

A brief look at homelessness in Queensland indicates that a number of local and regional issues are subsumed under the broad banner of 'homelessness' which need varied solutions and responses.

Homelessness in Queensland

The reality of homelessness in Queensland is that it takes different forms and has different appearances in different communities. The homelessness figures gathered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in its 2001 Census of Population and Housing are the most current, reliable figures available and illustrate this variation. These figures are now supplemented by a detailed analysis, completed in early 2004, of the Queensland homeless figures from the 2001 Census¹.

Between the 1996 and 2001 Censuses, there was a decrease in the total number of people in Australia counted as homeless from 105,304 in 1996 to 99,900 in 2001². As noted earlier, Chamberlain and MacKenzie's analysis attributes this reduction to a changed approach to the definition and enumeration of an 'improvised dwelling' between 1996 and the 2001³. The figures for Queensland from 1996 and 2001 follow the same trend. A total of 24,569 homeless people were recorded in Queensland on Census night in 2001, 1,080 less than on Census night in 1996.

¹ Chamberlain, C. and D. MacKenzie 2003 *Counting the Homeless 2001: Queensland*, Swinburne University of Technology and RMIT, Melbourne, pp19-20.

² Chamberlain, C. 2000 *Homelessness in Queensland: A report prepared for the Queensland Department of Families, Youth and Community Care* ; Chamberlain, C. and D. MacKenzie 2003 *op cit*

³ Chamberlain, C. and D. MacKenzie 2003 *op cit*

Of the 24,569 homeless people enumerated in Queensland, 16% were sleeping out or in improvised dwellings (Level 1 homelessness), 9% were in Supported Accommodation Assistance Program services and 53% were staying temporarily with friends or relatives (Level 2 homelessness), and 22% were in boarding houses on Census night (Level 3 homelessness).

Homelessness numbers provide only a part of the picture, however. Rates of homelessness as a proportion of the total population also need to be considered in order to make comparisons between regions.

The trends in homelessness in Queensland revealed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie's analysis are shown in Table 1. Rates of homelessness are higher the further north in Queensland a Statistical Division is located. Rates of homelessness are significantly higher in the western part of Queensland, specifically in the Statistical Divisions of South West, Central West and North West.

Statistical division	Number of homeless people	Rate of homeless people per 10,000
Brisbane	7,726	48 per 10,000
Moreton	3,931	57 per 10,000
Wide Bay- Burnett	2,022	97 per 10,000
Fitzroy	1,518	87 per 10,000
Mackay	1,609	121 per 10,000
Northern	2,044	110 per 10,000
Far North	3,190	150 per 10,000
Darling Downs	1,015	50 per 10,000
South West	193	59 per 10,000
Central West	250	206 per 10,000
North West	730	211 per 10,000

Table 1: Number of homeless people, and rates of homelessness in Queensland Statistical Divisions (Taken from Chamberlain, C and D. MacKenzie 2003 *op cit* pp 45-46, and 58)

Table 2 shows the homelessness figures and rates in coastal cities and major regional centres in Queensland.

Statistical Sub-division	Recorded number of homeless people	Rate of homelessness per 10,000 of the population
Brisbane City	5,094	59 per 10,000
Bundaberg	356	65 per 10,000
Hervey Bay	368	96 per 10,000
Rockhampton	482	79 per 10,000
Gladstone	311	83 per 10,000
Mackay	348	56 per 10,000
Townsville	1,210	94 per 10,000
Cairns	1,269	117 per 10,000
Mt Isa	Figures for the city of Mt Isa only not available	Figures for the city of Mt Isa only not available

Table 2: Number of homeless people, and rates of homelessness in coastal cities and regional centres in Queensland (Taken from Chamberlain, C and D. MacKenzie 2003 *op cit* p 58)

Rates of homelessness in Brisbane City varied considerably across the three geographical areas used to analyse the 2001 Census data: the City Core, the Inner Ring, and the Outer Ring.

Location	Total number of homeless people	Rate of homelessness per 10,000 of the population
Brisbane Statistical District (including Brisbane City)	7,726	48 per 10,000
Brisbane City – City Core	2,108	316 per 10,000
Brisbane City – Inner Ring	1,348	44 per 10,000
Brisbane City – OuterRing	1,635	33 per 10,000

Table 3: Number of homeless people and rates of homelessness in the Brisbane Statistical Division, and in the three areas designated as Brisbane City (Taken from Chamberlain, C and D. MacKenzie 2003 *op cit* pp 45-46)

The number of Indigenous people in Queensland enumerated as homeless declined between 1996 and 2001, again attributed to the impact of the changed definitions and counting procedures used in the Census which impacted most on regional and remote Indigenous communities. Indigenous people, however continue to be significantly over-represented in the homeless population in Queensland. In the 2001 Census, 3.3% of the Queensland population identified as Indigenous but 9.3% of the homeless population

identified as Indigenous⁴. There were 1,918 homeless Indigenous people in Queensland compared to 22,487 non-Indigenous homeless people⁵ (or a rate of 164 Indigenous people per 10,000 of the Queensland population compared to 66 per 10,000 for non-Indigenous people). Indigenous people make up 24.9% of the users of the designated homelessness programme response, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, in Queensland⁶. This compares with a national figure of 17.7%.

People sleeping out (or experiencing Level 1 homelessness) represent, for many in the wider community, the stereotypical image of homelessness. The analysis of the 2001 Census figures shows, however, that people who sleep out are a relatively small percentage of the homeless population, making up only 16% of the homeless population in Queensland on Census night 2001. This group however attracts disproportionate attention because of their visibility, their apparent high level of need, and the lack of ‘on site’ responses available to meet these needs.

In addition to people defined as homeless and included in the homelessness figures Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s analysis identifies people they describe as ‘...marginal caravan park residents’ who have no permanent address other than a caravan park, are not employed, and whom the report’s authors consider to be at significant risk of homelessness. The total number of people identified in Queensland⁷ as ‘marginal caravan park residents’ is 5,521. There were 61 ‘marginal caravan park residents’ per 10,000 of the population in Brisbane, 123 per 10,000 in the major coastal cities, and 181 per 10,000 in the regional and remote subdivisions.

⁴ Chamberlain, C. and D MacKenzie *op cit* pp7-8

⁵ The total of Indigenous homeless people and non-Indigenous people is 22,487. Data is missing for a further 164 homeless people. The three figures together give the total homeless population in Queensland: 24, 569.

⁶ SAAP National Data Collection Agency, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003 *SAAP National Data Collection: Annual report 2002-03*, AIHW, Canberra.

⁷ This figure refers to caravan parks only in Brisbane, all coastal cities (Gladstone, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, Bundaberg, Hervey Bay and Cairns) and all rural/remote Census subdivisions. As such, it may be an underestimate of the total number of residents in ‘marginal caravan parks’.

Developing a Queensland Government response to homelessness

In developing its coordinated response to homelessness, the Queensland Government faced a number of challenges some of which are related to the complexity of homelessness discussed earlier. Other challenges facing the Queensland Government in responding to homelessness included identifying and responding to the various forms of homelessness and other variations in specific locations which typify homelessness in Queensland. Other challenges facing the Queensland Government were the result of what have been described as the ‘silos’ found within and between Government departments; and the interconnectedness of policy drivers across jurisdictions and roles and responsibilities of different levels of Government.

The remainder of this paper explores how the Queensland Government faced these challenges in developing its coordinated response to homelessness, outlines the coordinated response, and reflects on the likely outcomes of the response for people experiencing homelessness.

The Queensland Government adopted a sophisticated and multi-dimensional approach in developing its coordinated response to homelessness. In order to address the complexity of homelessness – and the impacts of this complexity - the Queensland Government identified a need to review its own policies and procedures, and the impacts they had on homelessness and on people experiencing homelessness.

The development of the Queensland Government’s response to homelessness started with an identification of the gaps and barriers experienced by homeless people when they tried to access existing services and the responses they needed. Gaps and barriers were identified through a number of processes including a desktop review of evaluations already undertaken; a review of best practice approaches to homelessness; engagement with service providers in designated homelessness and generic services; engagement with

homeless people; and visits to regional and rural centres to identify particular gaps and barriers in these locations.

In Queensland, the Department of Housing undertook the initial identification of gaps and barriers and had the unenviable task of approaching other agencies with a critique of their policies and procedures. Housing's leadership role in this process did not protect the department from the realization that while it clearly provided an exit point from homelessness it also created homelessness when tenancies could not be supported and households were evicted.

Bringing other agencies to the point where they could see the gaps and barriers within their own service system was a gradual process. Getting a response from agencies to these gaps and barriers took even longer, particularly since agencies were being asked to respond within the existing resources of their agency.

Some agencies had no 'view' of homelessness because their core business did not require them too. For example, the practice of flying people from remote areas to regional centres for medical treatment or a court appearance is relatively common in parts of Queensland. This practice, however, often resulted, in people being 'stranded' in regional centres and contributed directly to what some communities identified as a homelessness issue. From the perspective of the agency concerned, its role was completed at the end of the treatment or hearing. Other agencies were convinced that if they delivered a service that was theoretically accessible to everyone, including homeless people, it was immaterial if homeless people could not or did not access the service. For example, it took quite some time for the health system to see that making appointments in advance with homeless people with mental health issues did not encourage them to seek treatment for these issues.

A combination of evidence and persistence resulted in the majority of the identified gaps and barriers being acknowledged and owned by the relevant departments and some (generally modest) actions to remove barriers and fill in gaps being taken. The small

scale, practical actions were brought together in 2002 in a cross agency Homelessness Action Plan which was endorsed by the Queensland Cabinet. The aim of the first (and several subsequent) Action Plans was to improve the quality of services provided by Queensland Government departments and to enhance homeless people's quality of life.

The analysis of gaps and barriers led to the conceptualization of 'an integrated homelessness service system'. The intention of an integrated homelessness service system is to provide homeless people with the full range of services available to all community members. An integrated service system would provide to homeless people the educational opportunities, leisure opportunities and access to health care available to all community members. In addition, an integrated homelessness service system would provide services specifically targeting homelessness, for example the support services offered through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Not only would an integrated homelessness service system seek to provide the services but it would deliver them in a way that was 'user friendly' for homeless people. In the case of health services, for example, the conventional view that homeless people can (and will) access mainstream health services would be replaced by an understanding that homeless people frequently need to be engaged by services before they will access and use them. This can mean delivering services in a different way or delivering them from a different place.

The idea of an integrated service system provided a rationale for bringing together all the agencies that were components of an integrated homelessness service system. Bringing together Queensland Government departments also provided a way to address the challenges posed by the structure of Government.

Government departments (and agencies within departments) have very different views of the world and their place in it, that are both exemplified by, and the result of, different legislative responsibilities and core functions, different area and zone boundaries, varying fields of expertise, and even the geographical spread and location of agencies. 'Silos' are a natural outcome of structuring departments around core responsibilities and areas of expertise but they militate against the development of the 'joined up solutions' needed to

address complex, ‘joined up problems’ like homelessness. Joined up problems and joined up solutions require coordination and cooperation between and within departments which can be stifled by an approach that erects boundaries, guards territory or insists on a one dimensional view of the world.

Bringing agencies together around the issue of homelessness shifted agencies’ perceptions of their work as ‘silo-ed’ and started a cross agency dialogue about the issue. Its purpose was to build an understanding of how policies and practices excluded homeless people from participating in the communities in which they lived or from services offered, or contributed (albeit unintentionally) to homelessness. The dialogue was also intended to create an increasing awareness of some of the realities of homeless people’s lives and the ways in which policies and practices could impact on these lives.

Dialogue led to recognition and realizations, both important steps in a developmental process. Once agencies could ‘see’ the unintended consequences of their policies and practice, it was difficult to continue to argue that homelessness was not their business. Agencies recognized their role and this recognition was often followed by the realisation that it was frequently not the response (or lack of response) from one agency that lead to homelessness, but the interaction of many unhelpful, or missing responses.

These emerging, purpose-built relationships were formalized with the establishment of a Senior Officers’ Group on Homelessness at the end of 2001. The group operated for over three years with a focus on practical, resource neutral initiatives intended to improve homeless people’s access to existing services. The Chair of the Group fostered an atmosphere where problems could be discussed frankly and reflectively. Since the establishment of the Group, a degree of trust and openness has developed between agencies. Agencies’ capacity to consider and respond to homelessness issues has likewise been increased. The recognition of the complexity of homelessness, of its many causes, and of the many paths into and out of it deepened and this growing understanding was taken back to the agencies represented on the Group, regardless of core agency’s business agencies’. This positioned agencies to be alert and responsive.

Queensland Government agencies represented on the Group now include the Department of the Premier and Cabinet; Queensland Treasury; the Department of Communities; the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy; Queensland Health; the Department of Child Safety; the Department of Justice and Attorney-General; the Department of Corrective Services; the Department of Emergency Services; the Department of Tourism, Fair Trading and Wine Industry Development (Office of Fair Trading); the Department of Employment and Training; Education Queensland; Disability Services Queensland; the Queensland Police Service; and the Department of Housing.

The overview of homelessness in Queensland presented earlier shows another set of challenges in developing responses to homelessness and the need to factor diversity into the response.

Homelessness occurs in Queensland in urban, regional, rural and remote communities and in the discrete Indigenous communities. The data on homelessness in Queensland presented earlier show significant variations in the number of homeless people and the rates of homelessness across Queensland. In different locations homelessness can take different forms and can look very different. There are differing community perceptions of what constitutes homelessness. For example, in some locations groups of Indigenous people gathering in and using public spaces is identified as a homelessness issue, regardless of whether or not the people in question are accommodated. There are also significant variations in the capacity of the existing service system in particular locations and its ability to respond.

Locational factors represent a significant challenge for the Queensland Government. For example, a response designed to meet the needs of homeless Indigenous people who choose to occupy public spaces in a regional centre at certain times will not meet the needs of homeless families in the centre of Brisbane.

The challenge for the Queensland Government posed by local and regional variations was to develop an overarching policy framework to guide the direction of responses but at the same time to foster local identification and community ownership of the issues, and local responses to these issues.

The Queensland Government employed a place-based approach as a way of responding to homelessness with all its local variations. Place based approaches not only yield a fine grained understanding of the issues in specific locations but have the ability to tap into local networks and resources and build on the capacity that already exists within communities.

In 2003, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy developed a policy response to Indigenous homelessness and contested space issues in Cairns, Townsville and Mt Isa. Initiatives responding to Indigenous homelessness public space issues were incorporated into the Queensland Government's Homelessness Action Plan for 2003-04.

In September 2004, the Premier of Queensland announced the establishment of a Chief Executive Officers' Sub-committee on Homelessness (with reference to Public Intoxication) to coordinate and oversee the development of innovative responses to homelessness and public space issues. The Sub-committee reports quarterly to the Premier on progress and emerging issues, and plays a vital role in raising the profile of homelessness as an issue and fostering collaborative working relationships across State Government Departments.

The Chief Executive Officers' Sub-committee on Homelessness (with reference to Public Intoxication) has as its primary target group people without access to shelter and its aim is to reduce, over time, the number of people in Queensland experiencing primary homelessness. The Sub-committee has also identified a number of key locations around the State where homelessness numbers or rates are particularly high, and/or where visible homelessness has raised community concern. The areas currently identified by the Sub-

committee as key areas are inner city Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Mt Isa, the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast.

In June 2005, the Queensland Treasurer announced that \$235.52 million in capital and recurrent funds over four years would be directed to responding to homelessness in Queensland. The funds have been directed through seven Queensland Government agencies (all of which are represented on the CEOs' Sub-committee) and will strengthen and enhance existing responses and develop and implement innovative responses.

The Queensland Government's coordinated response to homelessness

The initiatives in the Queensland Government's coordinated response to homelessness will create an integrated homelessness service system in each of the identified locations and to provide opportunities for people experiencing homelessness to move towards more stable housing.

An integrated service system created through enhancements of existing system and newly funded initiatives can grouped under six themes:

- Providing more accommodation and support options;
- Connecting people with services;
- Responding to homelessness and public space issues;
- Meeting the health needs of homeless people;
- Meeting the needs of homeless people in the legal system; and
- Helping residential services stay open.

Providing more accommodation and support options

Initiatives under this theme will increase the supply of crisis and transitional accommodation for homeless people, and more closely link this accommodation with support.

Over the next four years, \$45.44 million will be directed through the Departments of Housing and Communities to provide additional crisis and transitional housing and support for homeless people in Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Mt Isa and the Gold Coast.

A further \$30 million over five years will be spent redeveloping the Lady Bowen complex, a group of heritage buildings located in an area well used by homeless people. Stage 1 of the redevelopment will convert one of the buildings to provide crisis accommodation for homeless people with complex needs who are excluded from other crisis services. The Departments of Communities and Housing have worked together to ensure the building design and the service model suit the intended client group, and community in-put into the service model will be sought through an Expression of Interest process. Later stages of the redevelopment will provide longer-term accommodation and office space where peak bodies and community organizations working with homeless people can co-locate.

A \$50 million package of assistance, which includes \$5.8 million from the Queensland Government's Smart State Building Fund, will provide boarding house style accommodation for single people, including single homeless people. This accommodation will be provided in locations across the state, including the identified key areas.

Connecting people with services

The aim of initiatives under this theme is to intervene early to prevent people becoming homeless in the first instance, or from moving into long-term homelessness. These initiatives assist homeless people access the information and services they need.

Over four years, the Department of Communities will direct \$4.02 million to establish a state wide call centre for homeless people which will act as an entry point to the homelessness service system. The call centre will assess homeless people's support and accommodation needs and direct them to the services that best meets these needs.

Funds of \$12.60 million will be directed through the Department of Communities to establish service hubs in inner Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville and the Gold Coast. These service hubs will assist homeless people access accommodation and information and will provide referral, assessment and advocacy services. Outreach services to homeless people living in public spaces will also be provided from the service hubs. Brokerage funds for accommodation, transportation and other immediate needs will also be attached to the service hubs.

To assist people in the private rental market and public housing at risk of homelessness, including vulnerable people living in boarding houses and hostels, maintain their tenancies a further \$10.41 million will be directed through the Department of Communities to provide support through outreach services. These services will be provided in 11 locations across Queensland.

Responding to homelessness and public space issues

People in the community use public spaces for a range of reasons, including social and cultural reasons. Groups of people gathering in public spaces are often assumed to be homeless even when this is not the case (Memmott et al. 2003). Equally, there is a perceived link between homelessness and public intoxication – both of which frequently occur in public spaces.

\$1.86 million has been allocated through the Queensland Police Service over four years to appoint six additional Police Liaison Officers to work in community patrols in Cairns, Mt Isa and Townsville. This initiative, which aims to reduce the rate at which homeless Indigenous people are arrested, will also enhance community safety. The Officers will monitor public spaces, link homeless people to Government and non-Government agencies and local support networks, defuse conflict and prevent violence in public places by mediation and arrange transport to safer places for people affected by alcohol.

The Department of Communities will direct \$4.92 million to improving community safety and amenity by providing public intoxication outreach services to people intoxicated in public space who are at increased risk of harm who need support to ensure their safety and address their longer term needs.

An additional \$4.55 million will be directed by the Department of Communities to develop additional services and activities to promote the safety of people who misuse volatile substances such as paint, petrol and glue.

Meeting the health needs of homeless people

Over the next four years, Queensland Health will direct \$43.59 million to meeting the complex health needs of homeless people, including those who have a mental illness and/or a substance misuse issue. Recurrent funding for 2008-09 is \$13.8 million. The services, which have been specifically designed to be accessible by, and responsive to, homeless people, will provide a coordinated system of health care by collaborating with and building the skills and capacity of other sectors to work with homeless people.

Funding will be used to provide specialist mental health, general health and drug and alcohol services to assist homeless people. The services will target people sleeping out in public spaces, and those living in squats and other improvised dwellings in the identified locations.

A drug and alcohol withdrawal service appropriate for homeless Indigenous people will be established in Townsville to assist people address the substance abuse issues that may contribute to their homelessness.

Queensland Health will also establish treatment, support and rehabilitation services for people with a mental illness who cannot be discharged from acute care wards because they lack adequate support, and who are at significant risk of homelessness if discharged without appropriate support. This initiative is complemented by the allocation of \$5.55

million through the Department of Housing for the provision of transitional housing for clients of mental health services living in unsuitable accommodation.

Meeting the needs of homeless people in the legal system

Homeless people are vulnerable to being caught up in the legal system for reasons that related directly to their homelessness. Living a large part of their lives in public spaces increases their vulnerable to contact with the criminal justice system for generally minor offences such as public nuisance and public drunkenness (Walsh 2004; Lynch ***; Goldie **).

The Queensland Government has allocated a total \$978,000 under this theme for initiatives to divert homeless people from custody and address the causes of the offences.

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General is directing \$306,000 to run a two year pilot program in the Brisbane Magistrates Court. The aim of the pilot program is to divert and support homeless people appearing in the court charged with minor public order offences. A Court Liaison Officer will provide referrals for homeless people to services providing accommodation, health care (including mental health responses) and support to address the personal circumstances that led to the commission of the offence. The Liaison officer will also provide to the Court, with the consent of homeless people, information about the circumstances of homeless defendants and alternative sentencing options for homeless people.

The pilot program is closely linked to work being carried out by the Brisbane Magistrates Court exploring the establishment of a Special Circumstances List in the Brisbane Magistrates Court.

The Department of Justice and Attorney-General will also direct \$482,000 to implementing a State penalties Enforcement Registry communication and training program. The program will increase the awareness of homeless people and services

working with homeless people about fine payment options with the aim of reducing the risk to homeless people of imprisonment resulting from the non-payment of fines.

In Cairns, the Department of Communities will provide \$190,000 to support a twelve months trial of a treatment based responses to alcohol related offences as an alternative to imprisonment. This initiative will provide accommodation, support and alcohol counseling to homeless people referred by the Court.

Helping residential services stay open

For many homeless people, a boarding house room is one of the few types of accommodation that they can realistically afford. For some, boarding house accommodation is their accommodation of choice providing as it does shelter, value for money, company and some degree of privacy and control.

Residential services are also critical in addressing primary and secondary homelessness. Homeless people whose most pervasive experiences are of living on the street or in crisis shelters often need considerable support over an extended period of time to make the transitions identified by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Boarding houses are a valuable step in the transition from absolute homelessness to accommodation, and can be as far along the accommodation continuum as some progress or want to progress.

The Queensland Government will direct \$2.32 million over four years to provide extra assistance to boarding house operators to meet the requirements of the *Residential Services (Accreditation) Act 2002* which is designed to improve physical amenity and safety in residential services. Service providers will receive assistance and guidance seeking to register residential services; help service providers navigate the accreditation process; and undertake evaluation and subsequent refinement of the accreditation process and the Act itself.

Assisting residential services to comply with the Act also increases the likelihood that they will stay open, reducing the risk to people already living in boarding houses and hostels of losing their accommodation through closures.

Reflections

The final question this paper has been asked to consider is whether the Queensland Government's response to homelessness will make a difference to homeless people.

It's far too early to answer that question in Queensland where the first initiatives are not expected to be operational until mid-2005-06. At the end of 2 years, a process review will be undertaken to determine how successful relationships and processes have been in developing responses to homelessness. A full evaluation of the impact of the new and enhanced initiatives in creating an integrated service system in identified locations will be carried out in mid 2009.

But it may be possible to make some predictions about whether it will make a difference. It has made a difference already. Undoubtedly, there has been a lot of learning for and within the Queensland Government – not just about homelessness but about how Government can work together to respond to a whole range of complex and confronting social issues. There is certainly a policy and an action plan in place, and accountability through reporting processes and evaluation. There is a raised awareness about homelessness through many government agencies and examples of developing relationships between policy makers and people living in public places in the inner city.

Will it make a difference to homeless people? This is a much harder question to answer and again, these are not answers but speculations.

People who are homeless will be able to access services where they are. Services that will now be provided on site include support, referral and case management via outreach services and health care, including responses to mental health issues and substance

misuse. This means that in many instances, homeless people will be able to make use of the services that target them. ‘In situ’ responses can also have the effect of signaling to homeless people that they are entitled to a place to be and to access services and that this entitlement is recognized by the wider community.

Through regular and unthreatening contact with service providers, homeless people will have opportunities to develop relationships with service providers and members of the wider community. These relationships are valued by homeless people as a sign of their inclusion in the wider community and also for the practical outcomes, for example the offer of work, these relationships can generate.

Through the Queensland Government’s response to homelessness, homeless people will have more options and choices, and the infrastructure and services to support those choices. There will be more crisis and transitional housing and increased support capacity to assist people making a transition from homelessness, and to maintain existing tenancies. Opportunities to intervene positively will be sought where previously homelessness was punished. And homeless people are acknowledged as members of the communities where they live – not simply moved on as outsiders.

Perhaps the final challenge facing all governments is how to include these members of the community – not just through access to services and opportunities for participation but in the development of policy responses. Homeless people’s views will be sought as part of the evaluation of the coordinated Queensland Government responses to homelessness. However, the ultimate test of success might be that we no longer talk about homeless people but with them - as equal partners and the true experts.

Bibliography

Beier A.L. 1985 *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy problem in England 1560-1640*
London, Methuen

Chamberlain, C and D. MacKenzie 1992 'Understanding contemporary homelessness:
Issues of definition and meaning' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* Vol 27, No 4, pp
274-297

Goldie, C. 2003 'Rights versus Welfare: Fostering community and legal activism in
support of people facing homelessness' *Alternative Law Journal* Vol 28, No 3

Jordan, A. 1994 *Going Bad: Homelessness Men in an Australian City Melbourne*,
Council to Homeless Persons

Liebow, E. 1993 *Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women* New York, Basic
Books

Memmott, P., Long, S., Chambers, C. 2003 *Categories of Indigenous Homeless People
and Good Practice Responses to Their Needs: Positioning Paper* Brisbane, AHURI

Queensland Government 2005 *Responding to Homelessness*