



**FIRST PROGRESS REPORT
ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF**

***BREAKING THE CYCLE – THE
ACT
HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY***

**FOR THE PERIOD
JULY 2004 - JUNE 2005**

**Authorised by
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A PROGRESS REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF *BREAKING THE CYCLE – THE ACT HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY* FOR THE PERIOD JULY 2004 TO JUNE 2005

INTRODUCTION

In June 2002, the ACT Government announced the formation of a Homelessness Advisory Group (HAG), comprising broad membership from the ACT government, the Australian Government and community sector, and commenced development of a Homelessness Strategy to meet its policy commitments under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

From its formative stages, development of the Strategy was grounded in a sense of partnership and shared commitment to improving the ACT's response to homelessness, an issue that affects approximately 1200 people each night.

For these people, and the many more who are at risk of homelessness, their experiences are complex, unique and personal. Multiple factors contribute to homelessness. Domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse, physical and mental illness, relationship breakdown, unemployment and poverty are all primary causes of homelessness.

So too, the responses and strategies required to alleviate its impacts, reduce its likelihood and support people to transition from homelessness are complex. This, in turn requires commitment from a range of support services and the need to recognise and respond to individual experience and circumstance.

Considerable scoping work was undertaken prior to the development of the Homelessness Strategy. The joint ACTCOSS / Morgan, Disney Associates and Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS) *Needs Analysis of Homelessness in the ACT* drew on the experiences and evidence of government, community service providers and people who had experienced homelessness.

The *Needs Analysis* scoped pathways into homelessness, the ACT's existing service responses and provided recommendations for future improvements. This comprehensive and inclusive approach towards consultation identified key priorities to be considered by the HAG, target groups in need of specific service responses and paved the way for the approach taken in developing the Homelessness Strategy.

Community involvement and participation was integral to the development of the Homelessness Strategy. Over 250 people from across government and the community sector were consulted through a series of working groups, sub-committees and validation sessions. Over 20 community service providers participated in this process. In addition to this, 135 people who were currently or had experienced homelessness were asked to provide input into the Strategy, including their experiences of the current service system and how it could be improved.

This level of involvement was vital in the development of an informed and practical Strategy, able to respond to homelessness on both an individual and systemic basis. It also contributed to a shared ownership of the Homelessness Strategy, fostered and strengthened relationships between community and government sectors and was the genesis of the vision and goal for the ACT's response to homelessness.

Breaking the Cycle – the ACT Homelessness Strategy, with four key themes and 82 actions, was the culmination of this process. Launched in April 2004, *Breaking the Cycle* articulates a vision where, “[a]ll Canberrans have the right to safe, secure, affordable and appropriate accommodation with the necessary supports to live as independently as possible within our community.”

Underpinning the Strategy was an ACT Government funding commitment of \$2.4 million in 2003-04, increasing to \$3.093 million in 2004-05 and \$3.89 million in 2005-06, to reflect the expansion of supported accommodation services, and then indexed in 2006-07.

This is the first of regular reports outlining achievements, challenges and learnings as we implement *Breaking the Cycle*. Progress reports document performance against the Strategy's 82 actions and articulated timeframes for their completion. This progress report is an amalgamated one, covering the 2004-05 reporting period.

Breaking the Cycle is not just a policy document, but a dynamic way of working which has adapted with changing needs and emerging priorities. It has taken into account the needs of service providers and those who work closely with people who experience homelessness and responded accordingly.

Throughout the reporting period, the responsibilities of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services expanded through incorporation of the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support. Young people's pathways into and experiences of homelessness require specific responses, and the development of a *Youth Homelessness Action Plan* has been a particular focus of the reporting period.

The development of this plan has involved key stakeholders and has built on previous research into youth homelessness. Most importantly, young people have been involved at key stages of the development of the action plan, providing their recommendations and advice on its actions. The result is a set of practical responses to improve early intervention and longer-term housing options for young people.

Attachment A to this report collates the achievements of ACT Government agencies and community service providers against each individual action of the Strategy.

Attachment B is a revised implementation schedule, endorsed by the ACT Homelessness Committee (AHC), the joint community and government body with responsibility for overseeing implementation, evaluation and monitoring of the Strategy. This table also identifies status to date against each of the 82 actions against their revised timeframes for implementation.

Reporting on implementation of the Homelessness Strategy must form more than an accountability framework for government. It must also represent the views of various stakeholders who have invested significantly in achieving the vision of *Breaking the Cycle*. That is why members of the ACT Homelessness Committee and the community sector have been asked to contribute to this report. You will find their perspective on achievements and outcomes throughout this report.

So too, you will find discussion on the impacts of people who have been users of the ACT's service system. Their perspective must always be included in our discussion about homelessness, because fundamentally, *Breaking the Cycle* is a human rights-based strategy. It recognises the disadvantage and social exclusion experienced by people who are homeless and seeks to create change that will improve their lives, experiences and opportunities.

Achieving social change, as we seek to do through the implementation of *Breaking the Cycle*, requires a long-term commitment from all parts of the community. It requires shared responsibility and a partnership approach. I would like to personally acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all members of the ACT Homelessness Committee and its various working groups and sub committees.

Many people have been involved in the development and implementation of the Strategy to date. Their commitment to achieving its goals, embracing new ways of working and reducing homelessness is a proud achievement for the ACT community.

I am pleased to present this Progress Report on behalf of the ACT Homelessness Committee.

Sandra Lambert
Chair

1. SAAP V – THE NATIONAL RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a joint initiative of the Australian Government and ACT Government. It provides the key policy and program guidelines for the national response to homelessness.

The development of *Breaking the Cycle* has been supported by the Australian Government through the SAAP.

As the ACT commenced implementation of *Breaking the Cycle*, on a national level the Australian, State and Territory Governments were involved in the negotiation of the next iteration of SAAP, which will run from 2005 to 2010.

The ACT Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services, Mr John Hargreaves MLA, signed the SAAP V Multilateral Agreement on 14 September 2005, bringing into effect three strategic priorities over the life of SAAP V:

- a. increase involvement in early intervention and prevention strategies;
- b. provide better assistance to people who have a number of support needs;
and
- c. provide ongoing assistance to ensure stability for clients post crisis.

The broad objectives of the Strategy align comfortably with the SAAP V strategic directions. The significant inroads towards achieving service coordination, responding to client complexity and implementing innovative new service responses, with a focus on transitional support, means the ACT is in a strong position to meet the objectives of SAAP V.

2. THE ACT HOMELESSNESS COMMITTEE

The ACT Homelessness Committee (AHC) is responsible for implementing and evaluating *Breaking the Cycle: The ACT Homelessness Strategy*. It was established in April 2004 after the launch of the Strategy.

The AHC comprises representatives from the ACT and Australian Government's and the community, through a range of peak body organisations. These include ACT Council of Service (ACTCOSS), Council on the Aged (COTA), ACT Shelter, Youth Coalition of the ACT and the ACT Church's Council. Representatives have also been drawn from the SAAP sector and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Throughout 2005, the AHC has sought additional membership to represent people with a disability and a further representative from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. These appointment processes are expected to be finalised by November 2005.

The AHC has established a series of working groups and sub-committees, drawing on specialist knowledge and expertise of a range of community members, to progress particular actions of the Strategy. These following groups have been active throughout the reporting period and have been instrumental in achievements to date:

- **Charter of Rights Working Group** - responsible for developing a Charter of Rights for people experiencing homelessness and an associated Code of Conduct for homelessness service providers. These actions will be completed by December 2005. This group will also consider the feasibility of establishing an Official Visitor Scheme for homelessness services, to uphold service standards and protect the rights of people accessing these services;
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group** – provides advice and recommendations on the establishment of a range of housing and homelessness responses as identified in the Strategy;
- **Youth Homelessness Working Group** - developed a *Youth Homelessness Action Plan* to address the specific needs of young people (12 – 25) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness;
- **Community Awareness Working Group** – is charged with developing and undertaking a range of engagement activities and consultation with stakeholders to raise community awareness of homelessness and inform policy and service development. The group plays an important role in providing an ethical lens through which consultation and engagement with people who have experienced homelessness should be viewed. The group is developing a consultation model to engage with people who are homeless, which will be tested during community consultation on the Charter of Rights and Code of Conduct. Future work of this group will involve working with the ACT Department of Urban Services to engage with people who are homeless to provide advice on the planning and use of public spaces to ensure their safety; and
- **Evaluation, Monitoring and Review Working Group** –this group will oversee a mid-point evaluation of *Breaking the Cycle*, scheduled to commence December 2005 and a final evaluation upon the completion of Strategy. The mid-point evaluation will also include the ACT's inaugural Poverty-Proofing trial, which will evaluate implementation of the Strategy to ensure there have been no inadvertent increases in people who experience poverty as a result. The evaluative framework for the Strategy is grounded within its imperatives to achieve social change.

A full list of the AHC and associated working group members is at **Attachment C**.

At present, ACT Government representatives chair all working groups and committees associated with implementing the Strategy. A future goal is to develop joint chairing arrangements for these groups to better reflect the partnership approach required to achieve the goals of the Strategy.

The implementation of the ACT Homelessness Strategy, Breaking the Cycle is providing a unique opportunity for the community and the government to work together. The sense of partnership between government and the community sector has been enhanced through regular meetings of the Homelessness Committee and its various working groups.
Veronica Wensing – SAAP Resourcing and Development Service

3. RESPONDING TO HOMELESSNESS: THE ACT'S CONTRIBUTION

In 2003-04, the ACT Government underlined its commitment to enhancing the ACT's response to homelessness through an unprecedented injection of \$2.4 million in 2003-04, increasing to \$3.093 million in 2004-05 and \$3.89 million in 2005-06, to reflect the expansion of supported accommodation services, and then indexed in 2006-07.

This and further ACT funding initiatives have formed an integral part in the implementation of *Breaking the Cycle*, establishing new services which respond to priority target groups. Services established through these initiatives increased the capacity of the total sector by 30% and in the case of some target groups, such as in funding allocated to support homeless couples, created the ACT's first service response. This funding represents an 86% increase in ACT Government funding to SAAP.

The process of establishing new service responses involved broad consultation with the community. Priority target groups were endorsed by the Homelessness Advisory Group and SAAP service providers, who were involved at all stages in the development of service models and the specifications for the tender processes undertaken to select service providers.

The result is a suite of innovative and flexible services that reflect contemporary trends in homelessness service delivery. These services recognise the complex support needs of people experiencing homelessness and the benefits of providing longer-term transitional support in achieving sustainable outcomes for clients. All are resourced appropriately to ensure service provision to meet these expectations.

Tenders were awarded in June 2004 and services commenced operation in 2004-2005. The allocation of 44 properties to the accommodation services was completed within twelve months.

The following service responses established from the 2003-2004 ACT Budget Initiative and additional ACT Government funding have achieved a number of actions across the four themes of *Breaking the Cycle* and have been integral in injecting new ideas and approaches towards supporting people who are experiencing homelessness.

Single Men

Mens Accommodation and Support Service (MASS) - Canberra Men's Centre (CMC)

- The provision of accommodation and support for single men is identified in actions 3.2.4 and 3.2.8 of the Strategy.
- MASS provides crisis to medium term supported accommodation to 20 single men, who are housed within individual flats. Support is provided utilising an outreach model. This is the only non-refuge service for single men in the ACT.
- A key innovation of this service is that tenancy of the unit can be transferred to the client upon completion of a period of support, which is aimed at building community connections and the development of independent living skills.
- After twelve months of operation, the first tenancies are in the process of being transferred to men in the program.
- MASS will then be allocated replacement properties through the Community Organisation Rental Housing Assistance Program (CORHAP).

- The other key feature of this service is that five places are designated for men leaving the criminal justice system.
- This aspect of the program recognises that men exiting the criminal justice system into homelessness are at high risk of re-offending and works with clients to minimise the risk of recidivism. The additional support requirements of this target group has forged strong operational partnerships between CMC and the Department of Justice and Community Safety (JACS). Both parties are working effectively to support mutual clients, develop greater understanding of the links between homelessness and criminality and identify training requirements to enable more effective support to be provided.

The following case study provides an example of the ways in which this service works with clients to re-establish links with the community.

Case Study

Mr J., 47 entered the MASS program after spending a prolonged period in hospital after a motorcycle accident that left him with a physical disability as a result of a stroke and an acquired brain injury. At the time of referral Mr J's only support was his estranged brother.

MASS took on the role of case manager and the following was put in place: Mr J now lives independently with support from other services and the community. He has respite care twice daily, who assist with personal care, housework and meal preparation, Meals on wheels, Red Cross linen service and Red Cross Alarm.

Mr J. has also established close links with his local pharmacy and an Occupational Therapist from The Canberra Hospital.

Mr J. is busy with lots of friends, he attends a lunch group and CMC's men's groups. He also attends craft groups two days per week.

Mr J. has well established relationships and supports in the community and at present all necessary requirements to enable him to live as independently as possible in the community have been built around him and are of a long term nature.

Case Study provided by CMC MASS with the kind permission of their client Mr J specifically for the ACT Homelessness Strategy Report

Crisis Accommodation Ainslie Village

- Additional resources were provided to the management of Ainslie Village, Centacare, to increase supported accommodation from 30 places to 37 places.
- The additional seven places increased the ACT's accommodation for single men by 13%.
- The additional places provide an accommodation option allowing men to stay for a very short of period of time (up to three days) to enable respite from sleeping rough, or for longer periods to receive more intensive support.

Families

- The provision of supported accommodation for families is identified at actions 3.2.5 of the Strategy.
- The establishment of services in the West Belconnen, Gungahlin and Tuggeranong regions recognised the importance of building service responses to better allow people to remain in their community when they experience homelessness.
- Raja, auspiced by Inanna Inc provides crisis accommodation for 12 families in the West Belconnen and Gungahlin regions.
- Families Experiencing Accommodation Transition In Tuggeranong (FEATT), operated by the YWCA, provides crisis accommodation for six families throughout Tuggeranong.
- Canberra Fathers and Children Service (CANFaCS), provides medium term supported accommodation for six families headed by a single male. This is the ACT's first medium term service for this target group and established accommodation and support options for fathers and children exiting the CANFaCS crisis accommodation service.
- All services can house families within individual dwellings, recognising that the congregate living environment can place additional pressures on families and have a negative impact on children. Raja has instituted flexible arrangements as identified below.

Progress Report for Raja and Zara

Raja will operate two houses on a congregate living environment, if appropriate to the client mix.

This is in recognition that some homeless families draw strength and support by sharing housing when the house is appropriately organised.

One of these two houses (named Zara) will offer accommodation for families in need of immediate safety due to issues of violence. The length of stay at this house will be limited to four weeks.

Excerpt from Raja Progress Report

Provided by the Manager, Inanna, the auspicing agency

- With support provided utilising an outreach model, each service has the capacity to provide support beyond the six families accommodated in each service.
- Each service is funded to provide Children's Support Workers, in recognition of the particular impact homelessness places on children and of the need to work with the entire family unit to break long-term cycles of homelessness and poverty.

Outreach Services

- Outreach is a flexible form of support that is non reliant on location and able to support people in various stages of the homeless continuum.
- It is a particularly useful support for people who are at risk of homelessness and has proven benefits in supporting people to maintain their tenancy as they transition to independent living.
- The Mens Outreach Program is an innovative partnership in which CMC supports single men and CANFaCS provides support to single men with accompanying children.

- Anglicare's STREETS program provides outreach services to young people at risk of, experiencing or transitioning from homelessness. The service has a priority target of young people who are residing in Housing ACT properties, offering support to maintain tenancies.
- Aleta Women's Outreach Service, operated by Toora Women Inc. provides outreach services to women.
- Beryl Women's Refuge, Barnardos Transition Program and Parenting Outreach Program and Karinya House Home for Mothers and Babies all received non-recurrent funding in 2003-04 to enhance existing outreach services, as part of a series of immediate initiatives approved by the HAG.

Canberra Emergency Accommodation Service (CEAS)

- This partnership between Anglicare and Lifeline was piloted in 2002-03, with Lifeline providing a 24-hour crisis accommodation telephone counselling service and Anglicare administering an Emergency Accommodation Funds (EAF) to facilitate flexible responses to homelessness.
- CEAS has become an integral component of the ACT homelessness service system because of its ability to broker crisis accommodation in motels, caravans or back packer accommodation or provide other options to meet the immediate needs of people experiencing homelessness, such as financial support for people to maintain tenancies until such time as more affordable housing options are identified, or assistance to enter private rental accommodation.
- Lifeline's component was initially established to provide information to callers on the availability of crisis accommodation and to provide referrals to Anglicare's EAF.
- Lifeline now report that the telephone service plays a frontline role in providing counselling support to people struggling with the impacts and experiences of their homelessness. The counselling service also provides information and referral to a range of other community support services, such as emergency relief and free food providers and gambling and financial counselling.
- The 2003-04 ACT Budget initiative significantly enhanced Anglicare's aspect of CEAS, including funding to establish the ACT's first service response to couples. Previously couples experiencing homelessness would be faced with the choice of separating access to men's or women's services.
- CEAS also received funding to provide case management support to clients and for increased administration infrastructure in response to high level of demand for assistance.
- CEAS received recurrent funding through the 2004-05 ACT Budget.

Brokerage

- An annual proportion of the *Responding to Homelessness* Budget Initiative was allocated to brokerage, which is flexible funding that can be utilised to enable diverse responses to a range of client needs.
- After consultation with the SAAP sector in October 2003, it was agreed to distribute brokerage funding by providing each SAAP service with an equal allocation.
- Key priorities identified for the use of brokerage funding were to facilitate access to health and medical services, including counselling, assistance with the costs of accessing and maintaining rental accommodation, including associated household costs and the purchase of items or assistance to alleviate the impacts of homelessness.
- The next brokerage allocation will be undertaken in November 2005.

SAAP Resourcing and Development Service (SAAP RaDS)

- In response to an increasing level of SAAP clients presenting with complex support needs, the ACT Government funded a Mental Health Advisory position in 2002-03, auspiced by Toora Women Inc.
- The scope of this service was broadened through subsequent funding to assume a support and advisory role, working with SAAP providers to develop the capacity to respond to service users with diverse and complex needs. The Access, Resourcing and Support for SAAP Communities (ARSSC) Project was evaluated in March 2004, the findings of which informed the service specifications for a recurrently funded service.
- ACTOSS was successful in the open tender process to provide the SAAP Resourcing and Development Service (SAAP RaDS).
- SAAP RaDS provides resources and development assistance to SAAP agencies, with a view to enhancing better outcomes for service users, particularly for those with high and complex needs.
- The service acts as a clearinghouse for information and research and is the central point of coordination for training needs assessment and provision.
- SAAP RaDS has played a pivotal role in sector development and has taken carriage of specific actions in implementing *Breaking the Cycle*.
- The service has developed a range of mechanisms to encourage stronger communication between supported accommodation providers, including the introduction of an e-mail discussion group (SAAPnet), facilitation of sub-sector networks such as Yinnar Winangali: the Koori Women's Network, and the Homeless Mens Forum.
- One of the service's major contributions to the implementation of the Strategy has been to facilitate the development of protocols between the SAAP sector and Mental Health ACT. These protocols are completed to the point of being signed off and SAAP RaDs will work closely with the department to implement these protocols by March 2005.
- The community sector's willingness to grasp the key tenets of the Strategy has identified a number of service system reforms for consideration by the SAAP sector. SAAP forums have evolved throughout the reporting period, shifting their focus from the provision of information and networking to become an arena in which service and sector innovation is identified, discussed and adopted if there is consensus from the sector.
- As a service that does not provide support, SAAP RaDS has become a focal point for strategic innovation and ideas from the sector, in part because it is seen as being 'independent'. Proposals to establish a common referral form and coordinated waiting list have been identified as areas of potential reform. So too, protocols for exchanging client information consistent with Privacy Legislation but which reduces the need for clients to repeatedly tell their stories. These issues have been scheduled for discussion at upcoming SAAP forums and will inform the development of the Strategy's joint operational framework.
- In recognition of the integral role of SAAP RaDS in achieving the objectives of the Strategy, the service has been given *ex officio* membership of the AHC.
- ACTCOSS has invested considerable commitments of time and intellectual rigour in achieving the outcomes of the Strategy to date, being represented on the AHC and each of its sub-committees and working groups. Particular acknowledgement must be given to this degree of involvement.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services

A full discussion on the establishment of outreach and supported accommodation services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is at Section 4 of this report.

Sustainable Tenancies – Housing ACT

Housing ACT, as a significant provider of low income housing in the ACT, plays a unique roll in the continuum of services from homelessness through to the provision of safe, secure and affordable accommodation and housing people within communities. Considerable work has been initiated by Housing ACT to ensure its policies and procedures, from assessment and allocation through to housing management, support people to access and maintain appropriate tenancies and do not contribute to homelessness.

Housing ACT, continues to review all operational policies and procedures with the intent of providing further assistance and support to tenants experiencing difficulty in sustaining their public housing tenancies. This is a key contribution to the prevention of homelessness. Housing ACT has developed a role as a facilitator and referral agency, assisting tenants experiencing housing stress to sustain their tenancies by working with them to access resources to cease or change behaviours prior to their tenancy being placed at risk. In order to provide a facilitation/referral service that produces results, Housing ACT continues to develop partnerships with relevant government and community sector organisations.

Housing ACT is actively developing strategies to provide applicants for public housing with pre-allocation assistance. The intent of this service is to establish and maintain client support systems and networks that will assist clients to live more comfortably whilst waiting for a public housing property to be allocated. Housing ACT will use the resources of its Client Support Coordinators to identify and engage appropriate community resources. Case conferences for people who require support from multiple agencies, to occur immediately prior to allocation, are also being developed with the intent of identifying client needs to assist in allocating a dwelling that is best suited to meeting those needs and thus fostering a sustainable tenancy from commencement. Case conferences will also be used to fine tune the matching of client needs and service provision such that the client is in receipt of those services that will provide them with maximum support. This is a further targeting of assistance and resources to those most in need.

Housing ACT has used both its Debt Review Committee and Tenancy Review Committees as tools to determine causes for breaches of tenancy in 2004-2005. It is Housing ACT's current practice to identify and engage community resources to assist clients whose tenancies are in jeopardy to sustain their tenancies. Clients are referred to community agencies with resources pertinent to their needs and given every encouragement to use these resources to assist them in overcoming their difficulty.

On a more formal level, the Minister has implemented a number of changes to the Public Rental Housing Assistance Program (PRHAP) as part of a suite of initiatives to combat homelessness. These changes became effective on 11 December 2003 when a program amendment was tabled in the Legislative Assembly. The changes included:

- reducing the minimum rent from \$20 to \$5 per week;
- abolishing the requirement for people participating in residential rehabilitation programs to pay 25% of their income in rent for their public housing dwelling. Instead they will pay the minimum \$5 per week rent;
- removing the barrier that make people holding Temporary Protection Visas technically ineligible for public housing; and

- removing the requirement for tenants to pay two weeks rent in advance at the time of entering public housing.

The Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services also announced that:

- rental debt would no longer be a barrier to re-entry into public housing where it was caused by domestic violence; and
- the establishment of a Debt Review Committee pilot project to examine and trial the principles for responding to debt of public housing tenants.

Community Inclusion Fund

The Community Inclusion Fund was established in 2004-05 under *The Social Plan* to provide funding to community organisations to tackle the causes and impacts of social exclusion and disadvantage. Three projects were funded through the inaugural funding round which provide responses to homelessness.

The Canberra City Uniting Church was funded to establish a drop-in centre for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, which provides free breakfast and access to some services such as mail facilities and computer access. Karinya House received funding to provide an outreach support worker to Erin House, its medium term supported accommodation service for women and their children who are experiencing homelessness. The service also received funding to employ a part-time mid-wife to provide support to pregnant clients accessing the service.

The third project provided funding to Woden Community Service to employ a case worker to provide support to vendors of *The Big Issue*, a street magazine sold by people with an experience of homelessness, poverty and social exclusion. Each copy is \$4 and half of the sale price goes directly to the vendor.

4. HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS RESPONSES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

Of the four key themes, 15 strategic objectives and 82 actions of *Breaking the Cycle*, none have been more challenging to implement from the ACT Government's perspective, than those seeking to respond to the needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in the homeless population and more likely to experience poor health compounded by poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and disadvantage. For Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, homelessness is experienced in a physical, spiritual and cultural sense that can be seen as a legacy of colonisation.

The ACT's 2003-04 *Responding to Homelessness* Budget Initiative sought to establish two services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The first was a crisis accommodation service for six families and the second an outreach service to support people at risk of, experiencing or transitioning from homelessness.

A further action to establish hostel accommodation for up to 30 people was identified in the Strategy and received ACT Government capital funding of \$3.2 million in the 2003 - 2004 Third ACT Budget Appropriation.

Specifications for these services were developed in consultation with SAAP providers and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and were endorsed by both the Homelessness Advisory Group (HAG) and its Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Reference Group. Tender specifications identified the preferred option that these services be provided by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service provider, or at the very least have the demonstrated backing and support of this community.

No tenders were received for the supported accommodation service in the open tender process, finalised in June 2004, and no compliant tender was received for the outreach service.

It is not possible to identify a single reason for the lack of response from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service sector. Despite consultation on the service models and an industry briefing being held to provide information to potential tenderers, anecdotal feedback on the tender process suggests that a specific information session would have assisted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers to be aware of the funding round.

Other feedback indicates that the complex tender responses sought from the Request for Tender process may have been an additional demand on the small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service providers, already stretched to meet the demand for their existing services.

Following an Indigenous Housing Forum under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, Billabong Aboriginal Housing Corporation convened a crisis accommodation working group to progress the establishment of these services. This group comprised key members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and SAAP service providers and endorsed a proposal provided to the department for consideration in November 2004.

Clarification was required on aspects of the proposal developed by this group, and Jalinari Associates was engaged by the department in March 2005 to further consult with the community to progress establishment of these services.

This consultation identified that outreach funding be provided to enhance the capacity of Gugan Gulwan's Aboriginal Youth Service's Reconnect program, which supports homeless young people to reconnect with families if appropriate, and the Winnunga Nimmyjah Housing Liaison Service, which provides support for people to access and maintain appropriate housing. This funding will be allocated November 2005.

Discussions have commenced with Aboriginal Hostels Ltd to progress the establishment of the Boarding House. The Jalinari consultation identified the need for accommodation for students and people requiring temporary accommodation, such as those visiting the ACT whilst relatives are in hospital. The Canberra Hospital has confirmed the need for accommodation. It is anticipated final service modelling will be completed by December 2005.

The Indigenous Housing Forum will reconvene and provide further clarification of the model for the supported accommodation services, with a particular emphasis on the provision of support to families accessing the services. This group will meet during November 2005.

There are some key messages to be taken from the experience in seeking to establish these service responses. The first is the need for government to develop and maintain relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, based on mutual trust and understanding.

A further imperative is to identify and facilitate organisational development and training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing and homelessness service providers. In recognition of the need for the ACT Government to support the small number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in the ACT to ensure a viable Indigenous service sector, funding has been allocated from the ACT Government's Indigenous Housing Initiative of 2002-03, which allocated \$1.2 million over four years, for sector training

5. ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE: THE *YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ACTION PLAN*

Breaking the Cycle-The ACT Homelessness Strategy identified that 'the ACT has the highest proportion of young homeless people nationally' and warranted specific attention.

The Youth Homelessness Working Group is responsible for developing a response to young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A draft Youth Homelessness Action Plan (YHAP) has been developed, based on research commissioned by DHCS.

- *Telling it how it is: Listening to Young People about Youth Homelessness in the ACT and the Services that Support them (2004)*, prepared by the Youth Coalition of the ACT was informed by young people who were at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The project sought to apply best practice principles in youth consultation by engaging and training young people as 'pathfinders' and interviewers. Young people who participated in the research were supported by the Youth Coalition project team. A draft YHAP has since been presented to the young people who participated in the original research and has been received positively.
- The *ACT Review of Youth SAAP (2004)* was conducted by David Mackenzie of the Institute of Social Research, Swinburne University Melbourne. Mr Mackenzie's research identified a number of strengths in the youth SAAP sector.

Both reports confirmed the need to develop a specific response to young people who experience or are at risk of homelessness. The research acknowledged that a range of programs and services were achieving good practice with a number of young people.

In 2005, the department, in partnership with other government agencies and youth service providers, including the Youth Coalition of the ACT, developed a practical document with targeted and achievable outcomes. The research findings and consequent development of the YHAP provided a timely opportunity for government agencies and community service providers to work together to address challenges identified by the reports. Objectives of the ACT Homelessness Strategy are included in the YHAP.

The YHAP includes actions that *support integrated service responses and delivery mechanisms* including

- establishing new protocols between the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support and youth SAAP services that identify roles, responsibilities and the capacities of all parties; and
- conduct joint training to support the implementation of the protocols.

Early intervention and prevention strategies include:

- the development of flexible brokerage and support services to assist in sustaining informal accommodation arrangements (staying with friends or relatives) while maintaining social networks and access to education;
- improving access to information on accommodation including information about rights and responsibilities; and
- conducting awareness raising activities with Child and Family Centres to encourage an early intervention and prevention approach to young parents who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Other actions include:

- continuing service and sector development by developing best practice guidelines for informed consent, consultation with young people and gaining client feedback;
- establishing protocols and a related training and development package to improve responses to young people experiencing mental health issues; and
- identify strategies that improve access for young people to community housing.

Timelines for implementation of the draft Youth Homelessness Action Plan are currently being negotiated. Protocol development between Youth SAAP services and the Office of Children Youth and Family Support has commenced.

6. Revision of Timelines

The majority of the actions in the Strategy seek to implement and achieve reform to the service system, based on the development of agreed approaches and consistency in service provision. Achieving this whole of community response to homelessness requires more than the articulation of a shared vision. In practice, there are considerable challenges in maintaining a diverse range of service providers, each with their philosophies and models for supporting their clients and the development of operational uniformity across the sector, and indeed the entire service system.

Service diversity is a distinct and defining feature of the community sector, primarily because the community is not homogenous and requires different service responses. The philosophy and model of one service may be entirely appropriate for one person who engages with that service and achieves real outcomes, but not work for another.

The AHC has been adamant that the implementation of the Strategy focus on achieving real change to the service system. To do so takes time to develop relationships of trust. Consequently, the AHC agreed to revise the timelines associated with actions in the Strategy, to provide a more realistic period in which to achieve sustainable outcomes.

The Committee has spent considerable time looking at the completion dates for each objective to try and ensure that these are achievable and realistic. The Committee appears very focussed with both government and community representatives working well together to achieve the best outcome.

- Malcolm Parker Council on the Aged

The revised implementation timelines for the Strategy are included at **Attachment B**.

7. Thematic Implementation of the Strategy

This section of the progress report examines some key achievements of the implementation of the Strategy against its four themes and 15 objectives. Areas discussed in the preceding sections are noted. Each theme is introduced with the summary originally appearing in *Breaking the Cycle: The ACT Homelessness Strategy*.

Attachment A provides an update on each of the Strategy's actions and incorporates input from ACT government agencies and community service providers.

Theme One: Integrated and effective service responses

Theme 1 aims to ensure that there is an agreed integrated approach to homelessness between government and the community sector in terms of policy, funding and operational requirements. The framework will ensure that there is agreement and clarity around the goals and outcomes to be achieved from the service system, while providing a clear mandate for action. An integrated, whole of government approach will enable more innovative and comprehensive policy approaches to be developed. To support this framework, there will be a greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention to better mitigate against those factors that place people at risk of homelessness.

Objective 1.1: Establish mechanisms to support integrated service responses and delivery

Development of Joint Operational Framework

The development of a joint operational framework seeks to create consistency across a range of diverse individual services and sectors to ensure that people who experience homelessness are able to more effectively access and receive high standards of support.

Components of the joint operational framework are being progressed at the regular SAAP and Youth SAAP Forums, which are now co-convened by DHCS and the SAAP sector. The introduction of a common referral form is being considered for adoption by SAAP services. Implementation of initiatives such as this requires a significant amount of discussion and consideration by all parties to talk through the practical and ethical implications of their introduction. For example, development of a common referral form needs to ensure that the form upholds the principles of privacy and confidentiality for clients, meets the needs of services and promotes appropriate information sharing and coordination between agencies.

The emphasis on the development of a joint operational framework, as with the broad reform agenda outlined in *Breaking the Cycle*, requires change across all organisations that provide services and support to people experiencing homelessness. This must include services provided by the community sector as well as those provided by government.

Housing ACT has commenced a six month Applicant Support Project to identify and implement strategies to better support people on the waiting list, recognising the demand for public housing currently exceeds supply and that people who are assessed as in the greatest need for housing may experience a considerable wait for allocation. In a collaborative approach to respond to the impacts of homelessness and enhance opportunities for sustainable tenancies the project team and its advisors is comprised of officers from across Housing and Community Services as well as community sector representatives from SAAP RaDS and Northside Community Service's Community Linkages program.

The project is taking a strengths based approach to consulting with staff from the Applicant Services Centre and the community sector to identify current practical support processes and relationships, with a view to enhancing these and where possible establish new supportive processes and enhancing relationships with the community sector. In addition, the project will consider IT, training and policy requirements to support ways of working with applicants to better meet their needs.

The Applicant Support Project recognises that Housing ACT forms an integral part of the service system and will develop more effective and consistent referral mechanisms to community service providers for Housing applicants and tenants. The project will also deliver recommendations on training and development opportunities for Housing ACT staff to increase skills in the provision of support services and understanding of the community sector.

The need for operational consistency also extends beyond service delivery and must encompass change to ACT government funding agreement management. Ensuring that data collections and reporting requirements are not onerous and reflect the level of funding provided and the nature of services provided is an ongoing process for the ACT Government Funding Agreement Manager's Network. So too is the development of consistent performance requirements for ACT Government-funded services. The Joint Community Sector Government Reference Group is also a key forum at which the development of a joint operational framework will be progressed.

Mechanisms to support integrated service responses and delivery

The concept of an integrated service system is deceptively simple, requiring a broad range of specialist health and social support agencies to work more effectively together to achieve better outcomes for clients. Yet even in a small jurisdiction such as the ACT, achieving integration between individual services and across sectors remains a challenging prospect.

The development of an integrated service system is effectively an acknowledgement of the experiences of those people who access or require support to enable them to participate in the community. For many, seeking support occurs at a time when they are vulnerable or in crisis and people may have already faced and overcome some considerable barriers to even access services.

It is important that services do not inadvertently create additional barriers or obstacles that may make accessing support services more difficult, or reduce the chance of clients achieving sustainable outcomes. This becomes more important the more services that a person accesses.

However, the expectation for service integration must be adequately resourced. Reliance on the formal and informal networks of community service providers, which provide effective collaboration at an agency level, does not deliver widespread cross-sector service integration and can be based on personal relationships as opposed to delivering client focussed service responses.

The recurrent funding of the SAAP Resourcing and Development Service (SAAP RaDS) in 2004-05 has provided a service which has as one of its major roles, the development of mechanisms to improve service coordination. SAAP RaDS has facilitated a range of mechanisms to encourage stronger communication between supported accommodation providers, including the introduction of an e-mail discussion group (SAAPnet), facilitation of sub-sector networks such as Yinnar Winangali: the Koori Women's Network, and the Homeless Mens Forum. Strengthening the relationships between SAAP services has encouraged sector led initiatives designed to improve client outcomes, such as the on-going work on common referral forms.

Training and workforce development

A central component of a joint operational framework, training and workforce development is discussed in detail in Theme Four Objective 4.3.

Objective 1.2: Increase focus on prevention and early intervention in order to reduce the incidence of homelessness

Breaking the Cycle-the ACT Homelessness Strategy highlights the importance of placing homelessness services in a continuum of housing assistance. The ACT Homelessness Strategy challenges the government and community services to find points of intervention at each stage of the housing assistance continuum.

Outreach Services

Outreach services funded through the *2003-04 ACT Budget Initiative: Response to Homelessness* (see Section 3, Responding to Homelessness, the ACT's Contribution.) are a particularly useful support for people who are at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancy as they transition to independent living. Homelessness outreach services are part of an early intervention and prevention of homelessness approach supported by the Preventing Eviction Program discussed below.

Community Linkages Program

The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services commissioned RPR Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the Community Linkages Program in 2004. The evaluation found that the CLP has been successful in developing an enhanced sense of community and safety in the areas where it has been operating.

The report recommended the program could be improved by a stronger focus on capacity building, improved linkages with the broader community and building sustainability into the program while retaining a flexible approach, in order to enhance the program's capacity to support tenants in maintaining and developing sustainable tenancies.

The CLP evaluation recommended the program maintain three core activities:

- Community Development
- Support to assist public and community housing tenants maintain their tenancies; and
- Tenant Initiated Activities

Two open tender processes were undertaken to allocate funds for community development and support services to assist public and community housing tenants in the management of their tenancies. Six new services commenced in April 2004. In 2004-05 twenty tenant initiated projects were funded under the program ranging from a 'Social Group for Men' to establishment of a 'Kids' Garden'. Funding for tenant-initiated activities has been increased under the program and will continue to be funded through annual grants-based funding rounds.

Housing ACT - Sustaining Tenancies

A discussion of sustaining Housing ACT tenancies, particularly the Applicant Support Project, Tenancy Review Committee and Debt Review Committee is included in Section 3.

Head Leasing

Head leasing arrangements have been introduced for a number of clients whose tenancy with Housing ACT was at significant risk. Under this arrangement specialist community services have been contracted to provide tailored support packages and tenancy management to clients with high and complex support needs. Early reporting from support services indicates that clients have shown a strong commitment to addressing the risk factor associated related to their tenancies. The program has provided crucial early intervention for five families at risk of homelessness to the end of 2004-05, demonstrating the efficacy of increased coordination between Housing ACT and supported accommodation services.

Theme 2: Client focus and client outcomes

Theme 2 aims to ensure the rights of people who are homeless are recognised and respected and that mechanisms are established to ensure these rights are realised. Theme 2 also aims to ensure that client centred approaches and comprehensive assessment processed identifiable to client need are integral to service provision. Specific responses to enhance the capacity of the current service system are identified for groups requiring specific attention.

Objective 2.1: Develop mechanisms to ensure the rights of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are recognised

One of the major themes of *Breaking the Cycle* is the recognition of the rights of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Charter of Rights Working Group has commenced work on the development of a draft Charter of Rights for homeless people and an associated Code of Conduct for homelessness service providers. These documents will include reference to the fundamental principles that people who are homeless have the right to be treated with respect and dignity and to live in safety and continue the ACT's proud record and strength in human rights. This work is scheduled for completion by December 2005, following a consultation process with services and service users.

Associated with the Charter of Rights, a study into the feasibility and appropriateness of introducing an Official Visitor's Scheme for people experiencing homelessness in the ACT has commenced. The study will review existing official visitors schemes and consult with service providers and service users about the application of such a scheme in the ACT. The study will be completed in December 2005.

The importance of including people who have experienced homelessness in the implementation of the Strategy, development of policy and planning of services is a vital step towards recognition of their rights. However, it is also vital this process takes place with sensitivity, respect and consideration to some of the methodological issues faced when wishing to engage with this target group. The Community Awareness Working Group is progressing a model for engaging with people who have experienced homelessness, with the view to undertaking consultation on the Charter of Rights. Key to this model, will be ensuring there are appropriate consultation strategies supported by feedback mechanisms which clearly demonstrate outcomes and actions resulting from the consultation.

Objective 2.2: Enhance client centred needs assessment, planning and decision-making to support quality outcomes.

SAAP and other homelessness services have addressed the need for an integrated approach to assessment, referral, information exchange and case management with a number of activities undertaken to progress these issues:

- Protocol development with the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services and Mental Health ACT (see Objective 2.4);
- Continuing work on a common referral and consent to release information form for use by SAAP services; and
- Development, training and good practice guide development with Youth SAAP services and the Turnaround Program (OCYFS). This program focuses on a strengths based client-centred case management approach.

Through Youth SAAP and SAAP Forums, homelessness services continue to explore practice issues as a sector, with a focus on the development of innovative services and service responses. This work is informed by current research, the work of the ACT Homelessness Committee and Working Groups and the extensive experience of homelessness service providers in working with people experiencing homelessness. This work will inform the development of a Joint Operational Framework (Objective 1.1.1)

National SAAP Case Management Principles

Under SAAP V, the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services will commission a consultant to revise the National SAAP Case Management Principles and Resource Kit in 2005-2006. The ACT will be represented on the steering group by a senior officer from DHCS Social Housing and Homelessness Services, ensuring that the revision includes some of the innovative developments in case management in the ACT led by the work of *Breaking the Cycle*. The revised Case Management Principles represent a further opportunity for SAAP sector development, particularly in the areas of client focussed service delivery, and incorporating the principles developed in the Service Providers Code of Conduct associated with the Charter of Rights for Homeless People

Objective 2.3 Design, deliver and maintain services to effectively respond to the specific needs of people to break the cycle of homelessness

Drop-in Centres for People Experiencing Homelessness

Evaluation of SAAP funded free food providers was undertaken as part of the Review of the ACT Government Provision of Financial and Material Aid and Food Relief (The Nucleus Group 2004), discussed in more detail below.

The ACT Government allocated \$100 000 in the 2005-2006 Budget to undertake a feasibility study into a homelessness drop-in centre either at a centralised venue or dispersed across a variety of locations for people experiencing homelessness in Canberra. The feasibility study will examine the appropriateness of developing a centre or centres with co-located services, acting as a central point of information and referral.

Emergency Relief Grants Round 2005

In the 2004-05 Budget, DHCS Community Services received a significant increase to its allocation for financial and material aid. An additional recurrent budget allocation of \$618,000 over four years (\$150,000 plus indexation per annum) was provided to enhance emergency relief provision. A review of CSP and the SAAP funded financial and material aid services commenced in May 2004.

A grants program to provide increased capacity for emergency relief, financial and material aid services was announced in September 2005. These grants will target areas of unmet need within the current service system and will allocate \$303,750 of the initiative.

Additional work is required to finalise longer-term recommendations from the evaluation of financial and material aid services. These include a number of sector reform initiatives, such as training programs for volunteers, enhanced service coordination and sector development strategies which will enhance sustainable outcomes for people who are experiencing financial difficulties. This work will be undertaken in collaboration with stakeholders throughout 2005-06 and inform the strategic directions for recurrent funding of the remainder of the Financial and Material Aid Program.

Early Intervention Initiatives

These are discussed extensively in Theme 1, Objective 1.2

Objective 2.4: Develop strategies to address the needs of individuals within the identified group for specific attention

Supported accommodation options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Issues related to the implementation of this objective are discussed in Section 4: Housing and Homelessness Responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Protocol development

In order to improve coordination between services working with people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, SAAP services, Mental Health ACT and the Office of Children, Youth and Family Services (OCYFS) commenced negotiation of two protocols:

- **SAAP/ ACT Mental Health Protocol**, developed to strengthen the case coordination and referral mechanisms between SAAP services and ACT Mental Health. This protocol is nearing completion, with a final draft negotiated between the stakeholders.
- **Youth SAAP/ OCYFS Protocol**, work has recently commenced on revising and updated guidelines for working with young people who are residing or supported by a SAAP service and clients of OCYFS.

The development work has been led by ACTCOSS SAAP RaDS.

Development of Services

Services such as outreach services for single women, and family services are noted in Section 3: Responding to Homelessness: The ACT's Contribution.

Theme 3: Access to appropriate housing and housing assistance

Theme 3 aims to ensure there is an appropriate range of medium and longer-term support options for people who are homeless. Complementing this are specific strategies to respond to the needs of groups requiring specific attention, as well as strategies to better support people to find and maintain appropriate accommodation.

Objective 3.1: Increase the supply of appropriate, safe and adaptive housing for people at risk of homelessness and people who are homeless

Long term supported accommodation for people transitioning from homelessness

Lowana Young Women's Service is contracted by DHCS to provide both the tenancy management and outreach service to Lowana Youth Boarding House. The boarding house has six rooms accommodating young people (from 15 to 24 years of age) exiting from SAAP services.

Lowana Youth Boarding House's Review was completed by Nucleus Group in April 2004. The review assessed the model as an appropriate option for young people susceptible to homelessness. Following the review, additional funding was provided in 2004/5 from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) for providing outreach.

An eight-room Older Women's Boarding House (Betty Searle House) was opened in March 2004. This service provides accommodation to older women, including those escaping domestic violence and those exiting SAAP services. Following the first twelve months of operation of this service, it will be reviewed in consultation with the service providers, Havelock Housing Association and Toora Women Inc., in 2005/6.

Construction of the Gungahlin Singles Accommodation, a 20-unit development for single adults, will be completed in December 2005 and accommodation services are expected to open shortly after. The building incorporates 2 adaptable and accessible units at the ground floor. It has been developed as long-term, affordable accommodation for single adults with low support needs. Four of the 20 units will be designated to accommodate people with mental health issues. It is expected that this accommodation will be a valuable exit point for single people leaving SAAP accommodation.

Increase in the supply of affordable housing

Capital funding of \$3 million was provided in 2003-04 to expand the supply of community housing in the ACT. Funding was provided to the following organisations:

- Centacare for five properties for a linked housing network for people with disabilities;
- Billabong Aboriginal Corporation to provide housing for Indigenous families in the ACT;
- Havelock Housing Association in partnership with the AIDS Action Council to provide accommodation for people living with HIV/AIDS; and
- Havelock Housing Association in partnership with Anglicare to house families needing support for a transitional period following an episode of homelessness.

These projects provided an additional 12 properties for the social housing sector.

In addition, the ACT Government has provided capital funding to Community Housing Canberra (CHC) for the following redevelopment projects:

- Big House in Inner North (\$415,155)
- Group House in Inner North-(\$356,208)
- Abbeyfield Disability project in Inner South- funded (\$1,471,308)

The Big House and Group House projects will replace older dwellings currently leased by CHC under the stock transfer program with dwellings that provide a more flexible share housing option for single households. Construction work on the Group House project commenced in 2004/5. Work on the Big House project is subject to planning approval by the ACT Planning and Land Authority, and is expected to commence in 2005/6.

CHC is project managing the third construction project, on behalf of Abbeyfield Disability. Under this project, CHC will construct a single storey dwelling comprising ten residential units, a guest room and accommodation for a house coordinator. When completed, the dwelling will be managed as community housing by Abbeyfield Disability. Construction is expected to commence in mid 2005/6.

Objective 3.2: Develop accommodation options to address the needs of individuals within the identified groups

An extensive discussion of key achievements under the 2003-2004 ACT Budget Initiative: Response to Homelessness is at Section 3: Responding to Homelessness: The ACT's Contribution.

Objective 3.3: Assist people to achieve or maintain their tenure

ACT Residential Tenancy Act (1997) amendments give rights to SAAP service users

The ACT Residential Tenancies Act (1997) was recently amended with changes becoming effective on 8 March 2005. The amendments gave rights to people who had previously not been covered by the Act, such as people living in crisis accommodation, under occupancy agreements. Following the passage of the amendments in the Legislative Assembly, SAAP RaDS conducted information sessions and training on the changes to the Act, as well as assisting services to develop draft occupancy and tenancy agreements. The majority of SAAP services attended these sessions and continue to receive ongoing offers of individual support and training.

Key achievements and on-going work related to this objective are found at:

- Section 3: Responding to Homelessness: The ACT's Contribution
- Theme One: Objective 1.2

Community Linkages

The work of the Prevention of Eviction Program and its successor the Sustaining Tenancies Program has assisted public housing tenants to sustain their tenancies, and is outlined in full in Section 3.

Theme 4: Supporting and driving innovation and excellence

Theme 4 aims to ensure that the service and support system is able to provide quality services, supported by evidence based decision making, and responding to the changing needs of people who are at risk of homelessness and those that are homeless. In addition, this Theme aims to ensure that the sector's workforce is able to respond to changing needs and requirements. Complementing this is an active awareness program targeted at increasing the community's understanding of the impact of homelessness on people and the wider community.

Objective 4.1: Undertake program evaluation and improvement to ensure service quality and effectiveness

As part of the implementation of the ACT Government's Community Sector Funding Policy, funding was provided to ACTCOSS to provide service funding agreement training to community organisations signing up to the three-year service funding agreement. (ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs). This work is on going, and forms part of the sub-sector funding planning undertaken by DHCS annually.

Continuous improvement in homelessness services is also supported by SAAP Fora, sub-sector networks, SAAP RaDS and quality improvement tools and training such as "Raising the standard". ACTCOSS SAAP RaDS activities are reported in more detail in under Section 3: Responding to Homelessness: The ACT's Contribution.

DHCS provides secretariat support to the Service Funding Agreement Managers Network. The network's aim is to minimise unnecessary demands on service providers while providing a forum for recognising and supporting innovation and excellence across service systems. The network is working to standardise funding agreements across ACT Government departments while ensuring that the agreements maintain flexibility and responsiveness to identified client needs and meet Australian Government reporting requirements. Social Housing and Homelessness Services funding agreement managers participate in this network.

Objective 4.2: Undertake research to enhance evidence based decision making and service development

The following research proposal was developed by the ACT SAAP women's services meeting and will form a critical step in giving effect to a joint operational framework. It is reproduced in full in recognition of the initiative the SAAP sector have taken in achieving the objectives of *Breaking the Cycle*.

The complexities of referrals including "ricocheting" referrals 'or "boomerang" referrals

Background

There is an emerging trend developing in the ACT, with increasing numbers of callers being bounced around the service system in their search for accommodation.

We are interested in exploring the effect this has on clients and equally importantly, the effect this has on workers who are constantly faced with having to deny services to people in need. There is a psychological impact on both the potential client whose needs are unmet and on the workers who are unable to meet the need.

It would be useful to explore how wide this trend extends across the ACT and region and secondly to explore possible systems or whole of sector responses to this issue.

Each of the new DHCS funded services has an information and referral component, which is great - but one consequence of this has been that there are more workers providing referral information and services have been getting inundated with requests for accommodation over the last few months.

This emerging situation is exacerbated by the lack of public housing stock to meet the growing need for housing, (thereby also slowing down the flow of families through SAAP and DHCS funded accommodation).

There appears to be an increase in the actual numbers of calls to services which is increasing distress and confusion of callers who are making multiple phone calls to either apply for housing or to update their applications. This is also increasing stress for workers.

Issues for consideration

A research project could ask the following questions

- Are services experiencing similar issues and if so, what can we do to stop homeless people from being bounced around the service system?
- While there are many issues with a common waiting list - is this something we could try, given the smaller size of the homelessness sector here than in other states? Is this something that has been tried before in the ACT?
- Is it viable to develop a partial common intake - ie a short written intake form which can be shared between services with a second stage to the intake process involving direct contact between the applicant and the service workers?
- Is there some way we could use 'protocols' for information sharing between services?

- Would it be better to think about a common information and referral call centre, a place which will keep up to date information about which services are open for intake and which are not, and which ensures correct information is passed on and which perhaps assists callers to organise themselves in the way in which they apply to the various services?
- What is the level of impact on workers? Is there a negative psychological effect on the resilience of workers?

Some specific examples of this issue are:

1. Callers becoming distressed because they can't remember where they have put their names down, what each service offers and which services have said they would call them back and which services they (the applicant) are supposed to call back to.
Another caller was distressed that she had spent \$130 on mobile phone calls to different housing services and was still being told there was nothing available for her family.
2. Other callers are distressed because they have been (incorrectly) told some services can offer refuge or emergency accommodation when they are in fact medium or long-term services

Reproduced with the kind permission of the ACT SAAP women's service group for the ACT Homelessness Strategy Report

Objective 4.3: Develop and implement a workforce planning strategy, to maintain a high level of skill and capability in the sector

The development of skills and capacity within the sector workforce has been supported by the provision of training in Community Service Management (Diploma level). Opportunities for joint training with both care and protection services and mental health services have been identified and will be run in conjunction with the roll out of related protocols. Training was provided on the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 following its amendment to include boarding houses, caravan parks and SAAP services. Training has also been provided on culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people by ACTCOSS SAAP RaDS

Government agencies and the community sector showed a strong commitment to developing and providing training and workforce development opportunities across a range of topics. A number of training topics were undertaken in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005:

- ACTCOSS governance training to small community sector organisations and service funding agreement training to community organisations signing up to the three year service funding agreement, funded by the ACT Office of Multicultural Affairs and Community Development Branch, as part of the implementation of the ACT Government's Community Sector Funding Policy funding.
- ACTCOSS facilitating sessions on "Raising the Standard", a quality improvement manual designed to assist community services to evaluate and develop their policy and operation procedures.
- Seven SAAP sector managers attained qualification in Community Service Management (Diploma level).
- DHCS facilitated four days of data collection training for supported accommodation services, who participate in the National SAAP Data Collection. In addition, the ACT hosted a live testing of the new statistical linkages key and training package on behalf of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) National Data Collection Agency (NDCA). Feedback from this testing resulted in amendments to the training program which was then rolled out across Australia to other SAAP services prior to its introduction on 1 July 2005.

8. CONCLUSION

Overall, the progress of the implementation of *Breaking the Cycle: The ACT Homelessness Strategy* has been steadily building over the 12 months covered in this report. While some actions have not been achieved within the initial timeframes, significant work has been undertaken to ensure that the planned activity of the Strategy has been realistic and sustainable and that its progress continues to reflect the partnership of government and community that informed its development.

The establishment of new services funded by the *Response to Homelessness 2003-04 ACT Budget Initiative* is the marker of a concerted effort by service providers and government in developing new responses to homelessness. The nine new services funded in June 2004 have already established themselves in the ACT community sector. Their contribution has been not only in providing support and accommodation to people experiencing homelessness, but in contributing to the knowledge and skill base of the sector.

The development of the joint operational framework has been assisted by initiatives generated by the SAAP sector. The work of this sector as a whole continues to challenge existing notions of service delivery to people experiencing homelessness, supported by the sector's commitment to engage in regular policy and practice discussion such as that which occurs in SAAP and Youth SAAP Forums. These forums, attended by service providers, government and peak bodies have evolved over the life of the Strategy to be sector facilitated and more closely connected with the implementation of the Strategy. The evolution of homelessness services from a series of discrete services to a coordinated sector is an achievement that will contribute to the vision of the Strategy well beyond its completion in 2007.

The recognition of *Breaking the Cycle* as a way of working extends beyond the SAAP sector. Community Linkages Program providers have embraced the need for service collaboration and developed reporting mechanisms and operational processes which align with the directives of the Strategy. This is recognition of their role in helping to achieve the Strategy's aims of reducing homelessness.

Measuring social change resulting from the Strategy will be a key task of the mid-term evaluation and beyond. The measurement of change needs to include the assessment of the people most impacted by the work of the Strategy— people at risk of, experiencing or transitioning from homelessness. The opportunity to include a poverty proofing exercise as part of the evaluation will enhance the quality of the outcome, and ensure that our service system has not inadvertently contributed to the causes of and levels of poverty. The ability for Government policy to be effectively informed by people experiencing homelessness will be developed through the Community Awareness Working Group and reported on in the second progress report. Of course, the measurement of social change of one strategy must take into account other factors that impact on homelessness, such as housing affordability, poverty and income support, employment and access to health services. It is critical that the Strategy continues to engage with all areas of government and community in order to ensure the achievements of the Strategy are supported by positive change in other areas.

Preliminary data from the SAAP National Data Collection 2004-05 indicates that, while the ACT's new services have reached capacity, demand still outstrips supply. In 2004-05 SAAP services across the ACT supported less individuals than in 2003-04, reflecting the increasing complexity of need as well as the impact of a limited supply of independent accommodation, reducing exit points for people in SAAP services.

Work undertaken by Housing ACT in 2004-05 to sustain tenancies has reduced the number of evictions, a contributing factor to homelessness. This work is critical to the goal of reducing the number of people becoming homeless, but has also reduced the number of properties available to people on the Housing Act waiting list, and the ability to move people through supported accommodation to independent housing. This example serves as an indicator that the real social change of the Strategy will need to be measured over a number of years to give an accurate analysis of the impact of policy and service changes on homelessness in the ACT.

The first progress report of *Breaking the Cycle: The ACT Homelessness Strategy* highlights the achievements and the challenges of the first year of implementation. While there has been good progress towards achieving the vision of the Strategy, there is still much ground to be covered.