

Narelle Clay, AM

Narelle Clay is the Chief Executive Officer of Southern Youth and Family Services which provides services in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven areas of NSW. Narelle has been active in the community sector and particularly in the area of homelessness for twenty three years and is well known in her field and more broadly for her activism and commitment to seek social justice, and her endless energy to challenge but also work with Government to make changes. Narelle's Member to the Order of Australia Award (AM) is for "Distinguished service to the community through social justice advocacy and the provision of accommodation, housing and support for homeless people especially young people." She has been a teacher for twenty two years with TAFE and a trainer in various courses related to human services including advocacy, community management, policy development and industrial relations. She is the President of the Australian Services Union (ASU) NSW and Act Branches and Vice President of the Australian Services Union NSW, Community Services Branch. Narelle was the first Independent Chairperson of the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations (AFHO now Homelessness Ausyralia), previous Chairperson National Youth Coalition of Housing (NYCH), Previous Member of the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness (CACH) and on Housing (MACHA), Previous Member of the NSW Ministerial Advisory Council on Homelessness, Member of the previous National JPET Advisory Group, a Member of the Association of Child Welfare Board, an active member of the Youth Accommodation Association NSW.

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Its Time, Its Over Due and It Can Be Fixed

Summary

100,000 people, 36,000 aged 12 to 24 years, 22,000 of those are teenagers, an additional 10,000 children homeless on any night. These figures leave no doubt as to the serious extent of homelessness in this country. Narelle describes the situation twenty years ago from a service provider's perspective and the missed opportunities to tackle the problem. She describes her recent experience as a Commissioner on the Independent Inquiry into Youth Homelessness. This presentation touches on the big ticket items, the People, the Programs, the Models, the Services and the Community Sector Work Force. It looks at the current problems, the barriers to reform, and the risks. It identifies what is needed to really address the problem and some principles. It provides an optimistic view that it is the right time, that addressing homeless is long overdue, and that homelessness can be reduced and eliminated.

It is time to fix homelessness. It is long overdue. Seventeen years of economic growth yet the number of homeless people has risen. I was asked to address what should be considered if we are to make the most of the opportunity offered by the Federal Government. I will address what's different, what's possible, and what's needed. Many of us have worked in this area for decades. Even when it's been really tough – we have kept the ideal alive – social justice and the elimination of homelessness. The task ahead is huge and it won't happen overnight.

But it must happen. People who experience homelessness are depending on us. You have heard some figures today. 100,000 homeless people; 36,000 aged 12 to 24 years; 22,000 of those are teenagers; an additional 10,000 children homeless on any night. The recent report, Australia's Homeless Youth, revealed yet again the continuing disgrace of youth homelessness. Every time you hear those figures, or see media coverage, or open the door of a service to provide shelter you can not help but be moved. There are too many homeless people, too many living in sub standard housing because of poverty, too many as the result of child abuse and domestic violence, too many incarcerated and too many without opportunities most of us take for granted. **It is hard to imagine a group more socially excluded than homeless people.**

The problem has not been a lack of concern but this concern has often translated into a new program, or a reform, or a data collection or an Inquiry. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was a National response to the inadequate and ad hoc arrangements in the States and Territories. SAAP was developed with the community sector, still has, a legislated social justice framework and has been the key homelessness response in Australia since 1985. It remains an effective program, and in fact desired in many countries. However, for too long, it was expected to do more than it was resourced or intended to do, and it could not meet the relentless demand. I have heard it said, that SAAP failed to reduce homelessness. It did not fail. Past Governments failed. SAAP could never reduce homelessness without the elimination of the causes or drivers.

There have been improvements including the expansion of medium term supported accommodation, the enhancement of case management, increased professionalism, and a move away from institutionalisation. SAAP services showed great commitment and innovation by stretching their capacity with additional housing so people exiting had access to an affordable option for transition. But overall, these were all small changes.

Despite the improvements, there have been missed opportunities to actually make a difference. The big decisions around policy, priority and resource allocation were not made. For too long we've been forced to accept tinkering around the edges of programs, as an alternative to real action to eliminate homelessness. The spin's been endless – unmet demand was explained away as double counting, we were told it's not about bricks and mortar, they said co-ordination and case management were lacking, and individuals were blamed for their homelessness. Of course we knew that - there was and is high unmet demand, that it is very much about bricks and mortar and that case managing individuals **could never** prevent homelessness in the absence of action on the causes.

Last year, as part of the Inquiry into Youth Homelessness independently funded by the Caladonia Foundation, Commissioners David McKenzie, David Eldridge and Father Wally Dethlefs, and I heard evidence at the Public Hearings that was both inspiring and discouraging. There were strong messages from the young people themselves of entering a supportive and positive placement, many in SAAP, of feeling safe and gaining help, of the important relationships they made with workers. Many of you would have recently seen the documentary featuring the Oasis Service. Despite the most dire situations that those young people found themselves in, you could not help but to be touched by the young people's hopes for their future.

From the Inquiry's findings, we know that services are doing a really positive job in a very difficult area. That being said, there were too many stories of young people who because of child abuse, domestic violence and other untenable situations had left home with the assistance of the State/Territory child protection departments only to find themselves homeless, poor and vulnerable because of a lack of appropriate placement or supported accommodation. Young people told us of their confusion, their lack of appropriate treatment in the mental health system including those who said they wanted to kill themselves, yet were discouraged from entering hospital. Maybe hospital was not the right place for them, but there were no other available alternatives. And we heard time and time again, that young people wanted to get a bed in a homelessness service but they were full.

I have re-read some of the submissions made to the Burdekin Inquiry. The situation back then was not markedly different than it is now, certainly in terms of the causes and the action recommended. I could have today read them out with updated the data. From a speech in 1986 by Di Otto, an Associate Professor at Melbourne University, who previously worked in the DV sector, “There is no question that a person’s class, race and gender are major factors in their increased risk of homelessness.” From the agency I worked in, “The numbers of homeless people is increasing and will continue to increase. There is no other way to turn this problem around than a attack on the structural causes - the elimination of poverty, full employment, increased housing and freedom from child abuse and domestic violence.” And from NYCH, “Failure to act now will inevitably have a huge cost both in human and dollar terms in the future”. The sentiments expressed twenty years ago sadly remain true today.

I want to now focus on what’s different, what’s possible and what’s needed.

So whats different? We all know there has been a change. **You can feel it.** The feeling of promise. **You can hear it in** Tanya’s speech. The Government talking social inclusion. **You can speak it.** The removal of the gag clauses from contracts with community agencies to allow and encourage advocacy was welcomed. **You can see it.** Pictures of sound leadership such as the Prime Minister giving the significant and long awaited for Apology to Indigenous People, and Julia Gillard at the ACOSS Conference, the first woman Deputy Prime Minister and first Minister for Social Inclusion. And the Prime Minister’s presence here today. **So change is here.**

Many ask, do we really have a chance to fix homelessness this time?. I think yes. Will we be successful? I would say Yes again. Will it be easy? No bloody way. I know many of you are relieved that our lobbying has paid off and Government has listened. But this is not the time to feel relieved. This is not the time to gloat that homelessness has finally made it onto the big political agenda. If we do that, we will be missing the opportunity to influence and design the improvements needed. The White/Green Paper process provides a chance to work on the solutions. And this won’t be the only opportunity. Its just the beginning. But this chance must not be squandered.

There are some risks so let me just mention a few cautions.

- Don’t defend things that could be improved. Be open to the things that can change. Some things do need to be improved or changed or replaced.
- Resist the temptation to blame current programs and services for being less than effective. Its unhelpful and inaccurate.

- Don't throw the baby out with the bath water. In an effort to do something different, in seeking innovation, don't overlook the services and models that are effective. If you do this, the consequence will be a loss of community support and infrastructure that is invested in existing local services.
- Don't fall into the trap of going with cleverly marketed models or thinking the best and most innovative ones are overseas.
- Don't just define the problem as primary homelessness because that will severely limit our responses.
- Resist the tendency to keep existing services but expect more from them without additional funds.
- Adequate staffing is a key to successful models. Don't try and save money by not funding the real cost. It's a false economy and it doesn't work.
- Be wary of generic or simple one size fits all solutions because they may well miss the mark and people will fall through the gaps.
- Watch out that change or reform in one area doesn't have unintended consequences in another.
- Step carefully, if for instance, the SAAP legislation is repealed. Don't proceed without community support and agreement on the replacement and we need assurances that the essence and unique qualities of SAAP will not be lost.
- And be careful in the reform of Commonwealth and State Agreements not to dilute essential programs and lose national co-ordination and national leadership from national problems.

The changed environment and the provision of the current opportunity **will not, on its own, be enough to rid this country of homelessness.** It will still need significant ongoing commitment, time and resources. For community workers and voluntary managements we must remind ourselves that we **have made mistakes in the past when we have perceived there is a more supportive Government in power.** Even supportive Governments don't always get it right. It is even more important to increase our activism, advocacy and lobbying, our participation and engagement in peaks and unions and in Government processes and opportunities for consultation so that the opportunity provided is maximised. This will also increase and demonstrate the community's support for Government action and spending and will ensure homelessness stays a priority until it is reduced. The sheer numbers of homeless people, the numbers of people who work in the homelessness area and the number of people here today, give great strength and momentum to the task at hand.

So Whats Needed?

At times the problem seems so huge that it immobilises us. **But we must not think it is too hard.** I don't have time to go through all that's needed but I want to touch on a few key ones.

Political Will

Well we might just have it this time - the Federal Government's stated commitment to social inclusion and the Prime Minister's presence here this morning, gives us great confidence.

Prevention

The prevention and elimination of homelessness is not just about developing new programs or broader reform. It is about tackling the big ticket items that cause and maintain it. We need National Action to deliver:-

- Elimination of poverty
- Increased incomes including pensions and benefits and the elimination of punitive approaches
- The elimination of low wages that prevent a decent standard of living even when employed
- Increased affordable and secure public and community housing
- Full employment or as close as possible including for young people
- Universally available health services
- Universally available free education
- Law Reform so that laws do not work against disadvantaged people
- National leadership to build a safer community for everyone especially women and children and Family Law that ensures where there is violence, the protection of children is paramount
- Even with all that - there will still be some citizens who will want and need extra support and for this reason we need a strong well resourced human services system.

These are the prevention strategies. It will cost lots of money. However, this should not be the reason for the failure to act. The human cost, not to mention the economic cost is already unsustainable. Domestic violence, early school leaving, unemployment, poor physical and mental health and incarceration all cost us now. The cost of not acting will be far higher into the future.

So this is big, and it can only be improved incrementally. We must have a strong and agreed plan of action over the next ten years.

Community Services and Workforce Capacity

Quality service provision to the most in need depends on us. Strong and valued community services are essential to a social inclusion agenda - they contribute to community wellbeing and in fact save Government money.

Community Services are facing a crisis in attracting and retaining workers. Its not just the skills shortage in this industry – it is more serious than that.

If you do not work in the sector, you may be shocked to know of the appalling conditions and low pay rates for the majority of workers in community services. Many work as casuals because of the short term and insecure nature of funding; many as sole workers, on their own in isolated workplaces, after hours and with little back up. They often work unpaid between 10-15 hours a week. Staff are placed at times in situations where some of the service users have unpredictable and dangerous behaviors. Aggression and violence occur regularly in many services. The work is complex and demanding.

The cause of these problems is primarily inadequate Government funding. It, in no way allows voluntary Management to better support the workers with improved wages and conditions. When funding is provided, when indexation is less than the increase in costs, services have to reduce service delivery, cut staff positions and cut corners. Staff leave services and often go to Government jobs and the most often cited reason for this is poor pay and conditions. It is no secret that community workers receive significantly less than Government employees in similar positions - as much as \$20,000 less.

The treatment of the community sector workforce **is not smart policy, it is not sustainable, its not in the best interests of quality service delivery and it is simply, not right.**

And let me say that while I believe the cause is primarily inadequate funding, I believe community workers share some responsibility. The sector over the last decade has been emasculated and yet despite the poor pay and conditions, we often just put up with it. We must demonstrate the link between good funding, a strong workforce and quality services and you can do this with other services, your peaks and the Unions.

Services and Models

In general, in Australia agency self promotion is not common and so at times innovative and effective services go unnoticed. We need to encourage services, utilise their expertise, preserve and value them, capitalise on the existing community support and invest in their further enhancement. In the current Green and White Paper process, its not just about replacing old models with new you beaut ones. Its not about moving things around. Its about improving and enhancing what we have and adding new service types to increase capacity and improve the overall response. SAAP has taken over twenty years to develop, improve and become the part of the local community. Splitting it up or replacing it, is very risky as it will take an enormous of time for the new programs or responses to be embedded into the communities. The mount of time for SAAP to develop into the Program it is today **Deconstructing the core response to homelessness, will reduce the nationally consistent effort needed and delay the ultimate goal.**

Deconstructing the core response to homelessness will have very serious consequences to the other funding and services that support homeless people. Many services have attracted other funds to their agency to assist homeless people but the core is the SAAP funding. These include Family Support, Reconnect, Legal and Advocacy Services, Financial Counselling, Juvenile Justice Supports, Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET), Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY), Court Support, Drug and Alcohol Supports, Suicide Prevention Funding, Community Based Mental Health Program, Family Relationships Program, and many others.

We know whats needed - a range of service types in early and crisis intervention, transitional and long term. Supported accommodation and affordable housing with and without support, without doubt, are key aspects. Other critical elements include assistance in areas of education, training, employment, family support and connection, health, safety and protection and social engagement. All these service components should be available and can be delivered simultaneously or accessed when needed.

But who should deliver these components? For example, should homelessness services deliver mental health and drug and alcohol supports or should the health system be improved to better support these people.? I think we need both and there are various ways to do this.

So we need a range of services, but these will not be the same across Australia because what works in one community may not work in another. For example, a service in a rural area will look very different to the inner city one. There are both differences and similarities in what each target group needs and so we need a system that has a consistent National response with flexibilities. For instance women and children escaping domestic violence will need special attention in regard to safety and protection. But young

people also have need for safety and protection and need to be linked to a family and community response.

I don't have time to describe all the models. We know that no one model will do it. The combination of support and accommodation is a positive model, but in this country, has never been allowed to reach its full potential. We now have the chance to enhance it. To those who advocate the separation of housing and support where support is provided by one agency and the property managed by another as the only way to go, I would say you have got it wrong. This limits the options way too much. It is not about one model being better than the other. We need many and varied models. There are many models that expertly combine accommodation and support with high achievement of outcomes and client satisfaction. For example, for youth, combining current programs Reconnect, JPET, SAAP and CAP delivers an early intervention approach, with an emphasis on family and connection, safe supported accommodation from an appropriate building, with employment, education and training support.

In an improved system, I can see sites which have local community support and highly skilled and committed Staff. Well designed and appropriate properties. Where homeless people are no longer homeless. Where they are safe and supported, afforded respect, privacy and live in a pleasant environment. Where they can easily access a variety of supports and services, simultaneously, or over time, enhancing their engagement. Sites where they do not have to keep being referred to many different places to receive basic services. Where there is a viable Client, Resident or Tenant mix. And where moving out is more a choice and a normal step than a forced one.

Capital

Our supported accommodation models are equal if not superior to many models overseas but in many cases our properties are deficient and we have never invested adequate capital. Bureaucracies have been heard proudly bragging "we have moved away from bricks and mortar". Unfortunately it was a wrong direction and capital input is essential. In some of the overseas models currently being promoted, the importance of the capital is obvious.

Homelessness services in this country have not reached their full potential partly because of the lack of capital funding for purpose built or purpose renovated properties.

Services must be given affordable, appropriate, well maintained, comfortable properties that provide a safe and positive living situation. Properties should include offices, reception areas, staff facilities including meeting rooms; independent units with privacy and ability for Residents to have some control, disability access, safety and security inclusions, areas for storage, recreation, and other activities such as training. These are not our standard SAAP/CAP properties. Properties should be owned and managed by the community organisation as close as possible to service delivery. This strengthens community infrastructure, enhances long term sustainability, and avoids relocation costs and unnecessary restrictions imposed by owners or landlords.

Administration Burden

There has been precious little support in this country to help services build the range of supports needed.. Many services have over time strategically cobbled together a range of programs and services. These include SAAP, Reconnect, JPET, NAYSS, IHSHY, Local Answers, Community Housing, Mental Health Community Based Program, Emergency Relief and others. These add to the continuum of support for homeless people but the process of getting and keeping the funding is onerous.

This has resulted in the highly inefficient practice of managing multiple contracts with varying accountability requirements. The level of resourcing required to manage these contracts wastes time and money and detracts from actual service delivery. The level of unnecessary red tape is at a disproportionate level to the risk and the level of funding. Micro management is unnecessary and costly to Government and the community. The system must be changed to make it more simple for the agencies not just Government.

Funding

Community services have struggled for a long time in regard to funding. It is incumbent on State and Federal Governments to do better in this.

It is positive that the new Federal Government has recognised the importance of community services in social inclusion. The National Compact is welcomed but it will be ineffective if it is not backed up with additional funding. As an absolute priority, funding to meet demand for supported, emergency and short term accommodation must be increased even on a conservative estimate, by 30 to 40%.

It is still unclear exactly what the Federal Budget delivered in terms of indexation and the efficiency dividend. It looks like some programs will get nothing and some may get as little as 0.73%. The compound effect of this over many years has caused a crisis and in some Commonwealth programs and further reductions in staff hours leading to a decline in service delivery will occur in July this year. There are some contradictions, on the one hand, we hear that the community sector is valued and yet on the other hand, we are unable to maintain existing service levels. For example, the National Youth Commission called for an expansion of Reconnect but the existing 100 services are in trouble.

A further issue is that, funding for many programs that specifically target homeless people are insecure. I won't go into detail but many are about to end or change considerably which may reduce effort in the homelessness area. We must shift from the practice of short term funding, often politically motivated to long term funding reflecting the reality of the job to be done.

The funding system needs to be simplified for community agencies, not just Government. It important to say that some things will not be helpful such an increase in sub contracting as this often is more expensive; a reduction in the presence of small or specialist providers as it limits the service provision to particular types; and dispersing homelessness services across portfolio areas which only complicate it and which will create many negative results. It can be more efficient, channelling funding from relevant portfolio areas through one simplified process, through one central Department. It must ensure accountability but minimise unnecessary administration. It must maximise the autonomy of the community organisation and minimise the ill effects of competition.

The Federal Government must demonstrate its commitment to support the sector in practical terms with an improved funding system across portfolios, adequate long term funding and full indexation, because without it services will reduce and this will hinder the process of improving the response to homelessness.

Conclusion

So – to address the causes of homelessness there is the broad structural agenda that must be invested in such as housing, employment, income and safety and there is the ambitious but totally necessary service and industry improvements that I have touched on. We also must minimise the unintended consequences of change. We need a radical attack on the structural inequities, not a radical attack or the deconstruction of the current programmatic response to homelessness.

You must get active in your networks, the Peaks, the Union and all the Government processes offered to influence the future directions. It won't happen without our collective effort, and resources. The system is going to change because the Government has signalled its intention. We need to make the most of the current environment and get it right. Homeless people and the community are relying on us. **The time is right to fix homelessness. Lets get on with it!**