

**Submission
No 17**

INQUIRY INTO THE PROTOCOL FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN PUBLIC PLACES

Organisation: Neami National

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO PROTOCOL FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IN PUBLIC SPACES

February 28th 2020

Introduction:

Neami National (Neami) is pleased to submit our response for the Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places.

Neami is a leading organisation in Sydney's Specialist Homelessness Service System and a national leader in the provision of community based mental health programs.

Neami Way2Home is jointly funded by the NSW Department of Communities & Justice and the City of Sydney Council to provide assertive outreach and complex case management to people sleeping rough in the City of Sydney local government area. Since 2010 we have supported 646 people to move off the streets into long-term housing.

We welcome the Inquiry into the *Protocol for Homeless People in Public Spaces* and hope the process will strengthen the document to improve engagement, support and pathways into housing for people experiencing primary homelessness. This submission will address the questions in the Terms of Reference and outline our recommendations.

Response to the Terms of Reference :

That the committee inquires into and report:

- a) Whether the Protocol continues to provide an effective framework for government organisations with an operational presence in public places and for services that support people who are experiencing homelessness.***

For organisations that operate in public places the Protocol can only provide an effective framework if the signatories are required to implement it. For police, paramedics, bus, rail and amenities staff it provides a straightforward guide, but they are under no obligation to follow it.

For homelessness services it provides useful information, but each organisation already has best practice protocols that are reflected in this document and which those organisations are committed to following. The effectiveness of a framework can only be measured if it is adhered to by all signatories, so we recommend that it be a mandatory requirement of signing this Protocol.



b) *The extent to which the Protocol is being implemented in practice by government organisations providing direct service delivery and non-government organisations contracted on behalf of government.*

As a non-government organisation contracted on behalf of the government, Neami implements best-practice principles for working with people experiencing homelessness. These principles are consistent with those of the Protocol.

c) *The appropriateness of the Protocol to support joint responses between government organisations, non-government organisations and local governments working in partnership to respond to homelessness.*

It is important for the Protocol to support joint responses between government organisations, non-government organisations and local governments to respond to homelessness as this would ensure consistency and best practice.

d) *Whether the Protocol adequately protects the rights and interests of people experiencing homelessness who use public places, including Indigenous people and minority groups.*

No, it does not adequately protect the rights of certain groups. There needs to be specific sections outlining the rights and needs of Women and LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness. See recommendations 4 and 5 below.

e) *Whether the Protocol adequately protects the rights and interests of people experiencing homelessness with those of residents, businesses and other people and organisations using public places.*

Whilst the protocol does currently protect the rights of businesses, residents and other members of the public; it would more adequately protect the rights and interests of all concerned if it was a mandatory requirement for organisations to implement it and this was made a condition of being a signatory.

f) *Any other related matters*

See recommendations.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The Protocol should use more empowering, trauma-informed and person-centred language. The term “homeless people” should be changed to “people experiencing homelessness.” In section 6.6 the wording “drug and alcohol abuse” and “mental disorders” should be changed to “alcohol and other drug use” and “people with a mental health condition.” The term “Aboriginal People” should instead be “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.”

More positive and proactive language could be included in Appendix A so an emphasis is placed on what could be done and how to do it, rather than what not to do.



Recommendation 2

The Protocol must be mandatory practice for all signatories. This would mean signatories would use the protocol in staff induction training and monitor whether staff were adhering to it. This would ensure the rights and interests of people experiencing homelessness were being upheld and provide a consistent approach across government, non-government and private sectors.

Recommendation 3

The Protocol needs to go into more detail in the section for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and outline what a “culturally respectful approach” means in practice and consultation must be done with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to determine this.

Give clear and practical examples of how culturally respectful practice can be done in the context of homelessness.

When referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rather than use words like “hostile” and “creating problems in public” the document should use language and scenarios that are positive and not reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Recommendation 4

The Protocol must have a section on women experiencing homelessness. Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of women’s homelessness. Women sleeping on the street are at significant risk of sexual assault or physical violence and a high number of women sleeping rough have a history of domestic or sexual violence.

Women often choose very public spaces to rough sleep (e.g. retail streets in CBD) where they are safer in public view. The Protocol should incorporate a trauma-informed approach that prioritises women’s physical and emotional safety. Where possible it would also help to have female staff approach and engage women on the street.

The Protocol should outline a comprehensive referral pathway for women who are experiencing violence and need immediate support. It should also include how to do on-the-spot safety planning when a woman discloses she is unsafe as well as a list of domestic violence and sexual assault services in NSW.

Recommendation 5

The Protocol should have a section on LGBTIQ people’s experience of homelessness, the unique challenges and barriers they face and how best to support them. More specifically transgender people experiencing homelessness are a particularly vulnerable group and may experience transphobic violence, alienation from services not equipped to support trans people and social isolation.

Trans people transitioning on the street may encounter issues around access to hormone treatment and medication and applying for housing may be more difficult due to ID and name varying on different documents. Trans people are also at a higher risk of suicide and LGBTIQ youth are disproportionately represented in homeless and suicide figures.



Way2Home has seen a rise in recent years in the number of transgender women sleeping rough in the City of Sydney registering with our service. The Protocol needs to include a specific, trauma-informed and gender-affirming approach for any persons engaging with LGBTIQ people on the street. It should include training resources for organisations to access for staff, as well as a list of specialised LGBTIQ services available.

Recommendation 6

The Protocol should include a more detailed and updated strategy to support people experiencing homelessness during extreme weather events. Storms, bushfires, smoke-inhalation, extreme heat and extreme cold all pose a serious threat to people sleeping outdoors in any urban, bush or regional context.

The Protocol should outline a detailed, planned response for each extreme weather event. It should be region-specific highlighting the risks and conditions of certain areas around NSW e.g. when bushfires occur in the Hawkesbury region respond to the safety needs of people sleeping in the bush along the river.

Recommendation 7

The DCJ Housing Outreach and Support Team (HOST) should be mentioned within the Protocol and the role and responsibilities of the local HOST team outlined. It should detail how HOST can assist an individual and a clear referral process. The HOST model is being extended to other parts of NSW, so this section should include region specific information.

Recommendation 8

The Protocol should include an updated list of current services operating in each region and not only homelessness specific services. The list should include domestic violence, youth, legal, LGBTIQ, mental health, drug and alcohol, disability and aged care services. It should also include relevant Peak Bodies such as Homelessness NSW, Y-Foundations and DVNSW as these are state-wide organisations.

Recommendation 9

If the Protocol is to be used as a state-wide guide that all services working with people experiencing homelessness implement it could include a section about the benefits of Peer Work. Services working directly with people rough-sleeping are able to engage more easily with these individuals and offer better quality support and more authentic support with a Peer Worker on the team.

Neami has initiated some research into the role of the lived experience workforce in homelessness and housing transition services, and the supports and structures that need to be in place to optimise the value of this workforce. The first phase of this research can be found at

<https://www.neaminational.org.au/what-we-do/research-and-evaluation/projects/understanding-the-peer-adviser-workforce-in-homelessness-services/>

Recommendation 10

A significant number of people experiencing homelessness have a pet and the relationship they have with their animal must be respected and prioritised when supporting them. The Protocol should outline safety considerations for approaching someone when an animal is present e.g. ask owner if

www.neaminational.org.au

dog is friendly, and the specific needs of the companion animal when offering further support e.g. are there accommodation services that allow pets.

Conclusion:

Thank you for inviting Neami to make a submission for the Inquiry into the Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places. We support the Government's commitment to improving the protocol and strengthening the current approach to reduce street sleeping and hope our recommendations provide valuable insight.

If you would like further information, please contact Neami's Regional Manager responsible for overseeing Way2Home, [REDACTED]

