OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE

Organisation: The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre

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The Chair
Community Services Committee
NSW Legislative Assembly
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By email

**Options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage
Submission from The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre**

About The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre

The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre is a free legal service for homeless and disadvantaged young people aged 25 and under. Established in 1993, the Shopfront is a joint project of Mission Australia, the Salvation Army and the law firm Herbert Smith Freehills.

We represent and advise young people on a range of legal issues, with a primary focus on criminal law. We are based in the inner city of Sydney but work with young people from all over the Sydney metropolitan area.

The Shopfront's clients come from a range of cultural backgrounds, including a sizeable number of young people who identify as Aboriginal. Most of our clients have limited formal education and therefore lack adequate literacy, numeracy and vocational skills. A substantial proportion also have a serious mental health problem or a cognitive impairment.

Common to nearly all our clients is the experience of homelessness. Most have a significant trauma history and have been forced to leave home due to abuse, neglect, domestic violence or extreme family dysfunction. Others are homeless largely because of a lack of affordable housing.

The three co-authors of this submission are a senior lawyer who has worked with vulnerable young people in the NSW criminal justice system for approximately 25 years; a case worker who holds an LLB/BSS with 11 years' experience working with at-risk young people in both case management and residential settings; and a student from Western Sydney University in her final placement at The Shopfront Youth Legal Centre for Masters of Social Work (Qualifying).

General comments

Rapid rehousing into "meanwhile use" accommodation services seems to generally be in its infancy in Australia.

Therefore, this submission leans on the research from the United States, United Kingdom and European countries that have a similar social climate to Australia. We have included a list of sources at the end of this submission.

We have also drawn upon our first-hand experience of working with homeless young people, and on information that has been observed and shared among agencies working in the area.

While "meanwhile use" is not a substitute for long-term social and community housing, we accept that it will take a massive investment of time and money to build or acquire adequate housing stock. A "meanwhile use" model is worth exploring as an interim solution to the growing problem of homelessness.

The experience of our clients suggests that temporary rehousing can be effective if it is accompanied by wrap-around support services, connection with the consumer's community, and some certainty around the duration of the accommodation.

Specific terms of reference

a) Options to better support 'meanwhile use' (temporary supportive accommodation), and the current major planning barriers to 'meanwhile use'

Adequate resourcing and staffing

- The assessment and intake process is a crucial part of building successful 'meanwhile use' communities. Having appropriate funding so that workers can get to know their consumers and offer them something of value is crucial. Doing the groundwork and research about the consumers first and then having a clear plan to support them whilst in the temporary supportive accommodation is needed. This will ideally be done in a bottoms up approach with the consumer being central to decision making where reasonably practicable.

Understanding of clients' needs

- Rapid re-housing and 'meanwhile use' can have positive impacts on the well-being of consumers when done in a way that adequately addresses the presenting issues of the individuals. For instance, scholars examining rapid-rehousing programs have noted that not only can rapid re-housing provide shelter to individuals and families at risk of homelessness, but also decreases food insecurity, improvements in mental and short-term physical health, reduce drug and alcohol use, improved children's school attendance, and improve child behaviour issues (Gubits, Shinn, Wood, et al 2016).

- Ideally this is done in a way that balances their wants and needs and also understands that the cause of homelessness is not always the lack of a physical home. There are mental, physical and community needs that also need to be addressed in order to make the placement of the individual into a short-term/ 'meanwhile use' accommodation work able and sustainable.

- The need for mental health support includes the necessity of outreach initiatives to support the mental health issues that often accompanies homelessness. These issues include (but are not limited to) depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sleeplessness, etc (Openminds 2019).

- In addition, the effects of homelessness can lead to problems in physical health due to poorer access to nutritious foods, substance misuse (to cope with mental health issues), poor dental hygiene due to lack of access, and the inherent reality that homelessness can expose a person to violence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). Therefore, a reasonable level of access and support to address these physical health needs is required in conjunction with meanwhile use accommodation.

- The necessity of addressing community needs for maximum meanwhile use efficacy involves confronting the reality that homeless people are marginalised as a result of multiple intersections of inequality (race, gender, (dis)ability, religion, etc) (Zakova and Stryckova, 2020). To address this, social workers and case workers ought to engage in advocacy for change of public policies, engaging in socio-therapeutic relationships with clients (Zakova and Stryckova, 2020), and engage in practices that enhance clients' self-determination and dignity.

Self-determination

- It is necessary to take a client-centred, trauma-informed approach to consumers of 'meanwhile use' housing. Due to the high likelihood of working with clients with a

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complex trauma history, at a minimum, social workers should implement trauma-informed practice methods when engaging in rapport-building and service delivery. This involves providing a sense of safety and security, avoidance of re-traumatisation, and trauma training (Cash, O'Donnell, Varker, et al, 2014).

- "Dignity Driven Practice" is an approach to social work endorsed by DCJ's NSW Practice Framework. It is the practice of upholding and acknowledging every person's dignity, autonomy, and sense of worthiness. It involves acknowledging the following tenets during interactions with clients: self-determination, choice of language, analysis of power dynamics of social worker and client, identifying acts of resistance (and why), and social responses (e.g., violence is a social response) (PSP Learning Hub (informed by DCJ), 2020). According to a study conducted by Miller and Keys (2001), homeless individuals who reported more feelings of self-worth and dignity were more likely to find the hope and motivation to engage in the reconstruction of their lives (Miller and Keys, 2001). In direct opposition, those experiencing homelessness whom reported feelings of anger, worthlessness, suicidal ideation, and depression, were shown to be a result of persistent invalidation of dignity (Miller and Keys, 2001).

- A balance must be struck between both the availability of accommodation and the needs of consumers. Ideally the consumers will have some input into where they will be housed. This allows the consumer to 'buy in' to the process and therefore more likely to produce environments with higher consumer participation and sustainability.

- Scholars studying the framework of "choice" have found that rehabilitation specialists ought to assume that the client is capable of making choices and support workers ought to plan their rehabilitation/outreach programs based on the clients choices (where possible and practical). This provides the client with valuable life skills of decision making, evaluative processing, and lets the client know that support workers value their voice (Lovell and Cohn 1998) (important for dignity-driven practice), which further aids in the socio-therapeutic relationship between service provider and client.

- Giving the client input and autonomy is centred on a "client-centred" model where agencies place priority into making sure the client's voice is heard, especially in relation to the locality of housing relative to their social communities.

- Last year we observed the rapid rehousing of rough sleepers in Sydney during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. We commend Housing NSW on this initiative that has led to good outcomes for many. However, we know of people who have struggled when taken out of their community and placed in housing far away from their community and social supports. This has led to relinquishment of tenancy and uncertainty, which can also have negative impacts on both mental and physical health.

- Often hubs such as Kings Cross are serviced with high-quality and trusted health services with which consumers have long histories and experiences. This includes access to food services as well as safe injecting rooms, Opioid Treatment Programs (OTPs), sexual, physical and mental health services that are resourced and staffed to deal with the often complex presentation of the consumers.

- Consumers must have the ability to be part of their community and have access to their social and community supports. For effective short/medium term accommodation options to be successful the consumer must feel like their needs are taken seriously. It is also understood that often these consumers have communication, transportation and other barriers such as physical and mental health that do not allow them to participate in their new 'meanwhile' community as may be expected.

- Our experience working with consumers who have had rapid re-housing outside of their community has shown that people need to have as much self-determination as

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possible with their housing. Removing all consumer choice and decision-making out of the process leads back into "homelessness by choice". Placing clients in housing that is geographically far from their existing communities diminishes their social capital. One's 'social capital' refers to the network of relationships that one possesses, either actual or virtual, where these relationships act as a form of resource that one can rely upon (Ayed, Athker, Bird et al, 2020). Not only are these social relationships important for building interpersonal skills, but also act as a support system that can potentially aid in alleviating their experiences of homelessness (e.g. provide brief shelter to avoid rough sleeping). It has been suggested that those experiencing both homelessness and social isolation have much lower social functioning. Therefore, removing people from their local communities to be placed in housing far from their social support systems will increase feelings of separation and social isolation and act as a precursor to broken tenancies.

Certainty around tenancy

- It is vital to ensure that consumers have certainty about their tenancy with definite timelines and reasonable notice of needing to vacate properties. This will mean that they are able to have confidence and security, leading to better health and social outcomes. Consumers can feel like they are being provided with adequate tenancy protections. This can also be reciprocal, with obligations on consumers to notify 'meanwhile housing' providers with notice of intention to vacate. This needs to have some flexibility and will also help to build good habits and expectations around managing a tenancy.

- Individuals and families who have been allocated to rapid re-housing programs have often experienced uncertain tenancies and sudden evictions due to circumstances outside their control (e.g., termination of welfare payments). According to a study conducted by Cooper and Vohryzek (2017) in the United States, participants in a rapid re-housing program have faced eviction because they were made to pay an "unsustainable portion of their income toward rent" (Cooper and Vohryzek, 2017, p. 310). In this particular study, tenants also did not have certainty about how much rent they would be required to pay because the terms of the agreement were unclear from the outset. Not only are they vulnerable to homelessness again, the eviction status on their rental record makes it difficult for them to rent in the future (Cooper and Vohryzek, 2017).

- Even if the duration of a tenancy (or temporary accommodation) is relatively short, it is still possible to provide some certainly around this. For example, during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Housing NSW (via Link2Home) housed people in temporary hotel/motel accommodation for up to a month at a time. This contrasts with the previous situation where people were required to move on every couple of days. During this period we noticed an improvement in stability and well-being for some of our most vulnerable clients. This in turn led to better criminal justice outcomes, including increasing the availability of diversionary options and lessening the risk of incarceration.

b) Options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing

Assessment, relationships and planning

- The assessment and relationship-building process is of great importance when assisting consumers with rapid re-housing in 'meanwhile use' properties. This means that effective resources need to be in place at the start of the process. It involves risk assessments and making sure that the 'meanwhile use' communities being created are appropriate and conducive to social cohesion.

- An analysis on rapid re-housing 'meanwhile' programs in New South Wales has highlighted the lack of certainty surrounding the assessment phase regarding a client's eligibility and needs. The analysis noted that this uncertainty has led to unstructured referrals to housing providers where the client's needs are not supported (Robyn Kennedy Consultants 2013). Perhaps a gap here is a lack of clarity about eligibility requirements, suitability, and a deeper understanding of client needs and abilities to gain the full benefit of 'meanwhile use' accommodation.

- For example, we have had an experience where a young woman was placed in an apartment block that was predominantly occupied by older men. This has meant that the young woman does not feel secure in her property which led to poor mental health outcomes and ultimately abandoning the property. Understanding the impact of relationships and balancing the need to have a healthy mix of personalities and people is important to help build a vibrant and healthy 'meanwhile use' community.

- The relationships that workers have with their consumers is the most valuable tool when improving on access to existing services.

- An important aspect of good rapport-building between workers and disadvantaged/homeless persons is the ability to build a relationship whilst preventing re-traumatisation. Due to a likely history of trauma, knowing how to communicate effectively will only benefit the client by opening up referral pathways to other services to improve overall wellbeing. In addition, some clients may feel that having a social worker reduces their self-worth and sense of capacity (DePoy, 2020). However, if we make the experience of receiving support positive and with the interests of the client in mind, we will begin to reduce the stigma of receiving support.

Addressing consumer issues

- It is often necessary to take a more pro-active approach to helping people with their tenancy. It is also important to understand that consumers often have complicated needs profiles that requires a multi-disciplinary approach.

- Often consumers have access issues such as ID, payment information and access to other official documentation. They may also have trouble communicating their needs and access requirements. This can be due to a range of reasons including cognitive impairment, mental health, ability to communicate effectively and underestimation of support needs.

- Again, the rapport that the support worker builds with the client will aid in the communication of client needs. A certain level of flexibility and patience is required in these circumstances. Flexibility involves being able to alter one's language so that it accommodates and is understood by the receiver (being wary of condescension), being clear and concise, respecting the client if they wish to not communicate, and progress check-ins (Health NSW, 2020). There are many techniques that accommodate a multitude of different clients, and support workers should be well-versed in these strategies.

Worker experiences

- Experience from working in mixed residential settings have observed that the most cohesive groups were more likely to be a mix of both sexes and backgrounds. The most cohesive groups also had a sense of togetherness and solidarity that was produced by the working towards shared goals and supporting each other. Identifying leaders in the community and using an asset based strengths approach to recruit them to become leaders in the community. The Planning Institute of Australia have noted that mixed demographics in residential settings have been proven beneficial because it promotes social integration and builds a sense of community where tenants feel connected to their neighbours (Parliament of Australia 2021).

c) Options for crisis, key-worker and other short term accommodation models

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Multi-disciplinary approach

- Relationship-building should be the priority of crisis workers' involvement. This can be done by being able to offer the consumer services that can build trust and help to build rapport and engagement.

- Key workers supporting people in short term accommodation models should have access to a variety of other specialist workers and services.

- Disadvantaged clients are likely to have complex needs. Key workers who would be beneficial to rapidly re-housed tenants include legal assistance, employment outreach programs, case workers, mental health support, general practitioners with an understanding of the complex needs of homeless persons, community centre outreach programs, amongst other specialised services (Naeh 2016).

- It is important to provide wrap-around support for consumers with assessments and ongoing checking of their ability to maintain their tenancy. This means that consumers entering into this model of accommodation are offered ongoing support from the very beginning. This should be from a client-centred trauma-informed perspective. Key workers should acknowledge that often people who have experienced long-term unstable housing have a variety of support needs and this will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and not a one-size-fits-all approach.

- Access to culturally-appropriate workers should also be a priority. Due to a history of mistrust of social workers (due in part to the experience of the Stolen Generations), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients may feel more comfortable with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander caseworker. While non-Aboriginal social workers may do their best in assisting the client through the practice of cultural competence, clients may often feel building rapport with someone of the same/similar cultural background is much easier. Similar considerations may apply to people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and to LGBTQI+ people.

d) Barriers to additional supply across NSW, including for smaller non-CHP housing providers

Physical

- Physical barriers may include access to the property, and access to public transport .

- The may also be an issue with properties that are not able to adequately address the consumer's needs, for example, someone being given a property that is not suitable for them to have their pet with them. This example comes from a rough sleeper from the 2020 rapid re-housing in the Sydney LGA. This person came under pressure from other residents in the complex for having their dog with them, which led to them relinquishing the property back into homelessness.

Condition and maintenance of property

- One major constraint to meanwhile use is the condition of the buildings. When certain buildings are not built for human habitation but are used as 'meanwhile' use, it can create dangerous situations and legal disputes relating to negligence (Smith 2014).

- According to feedback provided by consumers, the condition of the property is one of their major concerns, and this can be a significant barrier to achieving housing stability.

e) Support for and accountability of registered community housing providers

Issues faced by community housing providers include:

- access to resources;

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- support for the workers who are interacting with consumers: this includes training and ongoing supervision; teamwork and key/co-case management for consumers;

- access to brokerage to pay for consumers' needs, eg maintenance;

- building cultures of what can be done rather than what cannot be done.

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We are happy to be contacted for further comment. Our preferred means of contact is via email at ███████████████

Yours sincerely

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