

Short-term vs long-term housing responses – a false choice

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Within the homelessness sector in Australia, and overseas, there has been a tendency to eschew arguments for investment in crisis or short-term accommodation options for people experiencing homelessness in favour of housing-first approaches, long term-housing options and a prevention-focused approach. Recent examples of this include a piece in the conversation by MacKenzie and Hand (2019), a position paper from the Council to Homeless Persons (2020) and from overseas, O'Sullivan (2020) reflecting on the Irish experience.

However, presenting investment in long-term housing (such as social housing and permanent supportive housing options) as antithetical to new investment in short-term accommodation options is to present a false choice and to ignore decades of policy failure at the State and Federal levels.

Housing and homelessness peak bodies in Victoria have called for an additional 6,000 new social housing dwellings annually for the next 10 years just to bring Victoria's social housing stock to 4.5% of dwellings (The Housing Peaks Alliance, 2020). Even more is needed if the sector is to shift to a housing-led approach. Yet such an increase in social housing is unlikely to come next week, or next year, as the recent Federal budget announcements attest. In the years it takes for us to increase long-term affordable housing options, we must address people's urgent need for safe, affordable, and appropriate short-term accommodation.

The aim of this brief piece is to open-up a conversation within the sector about striking the right balance between investment in both longer-term and crisis or short-term accommodation. It makes a case for why we need not one or the other – but more of both. We need more high quality short-term accommodation options AND more social housing (including permanent supportive housing for those requiring longer-term support).

Definitions matter

Short-term accommodation includes a range of options and some are more appropriate than others. In Victoria, short-term accommodation includes Crisis Supported Accommodation Services (CSAS), refuges, and purchased crisis accommodation options (such as hostels, motels, caravan parks, backpackers, and boarding houses) along with a small number of winter shelters (e.g. <https://wintershelter.fluro.io/>). These are quite different options with different levels of amenity and support. A night shelter where many people sleep in one or more large shared spaces, may only enter after 5pm and must leave during the day, is quite different from supported crisis accommodation where people may stay 4-6 weeks or longer. These latter facilities offer private bedrooms and bathrooms with shared kitchen facilities (such as our Southbank service) and in some cases self-contained apartments. CSAS provide on-site support from case workers with housing and general support as well as a range of other specialist services either onsite or visiting covering mental health, medical and allied health, alcohol and other drugs, and legal advice.

Exposure to violence, exploitation and trauma

Homelessness increases people's exposure to violence, exploitation and abuse (Robinson, 2014; Cash et al. 2014). Many people who experience homelessness, in particular those experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness, have histories of trauma (Kolar, 2017; Cash et al. 2014).

Homelessness itself is a traumatic experience (Robinson, 2014). People experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse when they sleeping rough, couch-surf with friends or strangers, or stay in severely crowded dwellings.

While long-term appropriate housing options are desperately needed, people also need safe places to stay until such accommodation is available. There is a lack of capacity in the CSAS and refuge sectors. Across Launch Housing's St. Kilda and Collingwood entry points a total of 2480 people were assisted with emergency accommodation in the 2018-19 financial year. Yet there were only 423 government funded crisis beds across all of Victoria in 2018 (NWHN, 2019). This lack of capacity means that agencies purchase short stays in hotels, motels, boarding houses, hostels and caravan parks to provide basic shelter. Many of these purchased options (apart from those higher quality options that became available during the pandemic) are known to be substandard and unsafe (NWHN, 2019). The dilemma for the sector is that by accommodating people in desperate need of help, in sub-standard and unsafe places, they become complicit in perpetuating the cycle of homelessness, trauma and systemic abuse.

Temporary accommodation that is well managed and of an appropriate standard will reduce these risks. Expanding direct provision of CSAS would reduce the violence and trauma that people are exposed to while experiencing homelessness. This is in *addition* to the drastic increase in affordable, social and private rental housing which is urgently needed.

Short-term vs long-term responses – a false choice

Permanent supportive housing and crisis accommodation are not two opposing solutions to homelessness with one good and one bad and to present them in this way is to make a false comparison. We need both, for different reasons.

Short-term accommodation is an integral part of an overall homelessness response and a necessary option for anyone who is in crisis. Yet a major problem with current CSAS offerings is the lack of options to exit to affordable housing (Nous, 2018; TACSI, 2016) and this extends to all temporary or short-term accommodation options. This lack of exit options means that people are stuck in crisis services as there is literally nowhere for them to go. This lack of permanent or long-term housing options prevent such short-term accommodation options from fulfilling their temporary or emergency role. A finding echoed in a recent review CSAS in Melbourne (Nous, 2018).

Counter posing shelters ('bad') with Housing First or social housing ('good') presents a false choice. The real contradiction is between the decades of political failure to invest and grow the stock of secure and affordable housing, on one hand. And on the other, the unrealistic expectations placed on Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) to (re)solve homelessness without adequate access to housing. It is a failure of homelessness and housing policy that makes us feel forced to choose between two parts of one essential system.

Where do crisis responses fit in a system geared toward ending homelessness?

Short-term accommodation options, be they CSAS, refuges or purchased crisis options, are not designed to end homelessness – they are meant to provide temporary shelter until longer-term solutions can be found. To say that "Homeless shelters are ineffective at ending homelessness" is akin to saying that emergency departments will not reduce chronic disease – it is simply not their role.



In recent times, many advocates have looked to Finland's success in drastically reducing homelessness. It is important to note, however, that there has been a targeted program to increase the supply of affordable rental housing as part of their strategy (Pleace, 2017). And further, despite a reduction in shelters, short-term accommodation is still used while people await placement in permanent housing (The Scottish Parliament, 2017).

A final note

Rapid access to permanent accommodation housing is preferable for all people experiencing homelessness. For people with experiences of chronic homelessness, permanent supportive housing needs to be made available. However, this cannot be achieved without a sufficient supply of social housing. We support calls for a dramatic increase in social housing and permanent supportive housing options. An increase in these long-term housing options is critical in ending homelessness. But we also need to provide better options for people in crisis. By contrasting safe and supported short-term options with long-term housing is a false choice and risks exposing people experiencing homelessness to violence, abuse and trauma for the foreseeable future.



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