





**Chapter**

**4**

**Policy  
recommendations**

## Chapter 4: Policy recommendations

**Tackling family homelessness involves more than just providing a bed. It is about enabling families to have a sense of belonging, security and continuity. Most importantly, it is about giving children the best opportunity to grow up in a happy, healthy environment.**

### Background

Every day, Wesley Mission assists families who have nowhere to live, or who are at risk of becoming homeless. In recent years, the number of families facing homelessness has increased significantly. For people with children, homelessness can be overwhelming. It disrupts relationships, careers, education, health and community. For many parents and children, the experience of dislocation may become an ongoing experience and can bring with it serious depression and anxiety.

Homeless individuals and families are not always from disadvantaged backgrounds. Homelessness can happen to anyone: all it takes is one job loss, a chronic illness, a divorce, a domestic violence situation or other precipitating factors. Because housing represents a major expense in Australia, especially in the capital cities, people often lack savings; they can become homeless quickly if they do not have an extensive support system. The current problem of homeless families, the “new homeless”, demands our collective attention (Minnery and Greenhalgh 2007). Homelessness requires a multifaceted strategy that dedicates appropriate and adequate resources.

Wesley Mission’s policy response to family homelessness is based on current published research, data from other community organisations, meetings with experts, input from Wesley Mission staff and, most importantly, interviews with homeless families. The responses of homeless parents and children in this research give voice to vulnerability; their words are a clear reminder of the pain of homelessness and the need for governments, corporations and not-for-profit organisations to co-operate in the fundamental task of helping all Australians to live stable, positive, productive lives.

There is hope in the area of homelessness. Rosaane Haggerty, founder of *Common Ground*, states that before she began this work she “would not have believed that people who had been so broken and entrenched in homelessness could thrive” after they find permanent housing. As Kirsch et al (2009) state, “good housing is a foundation for productive and meaningful engagement in life roles, which is key to long term stability and improved mental health”.

In December 2010, Wesley Mission presented the findings of its research through a policy workshop. This event was attended by key organisations involved in homelessness research and service provision. This event drew participation and contributions from

- Department of Housing NSW, Homelessness Unit
- Department Human Services—Community Services
- University of South Australia, Australian Centre for Child Protection
- University of New South Wales, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse
- University of Queensland, The Urban Land Development Authority (ULDA)
- City of Sydney Council, Homelessness Unit
- Australian Council of Social Service
- Homelessness NSW
- Centre for Independent Studies, Social Foundation Program
- Wesley Mission’s Family and Community Services staff.

Wesley Mission has developed a range of policy recommendations to address family homelessness:

## 1: Supporting homeless families

### 1.1: Delivering multiple services

Addressing family homelessness also means addressing the other problems that both cause homelessness and arise from the experience. These include domestic violence, relationship breakdown, severe financial stress, mental illness and addictions (Allen 2010, Gibson and Johnstone 2010, Karim et al 2006, McArthur et al 2006, Prescott et al 2008). In fact, domestic violence is the predominant reason why women with children become homeless in Australia (Breckenridge and Mulrone 2007). One of the other key reasons for displacement is mental illness, which can occur both before and after experiences of homelessness (Johnson 2009, Robinson 2003). By addressing the need for stable housing in conjunction with these other crucial social problems, we may be able to end the constant insecurity faced by many families.

Overall, homeless families are likely to require services such as counselling and medical attention to help them stabilise their lives. Research shows that multi-disciplinary teams, anchored by consistent case management, have proven effective and economical over time (Gronda et al 2009b). Wesley Mission supports two fundamental approaches to providing multi-disciplinary health and homelessness services:

- a social services “hub”, located near supported housing
- specialist providers (eg physical and occupational therapists, nurses, developmental psychologists, counsellors) who visit supported housing, and/or referral to a family services program, such as Brighter Futures, which provides case management, children’s services and education.

Both these approaches, sometimes working in tandem depending on the nature and location of housing, benefit homeless parents and children. When families are in crisis, the visiting specialist providers may work best to address immediate needs. When families are recovering, the social services hub may suit them best.

The Commonwealth Government is already rolling out hubs that house Centrelink and Medicare services. These should also embrace other community services provided by the not-for-profit sector. Providing these services can help parents break the cycle of homelessness by allowing easy access to multiple services and a “one-stop shop”. This is particularly important for families without transport and those who move away from their traditional support networks (Zugazaga 2008).

### Recommendation

Wesley Mission supports a multi-disciplinary team approach to addressing homelessness. This could be achieved by combining the community services hub model with existing family and community services, and the visiting health specialist provider model, to meet the complex needs of homeless parents and children.

### 1.2: Focusing on homeless children

Because of a lack of resources, families are often not catered for adequately in crisis housing facilities; this has major implications for children’s overall health and happiness (Gibson and Morphett 2010, Kirkman et al, 2010). The majority of children experiencing homelessness in this country are younger than 12, so the lifelong impact of this stress is significant (Homelessness Australia 2010).

In addition, current research shows that young parents who become homeless have often been homeless themselves as children (Meadows-Oliver, 2009, Wesley Mission 2011). The inter-generational nature of homelessness is one of the most worrying aspects of this major social issue (Flatau et al 2009, Karim et al 2006).

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Wesley Mission seeks to prevent future generations from becoming homeless by improving the conditions for children in temporary housing.

Avenues for investigation include:

- supporting childcare and after-school care for homeless children so that parents can return to work (McArthur et al 2006)
- linking each homeless child to a support worker who assists with educational, physical and social development eg via the Brighter Futures program in that area
- providing free transport options, through the expansion of the Community Visitor's Schemes, to enable disadvantaged families/ individuals to attend appointments, work and school (Torquati and Gamble 2001)
- offering play opportunities for children and helping them develop a sense of 'home' in their temporary accommodation (Swick 2009, Moore et al 2008)
- helping homeless parents lead their own parenting support groups so they can talk to one another about concerns and solutions related to their children
- offering a Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) program; (this is related to approaches called Trauma-Informed Counselling and Trauma-Informed Consequences, both also known as TIC).<sup>15</sup>

### Recommendation

Wesley Mission believes that housing services should adopt specific programs (eg play activities, study sessions, parenting groups) that complement and reinforce the benefits of accommodation and address families' wider issues and experiences.

### 1.3: Ongoing support

Wesley Mission's current research reveals that the most significant positive influence on homeless families is the presence of consistent, supportive relationships with families, friends and case managers. The homeless families with these lasting, supportive relationships have scores on mental health measures equal to those in the general population. To improve homeless families' chances of establishing and

keeping stable accommodation, community services should be delivered in the context of a long-term housing recovery plan, with the benefit of a "persistent, reliable, respectful and intimate relationship between the case manager and the client, and the delivery of comprehensive, practical support" to families (Gronda et al 2009a).

### Recommendation

Wesley Mission recommends that staff in homeless services engage with each displaced family for an extended period—before, during and after the establishment of stable accommodation. Assistance should include a long-term recovery plan.

### 1.4: "Tell us once"

Research reveals that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is far more prevalent in homeless people (around 40 per cent) than in the general population (about 1.5 per cent) (Taylor 2006). In fact, Robinson (2003) reports that trauma is often at the core of displacement and therefore all homeless services should be sensitive to people's experiences of extreme loss.

In addition to enduring trauma, homeless people often have to explain their traumatic situation numerous times to welfare and other organisations before receiving assistance. Ideally, families in crisis should be able to describe their circumstances to one support worker and that individual should make links to the necessary services, or ask colleagues to assist in doing so. This may be termed the "tell us once" approach to serving traumatised individuals.

The "tell us once" approach requires more effective links between social services (eg the prompt transfer of case notes, school reports, medical files, etc. within an established legal context of privacy and support). Gibson and Johnstone (2010) believe there is an opportunity for "fruitful collaboration between homeless and child welfare sectors", in addition to other links, to ensure that families in need receive consistent, appropriate services. Better links between service providers can facilitate the recovery process for homeless families by helping support workers to efficiently and sensitively find solutions for displaced families (Gibson and Morphett 2010).

<sup>15</sup> The TIC programs see each homeless person as a unique individual who is coping with a highly stressful life history. These approaches place recovery from trauma at the centre of the healing process (Hopper 2010, Prescott 2008, Robinson 2010, Schneir et al 2009).

## Recommendation

Wesley Mission supports the idea of a “tell us once” policy to minimise the number of times that traumatised families have to relate their experiences. It also empowers social services staff to make the necessary links to help families recover from their crises.

### 1.5: Spreading the word

Community Services and healthcare providers frequently encounter families at risk of homelessness but may not always have the resources to serve the complex needs of these parents and children. Wesley Mission sees a need for additional training and awareness-raising about homelessness for a range of professionals who come in contact with families in crisis. These people might include police, GPs and nurses, legal workers and religious ministers.

## Recommendation

Wesley Mission advocates further training in homeless services, and in particular knowledge of housing services, for professionals who frequently encounter homeless families or those at risk of homelessness.

### 1.6: More training

Wesley Mission recognises the scope and seriousness of the problems facing staff working in homeless services. Because homeless children have very specific needs related to their physical and mental health, staff in crisis support organisations deserve additional training so that they feel more confident in meeting families’ complex needs (Gibson and Morphet 2010). Ideally, staff could benefit from additional training in areas such as trauma counselling, child development, mental illness and addiction. (As noted in recommendation 1.1, homeless families should also have access to specialist services in these areas.)

## Recommendation

Wesley Mission calls for resources to provide additional professional training, particularly in the effects of trauma and the challenges of disability, for those who work with homeless families.

## 2: Addressing the housing shortage

As outlined in Wesley Mission’s recent report *Making Ends Meet: Financial stress is not just about money* (Wesley Mission 2010), Australia lacks adequate, affordable housing for many of its citizens.<sup>16</sup>

In Australia, the median cost of purchasing a home is several times the median annual income; this ratio is one of the highest in the world, making home ownership less affordable than in most other nations. In addition, private rental accommodation in Australia has become more expensive and difficult to secure, especially in urban centres.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that Australia suffers from a significant shortfall in public housing and low-cost private rental dwellings. There is a considerable body of research that reveals Australia to be in the midst of a long-term housing crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Experts estimate that Australia needs approximately 200,000 additional dwellings for lower-income individuals and families. In addition, the problem is becoming more pronounced each year (NHSC 2010).

Wesley Mission hopes the Commonwealth Government will make housing a priority. While the building of affordable public housing is certainly part of the solution, displaced families also deserve a more integrated, sustained level of support to enable them to exit homelessness. As Gronda et al note, homeless people’s frequent and long-term use of emergency services (e.g. hospitals, temporary housing facilities) is “more expensive to government and society than providing integrated housing and support” (2009b: 1). This point alone should spur national action to benefit homeless families in Australia.

As detailed below, Wesley Mission believes there are several areas in which housing policy can reduce homelessness.

<sup>16</sup> Two key housing recommendations from the 2010 Wesley Report, *Making Ends Meet: Financial stress is not just about money*, are reiterated here due to their relevance to the problem of homelessness in families. These recommendations include (1) the need for more supported housing and (2) more affordable private rental accommodation.

<sup>17</sup> There are too many published papers in this arena to cite here, but the work of AHURI, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, is highly respected and very detailed on this subject. Please see [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)

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### 2.1: More flexible housing options

Many homeless families are excluded from refuges because their family structure (eg single fathers, single grandparents, adolescents with children, couples with children, mothers with teenage boys) does not meet the entry criteria (McArthur 2006, Meadows-Oliver 2009). Furthermore, homelessness affects an entire extended family, not just the individuals who present to social services for assistance; for example, there may be other relatives living separately who are still impacted (Paquette and Bassuk 2009). This difficulty in securing housing creates severe hardship for families, and, in particular, young children.

In addition, people who have been homeless repeatedly, or for a considerable period, are more likely to have a long-term medical condition or permanent disability (Reynolds 2008). There is a complex interplay between the causes and effects of homelessness (Johnson 2009). The result is that parents or children who have medical conditions or disabilities may be excluded from some homelessness services (Robinson 2003).

Wesley Mission would like to see:

- more open criteria to include a wider range of families in temporary and permanent housing, even if those families need to be accommodated in separate sections of existing facilities
- more flexible temporary housing premises (ie dwellings that offer a variety of rooms) so that the same spaces may be used for different purposes.

#### Recommendation

Wesley Mission supports a shift towards more flexible and sensitive criteria for housing facilities (both in the public system and community organisations) to incorporate all types of families.

### 2.2: Increase housing supply

There is a massive shortage of public housing in NSW and many parents and children fall through the cracks into homelessness while they wait for public housing (Homelessness Australia 2010). Wesley Mission appreciates the challenges that governments and the private sector face with this problem and supports recent government efforts to develop better prevention strategies and to create additional dwellings; both the Federal and NSW state governments have

articulated positive goals in this arena (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008, NSW Government 2009). Wesley Mission wants to ensure that Australia stays on the path of increasing its housing supply and meeting its targets.

#### Recommendation

Wesley Mission recommends further *sustained* investment in public housing, including:

- expansion of programs (eg HASI, the Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative) that support vulnerable people with their accommodation and life-skill needs
- consideration of new forms of finance (eg grants, public loans and commercial loans) to encourage additional public housing.

### 2.3: More low-cost accommodation

Australia also needs a greater number of low-cost private rental dwellings. Wesley Mission believes that the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) helps make accommodation more accessible to people on low incomes, but given this program's 2012 expiry date, further efforts are needed to tackle the crucial issue of homelessness (Marks and Sedgwick 2008).

#### Recommendation

Wesley Mission calls for more low-cost private rental accommodation in NSW. Initiatives could include:

- increased and extended funding for the NRAS
- changes to rules for negative gearing on investment properties to encourage purchase and construction of affordable rental properties
- encouragement and support of community housing organisations and housing co-operatives that create dwellings, even on a small scale, for people on low incomes
- more long-term leases in the private rental market (including options for modest rent rises at pre-determined intervals in long leases).

### 2.4: Simplify procedures

Wesley Mission research reveals that people experiencing homelessness not only find the community housing system cumbersome and difficult to navigate, but actually experience the very services designed to support them as obstacles. Long waits

for public housing and a lack of understanding of how wait lists are administered can add to the perception. Extensive assessment and intake procedures, along with the sometimes quite narrowly-defined target groups of services, can make accessing emergency accommodation, and escaping homelessness, seem unattainable.

### **Recommendation**

Wesley Mission calls for simpler and more accessible systems and processes, along with more flexible and inclusive service models, among agencies, service providers and businesses engaged in activities related to family homelessness.

### **2.5: Consider new funding models**

Wesley Mission sees value in broadening the national discussion about funding for homelessness services. Our research indicates that most researchers and policy makers favour a multi-faceted approach to serving displaced families. One promising funding model that fits this perspective is the “package” approach. This concept enables funding bodies to purchase a suite of services – including housing, physical and mental health assistance, childcare support, trauma counselling—for each family in crisis. This approach is designed to ensure that families receive the full range of support services necessary to overcome their challenges.

### **Recommendation**

Wesley Mission would like to see discussion on new approaches to funding homelessness services. Options for the future may include a “package” approach, whereby funding is linked to a full range of social services that are tailored to each homeless family’s needs.

### **2.6: More effective housing use**

Public housing in NSW is not always used effectively; some properties have periods when they are empty, while others are constantly at capacity. Properties, or rooms within properties, are sometimes underutilised because of technicalities limiting the people who have access to these living spaces.

Wesley Mission, together with other researchers and practitioners in this field, wish to gain a better understanding of properties currently held by the SAAP and not-for-profit organisations.

Analysis of the characteristics of, and criteria for, these properties would

- contribute to a centralised database of properties so that homelessness services staff can quickly locate appropriate options for each displaced family
- clarify the need for appropriate modification of the properties over time, to make them usable by those who need assistance in that particular area.

### **Recommendation**

Wesley Mission calls for more effective evaluation, use and maintenance of existing community housing properties through a centralised database of properties.

## **3: Raising community awareness about family homelessness**

### **3.1: Media education**

Through this report, Wesley Mission hopes to open a public discussion on the real face of homelessness, which includes families of all descriptions, including young couples with children, grandparents, guardians, single mothers and single fathers (Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008, Toro 2007). We are particularly focused on eliminating the distress of homelessness—especially its long-term effects on children (Minnery and Greenhalgh 2007).

Wesley Mission believes there is a need for greater public awareness of the issue of homeless families to heighten understanding of, and support for, the measures needed to address it. In particular, Wesley Mission believes a large part of the onus for raising this awareness lies with the media and the breakdown of stereotypes.

### **Recommendation**

Wesley Mission calls for greater education and training among those responsible for reporting and disseminating media information (including journalists, politicians and media-focused academics) regarding the true picture of homelessness in Australia. Too often the Australian and international media perpetuate the myth that homelessness is only a problem among single males sleeping rough in our inner cities. The plight of homeless families deserves greater understanding and attention.