

17 April 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

Homelessness NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the *Independent Expert Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfire Season*. As the NSW peak for Specialist Homelessness Services, we urge the Inquiry to ensure at the centre of its work is a focus on those in the community who experience vulnerability particularly those experiencing homelessness both before and after the bushfire season, and to consult not only with individuals who have lived experience of homelessness but also with those services who support them. These communities and organisations play a pivotal role in supporting people experiencing homelessness on a day-to-day basis, but also in times of crisis such as the recent bushfire events.

People experiencing homelessness, among others, are the first and most impacted by the impact of climate change including extreme weather events. As stated by the Australian Council of Social Services, based on their research with the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility:

*'People with the least resources tend to live in areas that are highly exposed to disasters and often lack the resources they need to recover. While many people in an impacted community will be affected in some way, the stark reality is that people who are disadvantaged are most likely to die in a disaster.'*<sup>1</sup>

This is a critical part of determining how well NSW was and is placed to not only prevent and mitigate emergencies and disasters, but how well we were and are placed to respond.

It is important to note that the NSW bushfires, and those it left homeless, occurred in the context of an ongoing crisis of homelessness in NSW:

- Between 2011 and 2016 the number of people experiencing homelessness in NSW increased by 37% from 27,479 to 37,715.
- During a similar period homelessness services have also experienced unprecedented demand with a 38% increase in clients from 2014 – 2016.
- This level of demand has been maintained since 2016. In 2018-19 homeless services across NSW saw over 73,000 clients. This is 27% more than they are funded to work with.
- NSW has now reached the point where more people who need crisis accommodation do not receive it (21,552) than those who do (18,000).
- And even if supported by a homelessness service, 2 in 3 clients will still be without long term accommodation or housing.

Our ability to respond to increased pressure on 'crisis' accommodation is severely hampered when the 'crisis' system itself constantly in crisis. If we don't start to build relief for the everyday person into our housing system – into affordable renting, social housing, housing security - there is very little resilience and flexibility in times of emergency and disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Council of Social Services (2015), *Resilient Community Services*, 'Introduction', access via <https://resilience.acoss.org.au/the-six-steps/introduction/key-messages>

In relation to the specific events of the 2019-2020 bushfire response, there are a number of matters that Homelessness NSW would draw the attention of the Inquiry to. It is our regret that we cannot expand on these matters in great detail, as we are currently – as are many of our members – supporting the urgent response to COVID-19. Many of these matters are interrelated, some are direct and others indirect, and they are key considerations at various points of preparing for and responding to disasters, including longer-term recovery.

#### *Before and during the bushfires*

- Coordination of and additional resources provided to community services supporting the communities most vulnerable to prepare for and respond to bushfire and other extreme weather events. Homelessness services are a key referral point during these events as they already coordinate health, housing and other community services for clients. Homelessness services in bushfire affected areas and in the surrounding areas have reported a huge increase in clients and work hours and expectations because of this key role, however, services are not funded to respond in this way. This increase was also managed within the context of staff and Board members also having to manage their own family evacuation and bushfire management and so it was a challenge to balance supporting clients and meeting family and community needs.
- Understanding of safety issues for vulnerable people and early planning to prepare and support people during extreme weather events. This ranges from support for people with a disability, to supporting young people experiencing homelessness to understanding the safety issues for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. We are aware of at least one instance where a woman escaping domestic violence was placed at risk due to being in an evacuation centre with the perpetrator. Services need to be given early warning and supported to plan evacuation (where needed) for their clients as early as possible.
- Evacuation, evacuation centres and the lack of coordination between emergency services and established community services with existing connections to community: Homelessness services already have deep roots in local communities and are in touch with vulnerable groups like those experiencing homelessness. Anecdotal evidence suggested that services were not well utilised in the emergency response by those coordinating the response (however were still providing additional support via client and other community contact that they had prior to the bushfires) nor was there a coordinated response in evacuation centres. These services could have been essential in immediately rolling out support to vulnerable community members, as is their expertise, in both evacuation and support directly following the crisis.
- Smoke, haze, and health consequences for rough sleepers and those living in poor housing conditions and the difficulty across the board in rapidly responding to keeping people healthy and safe. Health advice at the time was to 'stay inside, use air-conditioning to filter the air' which was completely inappropriate not only for those sleeping rough, but for others who didn't have access to an air-conditioner, or who couldn't run it due to financial insecurity, or may have experience 'bill shock' as a result. The City of Sydney and the Department of Communities and Justice have an Extreme Weather Protocol – but it does not include smoke haze as part of this and so there was no coordination during this period to ensure that people sleeping rough were free from the smoke dangers. This was complicated by the City being unable to open up community centres for people sleeping rough as these too were impacted by smoke haze. Resourcing is required to ensure that the condition of social and other low cost housing ensures the health of tenants. It is also required to support Councils, homelessness services and the Department of Communities and Justice to plan and respond to smoke issues for people sleeping rough.

#### *After the bushfires*

- Ongoing resourcing is required for homelessness services both in the affected areas and in the surrounding areas after extreme weather events as services experience an influx of clients not

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only due to lack of housing, but due to other stressors. Many small organisations stepped up to take on the load and were not readily recompensed – anecdotal evidence includes one organisation spending 4 months of their emergency relief budget in 2 weeks.

- Planning and resourcing the recovery needs to take into account the increase in the experience of homelessness as a result of loss of home, property, income, financial stability, social connection etc. Emergencies and disasters don't only have a disproportionate impact on those already experiencing homelessness, but it creates an additional cohort of people in the community who experience not just short term displacement and homelessness, but chronic homelessness due to the resulting economic and social impact on their lives
- Planning and resourcing needs to consider the impact of the damage of environmental and cultural Aboriginal places on Aboriginal experiences of homelessness. For example, homelessness might be experienced by a person by virtue of their removal from country, or inability for whatever reason to access their land or spiritual home.<sup>12</sup> Consideration also needs to be given to issues experienced in Aboriginal communities such as overcrowding and inappropriate housing and the impact this has on homelessness and rebuilding communities.
- Rebuilding communities needs to understand the flow on impact of temporarily housing community members displaced by bushfires on the housing stock needed for those supporting people experiencing different forms of homelessness. The limited availability of housing in the private rental market means that areas become less affordable for the most vulnerable. An affordable housing response needs to be a key component of bushfire recovery.
- Surge of domestic and family violence (DFV) in the aftermath of bushfires. DFV is one of the leading causes of homelessness in Australia and there is anecdotal evidence that this increased in bushfire affected areas. Resources to support women and children escaping domestic and family violence need to be part of any bushfire recovery plan, and
- Understanding the major challenge for long term recovery for communities in the current context of rental insecurity, housing affordability, a lack of social housing stock, and homelessness.

In ensuring NSW is equipped to deal with the likelihood of increasing extreme weather events and the impacts of climate change, we must ensure that disadvantage doesn't determine a person's chance of survival. Appropriate action is not only about focusing on the emergency or disaster at hand, and not only a long term-recovery horizon but working to eliminate disadvantage including address the drivers of homelessness. In the case of homelessness in NSW, action must be taken ensure we have a system that can operate during times of disaster. NSW needs:

1. An Affordable Housing Strategy that includes the delivery of 5,000 new social housing dwellings every year for 10 years, provides commitments to effective inclusionary zoning and affordable housing targets for new developments and ensures no-exits from social housing.
2. A 10-year plan to end homelessness that includes no exits into homelessness, systemic funding of supportive housing approaches, a focus on ending inner city homelessness and a focus on prevention particularly for young people, women and children experiencing domestic and family violence and Aboriginal people.
3. Enhancements to the Specialist Homelessness System that addresses gaps created by the Going Home Staying Home reforms, particularly domestic and family violence services, youth services and specialist Aboriginal homelessness services.

Alongside this NSW also needs in likely bushfire affected and immediate surrounding areas:

4. Resources to assist homelessness services to prepare and plan for bushfires and inclusion of homelessness services in emergency management prevention and preparation planning, with a focus on client safety and additional support requirements
5. Resources to support homelessness services in managing the influx of clients and increase in workload during a bushfire emergency and in the recovery period, including how staff might be

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- redeployed from other areas to support the response to enable existing staff to support their own personal evacuation or property management response
6. Resources to ensure that all low cost housing, including social housing, can ensure a smoke free environment in order to protect the health of tenants.
  7. Resources provided to Councils in areas with rough sleeper communities to lead a response to support people sleeping rough during hazardous smoke periods to ensure that they remain healthy and smoke free.
  8. Aboriginal community led planning and resources to ensure that Aboriginal people are not displaced from their homes and community and are able to access affordable and appropriate housing.
  9. Resources to provide affordable housing for the most vulnerable members of the community during the bushfire recovery period.

Homelessness NSW would welcome the opportunity to be able to expand on these matters before the committee, in greater detail, should the opportunity be available.

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Yours sincerely,



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