

***From the President's Office
Dr. Danielle McMullen
MBBS (Hons), FRACGP, DCH, GAICD***

12 August 2021

Wendy Lindsay MP
Committee Chair
Legislative Assembly
Committee on Community Services

Lodged via website

Re: options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage

Dear Committee on Community Services,

Thank you for providing the Australian Medical Association of New South Wales (AMA NSW) with the opportunity to provide input into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage.

Housing is an important social determinant of health. There is substantial evidence that indicates a lack of housing or poor-quality housing can negatively impact health and wellbeing.¹

Summary of recommendations:

- 1.) That funding for homelessness services be increased to meet current demand
- 2.) That ongoing investment into long term social housing properties be made to address the backlog of people on waiting lists for social housing
- 3.) That investment in housing for women and children escaping family violence be prioritised
- 4.) That new social housing be built to zero-carbon standards and existing social housing be retrofitted to be energy efficient

COVID-19 response to homelessness

Homelessness in NSW increased by 37% in NSW from 2011 to 2016 – significantly higher than the national increase of 14%.² Demand for homelessness services has also increased. In 2019-2020 homelessness services across NSW assisted 70,000 clients – 26% more than homelessness services are funded to support.³

Lack of affordable housing in NSW is a significant driver in homelessness in NSW. There are 50,000 households on the social housing waiting list.⁴

Pressure on services intensified in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 39% of providers reporting an increase in demand for services in March and April 2020.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the heightened health risks people face when they are homeless or when they are placed in overcrowded and insecure accommodation. International evidence

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indicates that transmission of COVID-10 may be greater for people sleeping without shelter or in public places due to limited access to showering facilities and hygiene supplies. In communal situations or large crisis accommodation sites people are unable to physically distance from other people are at greater risk of contracting the virus.

From a public health perspective, investing in social housing accommodation is an important means of reducing the transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

The NSW Government provided an additional \$14 million for hotel and motel accommodation and \$20 million in additional rental subsidies. This supported the health and welfare of 23,000 people who were placed in temporary accommodation or subsidised to remain in a stable housing situation.⁶ An additional 4,000 people were supported through crisis accommodation.⁷

The NSW Government's \$65 million Together Home Program will provide long-term housing and wrap around support services to over 800 people experiencing homelessness. However, as was noted by the Audit Office of NSW in its report to the Department of Communities and Justice regarding the NSW Government's response to the COVID-19 crisis during 2020, the number of Together Home places is significantly less than what is required to provide housing for the 4,355 individuals who were sleeping rough prior to entering enhanced temporary accommodation during the pandemic. In addition, NGO stakeholders raised concerns that the complexity of needs amongst the Together Home client group, the limited availability of affordable rental properties and the existing scale of unmet need for social housing in New South Wales will make it difficult for individuals to secure longer-term housing if the program's case managed support packages are not continued. Consequently, AMA (NSW) urges the NSW Government to consider funding the Together Home program on a permanent basis.

Building new social housing

Affordable housing remains a critical issue in NSW. Contrary to expectations that COVID would dampen the property market, house prices have continued to climb, which has resulted in a rental crisis. Homelessness is expected to increase across Australia by 9% and housing stress could increase 24%.⁸

Less than 1% of all private rentals are affordable for people on income support. The priority housing list increased by 800 applicants in 2020.⁹

Research and modelling conducted by Equity Economics finds that a new construction program of 5,000 new social housing properties per year, in addition to investing \$500m into repairs and maintenance program for existing properties will create 18,000 new jobs in the construction sector in NSW and prevent a state-wide increase of homelessness of between 22.8% and 46.5% at a cost of \$218m and \$445m per year.¹⁰

Housing at risk groups

There is an acute need to invest in housing solutions for women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

There has been a 6% increase in women who had experienced domestic violence seeking specialist homelessness services in March 2021 compared to the year before. Lack of long-term housing is forcing 7,690 women a year to return to violent partners and 9,120 women a year to become homeless.¹¹

Provision of social housing would not only provide women and children with a safe place to go, but it would also deliver economic benefits and create jobs in the construction industry. A collaborative approach with the Federal Government is needed to unlock existing housing supply.

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Energy efficient housing

The NSW Government has an opportunity to not only provide housing for at risk populations but invest in solutions that incorporate energy efficient housing. Poor housing can increase inequality by posing threats to health and economic security, including through indoor air pollution, as well as through increased living costs due to poor energy efficiency.

Low-income households are sensitive to energy prices and face significant barriers in accessing energy efficiency technologies.¹²

The Australian Council of Social Services has identified that the type of housing that low-income households can afford is typically energy inefficient.¹³

Energy unaffordability has a detrimental effect on households' health and social wellbeing, with Australian and international evidence identifying high energy bills as affecting renters' ability to afford other essentials such as food and medication as well as significantly impacting their mental health and social wellbeing.

Currently houses account for 28% of all carbon emissions worldwide, half of which comes from energy used for heating and air conditioning. AMA (NSW) urges both the construction of new social housing to be built to zero-carbon standards and the retrofitting of existing homes.

Yours Sincerely,



Dr. Danielle McMullen
President, AMA (NSW)

¹ "Housing And Health: An Overview of The Literature," Health Affairs Health Policy Brief, June 7, 2018. DOI: 10.1377/hpb20180313.396577

² Launch Housing (2018), 'National Homelessness Monitor', : <https://cityfutures.be.unsw.edu.au/research/projects/australianhomelessness-monitor/>

³ AIHW (2019), 'Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2019-20', <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessnessservices/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/summary>

⁴ NSW Department of Communities and Justice (2020) Guide to waiting times for social housing as at 30 June 2019, Department of Communities and Justice, Sydney.

⁵ Equity Economics (2020), 'Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW'
https://www.ncoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/policy/Equity%20Economics%20-%20Supporting%20Economic%20Recovery%20in%20NSW_05092020_Final.pdf

⁶ Inquiry into the NSW Government's Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic
<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/transcripts/2468/Transcript%20-%207%20October%202020%20-%20CORRECTED%20-%20Government%20s%20management%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic.pdf>

⁷ Based on ABS NSW Homelessness Census data

⁸ Equity Economics (2020), A Wave of Disadvantage
<https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/news/new-wave-disadvantagereport-shows-concerning-increases-economic-and-social-disadvantage>

⁹ DCJ housing waiting times <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/expected-waiting-times>

¹⁰ Equity Economics (2020) Supporting Economic Recovery in NSW: Investment in social and affordable housing today is critical to supporting jobs today and families into the future, Equity Economics, Melbourne.

¹¹ http://everybodyshome.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EE_Women-Housing_Domestic-Violence_WEB_SINGLES.pdf

¹² Walker & Day 2012; ACOSS 2013; Liu & Judd 2016

¹³ ACOSS; 2013