

## Launch Housing Submission

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### ***Productivity Commission Review of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement***

**March 2022**

## Introduction

Launch Housing welcomes the opportunity to respond to the review of the *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement* (NHHA) by the Productivity Commission.

For consideration by the Productivity Commission, and based on our extensive practice experience, we identify four overarching themes essential to strengthening the next NHHA, along with proposed solutions for better outcomes for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The four themes include the fundamental need for a national housing and homelessness strategy; the critical need for more affordable housing to end homelessness; a homelessness sector that is adequately resourced to end homelessness; and funding an evidence base of what works.

## Launch Housing

Launch Housing is an independent Melbourne-based community organisation working with people at risk or experiencing homelessness. Our mission is to end homelessness. We believe housing is a basic human right that affords people dignity, and it is our job to make this happen. We provide flexible, specialist services that directly assist thousands of individuals, couples and families every year. More information about Launch Housing is available [here](https://launchhousing.org.au).

## Acknowledgement

Launch Housing proudly acknowledges the First Peoples of Australia and recognises both their deep spiritual connection to Country, and their unique ability to care for it. We acknowledge we live and work on land that was never ceded and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging, who ensure the world's oldest living culture continues to grow and thrive.

## 1. A National Housing and Homelessness Strategy

### Solution

- The Federal Government should develop a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, which would enable a more robust and sustainable NHHA to fund the activities, projects, and workforce requirements, needed to address and end homelessness.

### Key issues

In line with a key recommendation from the Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness<sup>i</sup>, we are strongly supportive of a national housing and homelessness strategy, recognising that there are policies at the Commonwealth level that are ‘*creating homelessness*’<sup>ii</sup>

In its current configuration, the NHHA has not led to improved access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing for people experiencing homelessness. Critically, it has not resulted in increased stock of social and affordable housing; nor has it solved homelessness. In fact, under the NHHA, homelessness has worsened.

As highlighted in Launch Housing’s [Australian Homelessness Monitor](#), the changing level of homelessness is an outcome of socio-economic and housing market trends that influence the number of people experiencing or at risk of becoming homeless, and which also affects their capacity to regain access to appropriate and affordable accommodation.

As a funding agreement, the NHHA is severely restricted in what it can achieve in relation to improving access to housing ‘*across the housing spectrum*’, given that **key policy mechanisms** only available at the Federal level (tax policy, income support, rent assistance) **remain outside its parameters**. A broader national housing and homelessness strategy would link together these interrelated policy areas with the goal of ending homelessness and improving housing outcomes for all Australians.

A National Housing and Homelessness Strategy needs to be **ambitious** and acknowledge **housing as essential infrastructure**. It needs to provide a long-term **comprehensive plan**, with appropriate levels of funding for increasing the stock of social housing to end the homelessness crisis. It also needs to outline the connections with other policy areas and their role in improving housing outcomes and ending homelessness.

For the next NHHA to be more effective in ending homelessness, it needs to be part of a broader, national-level, housing and homelessness strategy. Such a strategy is best led by the Commonwealth Government who directly control a number of **key policy levers** including income support and rent assistance as well as taxation policy.

A National Housing and Homelessness Strategy should include:

- A detailed plan for preventing and ending homelessness;
- A detailed strategy for increasing social housing stock to necessary levels;
- A clearly articulated plan for how housing and homelessness initiatives and services and allied sectors should work together to implement the National Strategy.

The next National Housing and Homelessness Agreement would then sit under the National strategy and be focussed on funding aspects of its implementation. The NHHA would continue to provide funding for affordable housing and homelessness services, with a range of improvements such as those outlined in themes 2 through 4 of this submission.

## 2. You cannot end homelessness without access to affordable housing

### Solutions

- Targeted funds to raise the rate of income support payments and [Commonwealth Rent Assistance \(CRA\)](#) to increase housing affordability (and prevent homelessness for those at risk) and to broaden the pool of sustainable exit options from homelessness services to include private rental housing.
- Dedicated capital funding to significantly increase the amount of social housing stock available nationally and cover the costs of operation of social housing providers. Funding should be based on robust demand estimates and transparent accounting on the cost of provision of social housing.
- Funding to scale up and encourage growth of **permanent supportive housing** models and **functional zero** as effective **evidence-informed** responses to end long-term homelessness, which aligns with the Federal Government's commitment to improve the lives of people living with mental illness, and to reduce violence against women and their children (a national priority cohort in the NHHA).

### Key issues

A lack of access to affordable housing compromises the effectiveness of service interventions and support, and is costly in human and economic terms. Specialist homelessness services (SHS) need access to an adequate supply of social and affordable housing in order to exit people from homelessness.

#### Income Support and CRA

The low incomes of people experiencing homelessness make it extremely difficult to access housing that is affordable to them to resolve their homelessness.

- Nationally, a majority (79%) of clients aged 15 and over (almost 146,000 people) supported by specialist homelessness services are reliant on income support payments as their main source of income (including 33% on JobSeeker); a further 9% (close to 16,900 people) have no income when they present for assistance.<sup>iii</sup>
- A 2018 review found that limited access to housing, was a key barrier to positive client outcomes for Melbourne's three largest crisis supported accommodation services.<sup>iv</sup>
- The success and effectiveness of key state government initiatives such as Homelessness to Home (H2H), Melbourne Street to Home, and supportive housing, and are heavily reliant upon an available supply of social and affordable housing for addressing clients' homelessness.

The private rental market remains **unaffordable** for low to very low-income households and people on income support payments face the most difficulty in accessing affordable private rental housing.<sup>v</sup>

- 74,266 properties were listed for rent across Australia in March 2021, but **only three** were affordable for an individual on the JobSeeker payment.<sup>vi</sup>
- Despite receiving CRA, 46% of low-income households paid more than 30% of income on rent, while 17% paid more than 50%.<sup>vii</sup>
- According to research that estimated the population **at-risk of homelessness** in Australia, many of those **at-risk** had incomes in the bottom income quintile (bottom 20% of the income distribution), and the majority (72%) were reliant on income support payments. Higher levels

of rental stress and material deprivation, such as skipping meals and being unable to heat their homes, were evident for this group.<sup>viii</sup>

### **An adequate supply of social housing**

Social housing (including public housing and community housing) is an essential mechanism to ending homelessness.<sup>ix</sup> A lack of access to housing compromises the effectiveness of the support response and is costly in human and economic terms.<sup>x</sup>

- Nationally, more than **51,200 dwellings are needed right now** just to house almost **70,000 clients (including 18,300 children)** receiving support from specialist homelessness services, *on any given day*.<sup>xi</sup>
- Additionally, there are approximately 400,000 eligible households unable to access social housing, while more than 150,000 are on waiting lists.<sup>xii</sup>
- There has been a long run decline in the supply of social housing over decades<sup>xiii</sup>. Targeted capital funding is needed to cover reasonable costs of operation, as well as expand and grow social housing stock.
- This dedicated funding should be based on estimates of demand for social housing and transparent information about their operating costs. Demand estimates could be produced by either states/territories or a reinstated National Housing Supply Council.

### **Permanent Supportive Housing**

- People experiencing rough sleeping, especially with a chronic history of homelessness, are a particularly vulnerable group with a range of health problems including acute mental illness, severe substance dependence as well as acute and chronic physical health difficulties.<sup>xiv</sup> Increased complexity is linked with increased service use<sup>xv</sup>; and tends to be characterised by cycling between hospital emergency departments and exiting back into homelessness, and interspersed by interactions with the justice system and incarceration.
- Family and domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children. Of the almost 278,300 clients supported by specialist homelessness services in 2020-21, 42% had experienced family and domestic violence. The majority were women (77%); mental health issues were common (40%), and many were parents who presented to services with children in their care (40%).<sup>xvi</sup> The impact of homelessness and family violence on children is profound, affecting their health and wellbeing, engagement with school, capacity to learn and their connections to family, friends and the wider community.<sup>xvii xviii</sup>
- Permanent supportive housing (PSH) has a long history as a response to end chronic homelessness among adults with serious mental illness and drug addiction. A flexible approach, it includes both 'single site high density' (congregate) and 'scatter site' models (see Attachment A). With 65 studio apartments, our congregate PSH model, [Elizabeth Street Common Ground](#) (ESCG), has provided integrated supportive housing to highly vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals for the past 12 years. A 2021 evaluation of ESCG demonstrated that it is an effective approach, providing needed support and housing stability for people with long-term experiences of homelessness and complex needs.<sup>xix</sup> Further, PSH also makes financial sense for governments. The evaluation of Common Ground Brisbane reported an annual cost saving to the Queensland government of almost \$15,000 per person.<sup>xx</sup>

- Over the years, PSH has evolved to meet the needs of multiple vulnerable groups with histories of homelessness including, young people, older people, people with disabilities and families.<sup>xxi</sup> In fact, our new [Families Supportive Housing](#) (FSH) program in Dandenong will provide a safe place to live, stability and support for 60 women and up to 130 children who have experienced family violence and homelessness. Now in the final stages of construction, FSH is expected to be operational by mid-2022.

### Functional Zero

- Launch Housing is committed to ending rough sleeping, using the **functional zero** approach to work with local communities. Focused on achieving a more effective and sustainable outcome for people experiencing entrenched street homelessness, functional zero is an evidence-informed method that relies on **real-time data** to measure progress (see Attachment B).
- The functional zero approach has been implemented in [Melbourne](#), and has significantly reduced rough sleeping in the local government area of [Port Philip](#), which has attracted the interest of several more local communities. [Frankston](#) and Stonnington both launched their functional zero projects late last year, while three more are due to go live later this year. To date, these functional zero plans have been funded through philanthropy.

Further information on these projects are contained in the Appendices.

### 3. Adequately resource the homelessness sector to end homelessness

#### Solutions

- Increase funding for homelessness services and determine funding levels using the most up-to-date Specialist Homelessness Services Collection and census-based homelessness estimates, and index NHHA funding to CPI.
- Fund allied sectors to better support the housing needs of their clients when leaving their services.
- Dedicated funding for a workforce development strategy, including peer support.
- Increase the available places in TAFE and university courses for relevant disciplines.

#### Key Issues

##### Inadequate funding to meet demand

Specialist homelessness services (SHS) across Australia are unable to meet current demand with 312 requests for assistance not met on any given day.<sup>xxii</sup> This equates to 114,026 requests for assistance in the 2020-21 financial year.

- The amount of funding for states/territories is based on the share of homelessness population enumerated in the **2006 Census**, which is 14 years out of date and does not reflect current need<sup>xxiii</sup>. The funding model should be based on the most recent census figures and recent years data from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection including supported clients and unmet need.
- NHHA funding is indexed to the Wage Cost Index 1 (WCI1), which is a lower rate generally than the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Effectively, this will result in a \$20 million loss of base Commonwealth funding under the NHHA between 2020-21 and 2022-23<sup>xxiv</sup>.

##### Allied sectors to provide a housing response to their clients

Demand for homelessness services is exacerbated by difficulties allied services, such as hospitals and the justice system, face in addressing the housing issues of their clients/patients. Some examples of this are below:

- Clients have been discharged from psychiatric hospitals directly to homelessness entry points<sup>xxv</sup>. Outcomes for clients would be improved if exits from psychiatric hospitals could be supported by 'step-down' programs providing supported accommodation, rather than sending patients to homelessness entry points.
- People exiting prison are one of the fastest growing groups experiencing homelessness – over a 4-year period, there has been a 40% increase in those exiting prison into homelessness.<sup>xxvi</sup>
- Despite significant increase in funding for family violence, the response from family violence emergency accommodation services is limited to a short period of time, after which women and children are then referred on to homelessness services.<sup>xxvii</sup>

##### Workforce shortages and the need for workforce planning

There is an urgent need to understand the key skills and capabilities that are needed now and into the future for the homelessness sector workforce, as well as understand how workforce training, attraction, recruitment and retention issues be best addressed.

- Specialist Homelessness Services employ more than 23,000 staff nationally (78% female;)<sup>xxviii</sup> and are part of a larger workforce of 550,000<sup>xxix</sup>. The community service sector's is 'Australia's fastest growing industry'<sup>xxx</sup>.
- Clients are presenting with increasingly complex needs, requiring assistance across multiple sectors and programs including health, mental health, alcohol and other drug (AOD), domestic and family violence, disability, aged care, child protection and legal/justice services. To cater to the needs of clients the SHS sector provides support across multiple disciplines.
- There is a growing shortage of skilled staff to work in SHSs. Additional training places are required in both TAFE and universities in fields such as social work, psychology, nursing, AOD, community work, and community development to fill skill shortages.
- Peer support is a powerful mechanism that can immediately bring down barriers and establish strong, trusting, experience-based relationships<sup>xxxi</sup>. There is an urgent need to understand how the homelessness sector can include a peer support workforce and build cultural competency to support peer support.
- A workforce development strategy<sup>xxxii</sup> for the sector is needed to articulate the key capabilities for the workforce in this sector; outline a program of training and professional development; boost training places and; outline how a peer-support workforce can best be integrated and supported.



## 4. Knowing what works – funding data collection and service evaluation

### Solutions

- Dedicated funding for homelessness sector to fulfil complex reporting requirements in the next NHHA.
- Specific funding for documenting service models and evaluations of programs.
- Reinstate a homelessness clearinghouse.
- A targeted additional funding stream providing ongoing funding for innovative programs that are evaluated and shown to be effective
- Additional funding for the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and state/territory governments to promote improvements in data reporting and accountability
- Improved reporting on the capacity of the SHS sector and the expenditure of funds in bilateral agreements.

### Key issues

#### Complex reporting requirements

Homelessness services have to manage complex reporting requirements across multiple data systems often for the same client.

- Homelessness services, including Launch Housing, deliver multiple programs many of which require using a specific data collection system and which have their own specific reporting requirements across multiple government departments. This often results in staff having to enter data into multiple different systems for each client. For example, Launch Housing has around 50 programs with client services staff required to work across multiple data systems, for reporting purposes.

#### Lack of funding for evaluations

Lack of funding for evaluation and documentation of service models is hindering the development of an evidence base about what works and why and is impeding evidence based-decision making and program development.

- Dedicated funding for program monitoring, data analysis and evaluation will support sharing of knowledge and best practice across the wider sector. New and existing evaluations and documentation of service models need to be collated and made easily accessible to the SHS and related sectors to inform ongoing service development and improvement.

#### Securing ongoing funding for innovative programs

It is very difficult to secure ongoing government funding for new programs that are shown to be effective

- Launch Housing has a number of innovative programs that are designed to respond to emerging client needs (including for [children](#) and [young people](#)) and to fill a service gap, often observed by front-line staff in their day-to-day work. Generally, Launch Housing needs to source funding for developing and implementing such programs from philanthropy. Unfortunately, philanthropic funding is usually limited and therefore, doesn't allow for effective and innovative programs to be scaled up. An evaluation demonstrating an effective new program should be central in awarding ongoing funding.

### **Understanding the capacity of the specialist homelessness services (SHS)**

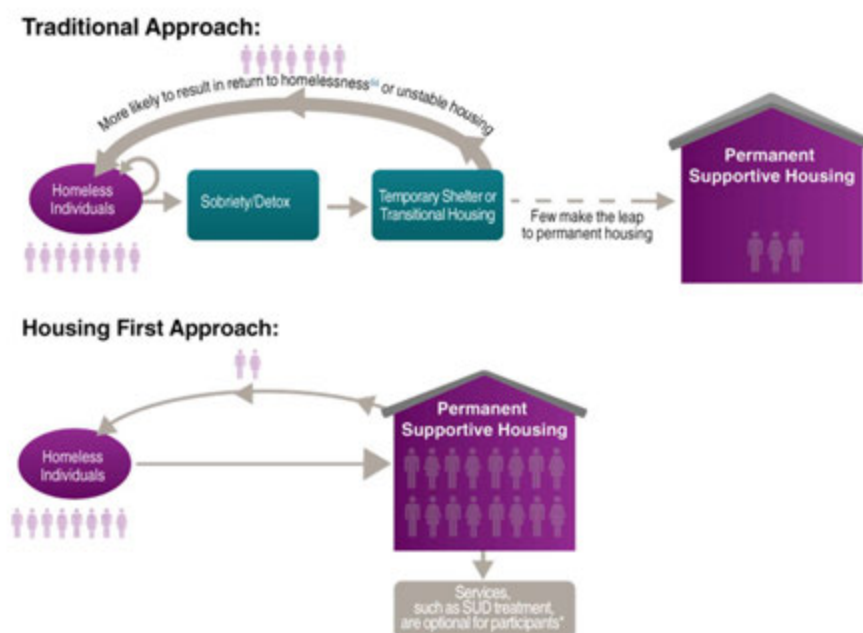
At present we only have the statistics on support periods provided and unmet demand to understand the capacity of the sector and whether the sector is meeting demand

- A new funding agreement needs enhanced accountability requirements that require state and territory departments to report on the capacity of the sector in their jurisdiction – for example, the number of crisis accommodation and refuge beds, the number of case management places available, the capacity of intake and assessment programs, the number of permanent supportive housing units
- To understand the work of the sector and how resources are allocated we need reporting on the number of clients and funds expended also needs to be made available by program type – for example Crisis, Initial Assessment Program, outreach, early intervention and prevention.

## Attachment A: Permanent Supportive Housing

Launch Housing supports the provision of more Housing First or permanent supportive housing options for people with an experience of chronic homelessness: who are prone to episodes of mental ill-health and heavy system users of health, criminal justice and crisis-related homelessness and housing services.

Permanent supportive housing has a number of key features	
<b>It brings housing and support together for high need groups</b>	Permanent supportive housing (PSH) refers to the provision of ongoing, long-term housing coupled with supportive services for individuals and families experiencing chronic homelessness, the unstably housed, individuals living with a long-term disability, and individuals and families who face multiple barriers to accessing and maintaining housing <sup>xxiii</sup> .
<b>Uses a 'Housing First' approach</b>	Unlike the traditional approach that require a transition from short-term to transitional housing, PSH is based on a 'Housing First' approach of getting people with a co-occurrence of homelessness and mental health straight into permanent housing.



<b>A flexible approach that supports both 'high density' and 'scatter site' models</b>	<b>High density models, like launch Housing's Elizabeth Street Common Ground, involve people living in one apartment complex, using a mixed tenancy model (e.g. not everyone who lives there has support needs or has experienced homelessness) and some of the support they need to sustain their tenancies is provided 'on-site'.</b>
	With 'scatter-site' models, people live in separate houses or units and support workers visit the person's home to help deliver or co-ordinate needed support. The evaluation of the Camperdown Common Ground in Sydney <sup>xxiv</sup> argued that both scatter-site housing and Common Ground models were of value for different formerly homeless tenants.

<b>Permanent supportive housing is especially beneficial for those with an experience of chronic homelessness</b>	
<b>A targeted approach is required</b>	There is good evidence to show that approximately 50-60% of people experiencing chronic homelessness will require permanent support to sustain housing. This is because they may have several health conditions, such as chronic illness, disability, mental illness and/or a history of having had a traumatic brain injury <sup>xxxv</sup> .
	An earlier review of Launch Housing's Elizabeth Street Common Ground <sup>xxxvi</sup> found that 91% of residents reported mental health as a major issue, 72% reported substance use as a major issue; and 66% lived with a combination of mental illness and substance use.
<b>Estimate of demand for permanent supportive housing in Inner Melbourne</b>	Using the VI-SPDAT tool as a measure of support need, Launch Housing estimates that 490 people would benefit from Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) each year in inner Melbourne. The VI-SPDAT is a specialist decision and assessment tool for use with people experiencing homelessness. It gives a measure of acuity and the level of support they require.
<b>Where support is flexible and provided on-site</b>	The critical components of PSH are the provision of long-term housing and voluntary supportive services for the residents, including access to mental health care and medical services.
<b>It is an approach that works for singles and families</b>	PSH has evolved to meet the needs of multiple vulnerable groups with histories of homelessness, including families, young people, older people and people with disabilities.
	Family Supportive Housing combines affordable housing with tailored support services and is designed to lead to stability and independence.
<b>And has demonstrable financial benefits to governments</b>	International evidence confirms that PSH reduces people's use of institutional and emergency services and is likely to result in overall savings for governments in the medium to long term.
	The evaluation of Common Ground Brisbane showed that although the cost of providing the housing and support was about \$35,000 per annum per formerly homeless person, this still represented a cost saving to government of almost \$15,000 per person per year.

## Attachment B: Functional Zero

# Achieving Functional Zero in Victoria

Functional Zero is a target and an approach to achieving an end to homelessness we call the 'Zero methodology' or the 'Zero approach'.

A functional zero end to homelessness is achieved when the number of people entering homelessness, and currently homeless, is less than average six-month housing placement rate. It requires the most efficient possible homelessness response system and accurate timely information about who is homeless.

The Zero methodology acknowledges that homelessness is the result of deeply embedded structural failures. The significant change required to achieve Absolute Zero, or the complete eradication of homelessness in Australia, is unlikely to be achieved under current (and foreseeable) Government policy settings.

### The goal of Functional Zero

The goal of a Zero approach to ending homelessness is to make the homelessness response system as efficient as possible. A Functional Zero optimised response system provides enough services, housing and shelter beds for everyone who needs them, and anyone who experiences homelessness does so briefly, is rehoused successfully, and is unlikely to return to homelessness again (Turner et al 2017).

### The birth of Functional Zero

Functional Zero was developed in the United States by Community Solutions as [Built for Zero](#) in 2015, and has been embraced by over 80 communities in the USA. From there, Functional Zero or the 'Zero methodology' spread to Canada, where various projects are currently underway and an emerging body of critical literature has started to develop (e.g. Turner et al 2017). Functional Zero has come to Australia under the leadership of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) as [Advance to Zero](#). Its goal is to end rough sleeping homelessness in this country within three years. South Australia was the first state in Australia to adopt the approach in 2018 with the [Adelaide Zero project](#).

### Launch Housing and the Zero approach in Victoria

In Victoria, Launch Housing led a coalition of partner organizations to launch *Port Phillip Zero*, the first Zero project in this state which produced its first By-Name List in July 2019. Launch Housing has used the learnings from the first nine months of Port Phillip Zero to fine-tune the Zero approach for the Victorian context, with a specific focus on partnerships with Local Government. We are the main Victorian representatives of the AAEH and the data leads for the Port Phillip Zero approach.

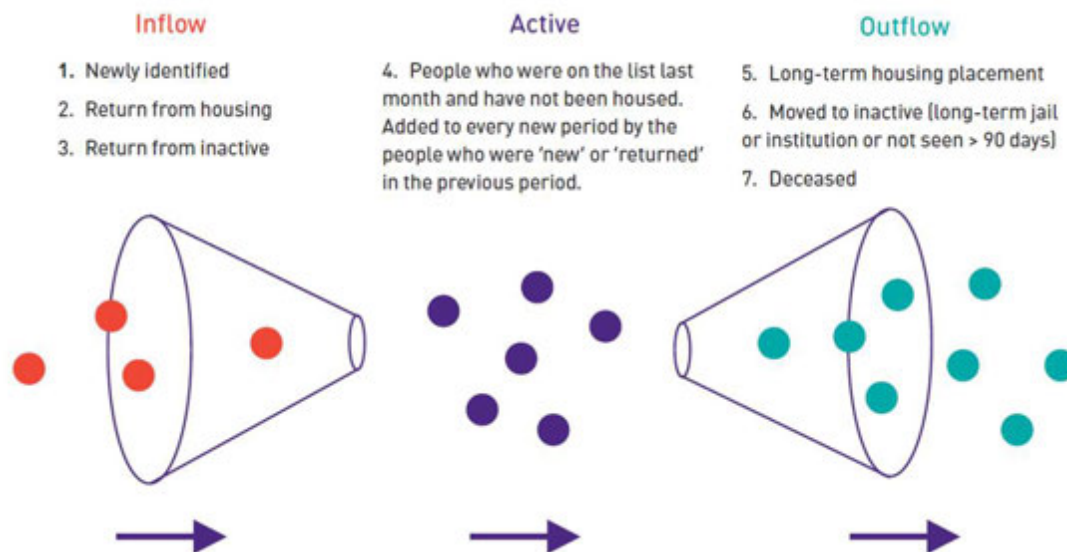
Launch housing operate multiple assertive outreach and entry point services across inner and suburban Melbourne and have a long history of successfully delivering street counts in inner Melbourne including the City of Melbourne (2014, 2016) and the City of Port Phillip (2017, 2018) and. We offer our hard-earned operational and data-driven expertise to any metropolitan LGA or regional Shire seeking to end homelessness in their locality.



## By-Name List

The Zero methodology requires data in the form of a By-Name List to describe who is experiencing homelessness in a given area. By-Name Lists contain identifying but non-sensitive personal information about who is homeless in a catchment; their name, age, gender, current circumstances and which agencies are working directly with them to address their homelessness.

The By-Name List enables services to observe ongoing changes to the cohort experiencing homelessness via seven dynamic data points, from inflow to outflow, which help to track progress toward the goal of Functional Zero.



If the focus is on people experiencing rough sleeping, the first By-Name List can be established via a 'Street Count' or 'Registry' type event. It can also be developed by bringing together services that provide assertive outreach and case management responses to rough sleeping. There are advantages to both approaches, but it is the ongoing update of the By-Name List and command centre approach to service coordination that is at the heart of the Zero methodology.

Functional Zero is best provided within a *Collective Impact* (Kania and Kramer 2011) framework where a cross-sector alliance of likely and unlikely partners is created to tackle the inherent complexities of the problem. When combined with an overall continuous quality improvement approach, leveraging the collective power of the group to identify and secure missing resources, the necessary and sufficient conditions for meaningful change can be reached.

To find out more:

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**George Hatvani:** Manager Service Development

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- <sup>xxvii</sup> [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Inquiry\\_into\\_Homelessness\\_in\\_Victoria/Submissions/S136\\_-\\_SHSN\\_Redacted.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Inquiry_into_Homelessness_in_Victoria/Submissions/S136_-_SHSN_Redacted.pdf)
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Martin, B., Phillips, R. and Xiang, N. (2012) Developing an effective homelessness workforce, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland.
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- <sup>xxxv</sup> Source: <https://www.mercyfoundation.com.au/our-focus/ending-homelessness-2/common-ground-permanent-supportive-housing/>
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Launch Housing, 2015, Elizabeth Street Common Ground, 5th Anniversary Report, Launch Housing, Melbourne.