

Emerging Solutions Homelessness Research

HOUSING VULNERABLE ROUGH SLEEPERS

A new study in Brisbane, Queensland has added to the growing evidence base for **Housing First interventions** in Australia.

The report, *A Housing First approach to homelessness in Brisbane: Sustaining tenancies and the cost effectiveness of support services*, demonstrates that people with 'complex' or 'challenging' circumstances and extensive experiences of homelessness are able to successfully transition to housing with linked support, with concurrent reduced costs on the broader emergency, justice and health services systems.

Funded by the Ian Potter Foundation, the three year project tracked a number of people experiencing homelessness. The participants were assisted to access housing and sustain their tenancies through a range of Housing First programs, including supportive housing, operated by Micah Projects.

What is Housing First?

Housing First represents a significant departure from more traditional approaches to ending homelessness. Traditional 'housing readiness models' see people move through crisis and short-term accommodation or rehabilitation programs before they are considered to be permanently housed. In contrast, **Housing First involves the rapid identification and provision of suitable, long-term housing, and the provision of services that individuals and families require to maintain this housing.**

Safe and sustained housing

100% of the formerly homeless individuals followed through the study remained housed. These individuals had substantial homelessness histories, health and behavioural needs and under traditional homelessness approaches, would have been considered 'hard to house'.

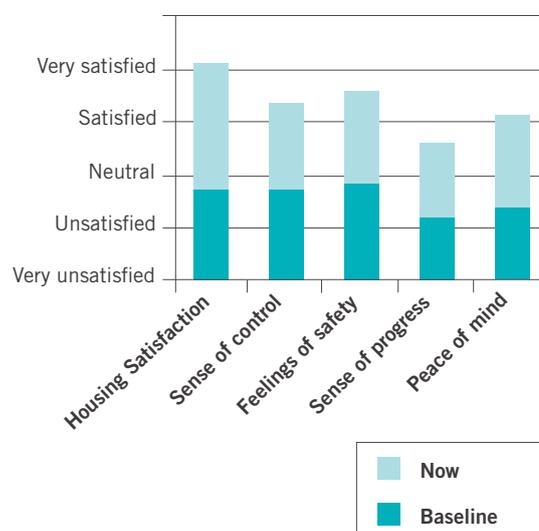
This high retention rate was also seen in the recent evaluation of Brisbane's Street to Home service. This service operates within a Housing First approach and is the first assertive outreach service in Queensland. This service had a 95% housing retention rate.

Improved quality of life

All participants' experienced substantial improvements in their quality of life across key domains over the three year period (see Figure 1).

This finding accords with a 2012 survey by Micah Projects of the housing needs and quality of life of 134 people who had been recently housed. The survey confirmed that people who have experienced extended periods of homelessness experience a much lower quality of life than the Australian norm and have high rates of physical and mental illness and disability. Housing, while necessary, is not sufficient to ameliorate these challenges and support is required to assist people to sustain their tenancies and improve their quality of life.

Figure 1



In the current research project, while improvements were seen in the remaining areas of managing finances and debt levels, these were not as dramatic as that seen for housing satisfaction and quality of life. People exiting homelessness with very small fortnightly incomes and the importance of affordable housing to aid in this transition cannot be overemphasised.

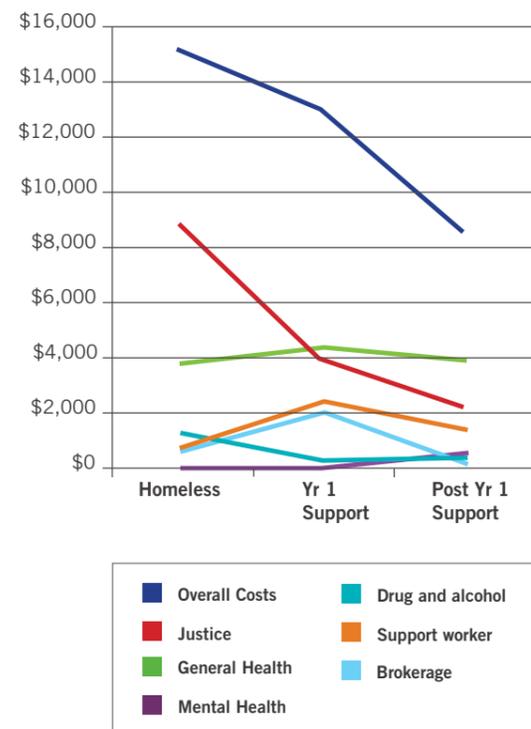
Cost reduction

The overall cost to the health, justice and community service system reduced substantially as individuals transitioned from homelessness to home. This was due largely to the reduction in use of justice services, with the cost to police and the courts dropping from an average \$8,719 per person per annum to just \$2,172 (See figure 2). Overall there was little change in health service utilisation.

The reduction in police and court involvement and the minimal change in health service utilisation associated with the Housing First interventions in this project were also found in a 2013 evaluation of Micah Projects Street to Home team¹.

The cost reduction is also supported by the latest AHURI Cost of Homelessness study. Published in 2013, Flatau and Zaretsky found that following a year of homelessness support, the cost to the health system decreased by \$1,559 and the cost to the justice system by \$2,397².

Figure 2



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Investing in Housing First programs is cost effective

Housing people with linked support costs less than keeping a person homeless. While the Housing First interventions themselves represent a cost to the service system, they are clearly associated with a reduction in costs elsewhere and achieve a far better outcome for formerly homeless people and their community.

A Supportive Housing Policy framework is required to formally align housing and support services, to set program specifications and to direct funding for housing subsidy and housing-linked support.

A Housing First approach to directly assist rough sleepers into housing is contingent upon reliable and transparent access to long-term sustainable housing with linked support.

Brisbane's Street to Home program, which was the initial assertive outreach service working with the majority of participants in this study, successfully managed to access secure housing. This was aided by the heightened national focus on homelessness, and the increase in funding for support services through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and capital funding through the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan.

Brisbane Common Ground is the only formal supportive housing initiative operating under explicit supportive housing and linked support service specifications. Development of a supportive housing policy framework and expansion of the existing program specifications would enable supportive housing to go to scale, ensuring delivery consistent with established evidence for a range of high need population groups.

We must build a supportive housing system that brings together dedicated permanent housing and support, quickly and predictably, to ensure pathways out of homelessness for those most in need.



ANDREW'S STORY

'And then they got me into Common Ground. **Said we're going to get you a place where you've got easy access to doctors, nurses, schooling, the whole gamut of everything.** TAFE being close was important as I'm going to do an IT course and set myself up as a computer technician. I loved it here from the beginning. I was awe inspired.'

Photography: Katie Bennet, Embellysh.

Excerpt taken from Creating Homes: Lives Changing. Andrew was not a participant of the research study. Please turn the page to read Andrew's Story. Read more about how supportive housing makes such a difference. Not in data and statistics, but in the lives of real people - http://www.micahprojects.org.au/resource_files/micah/Creating-Homes-low-res.pdf

1. Parcell, C., Tomaszewski, W. and Jones, A. 2013, An Evaluation of Brisbane Street to Home: Final Report, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

2. Zaretsky, K. and Flatau, P. 2013 The cost of homelessness and the net benefit of homelessness programs: a national study, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

Andrew's Story

I grew up in Melbourne in a Latvian refugee family. We were dirt poor as my Dad was an alcoholic and gambler. Dad was trying to assimilate so he spent a lot of time at the pub being an Aussie. We never saw the physical markings of his violence towards mum but knew it was there. We were all scared of him.

For all intents and purposes, I was the man of the house. From the age of seven I was paying rent, going to the butchers, doing the groceries; all the adult duties my mum couldn't do when she was at work. I protected my little sisters too. I'd get the hidings so they wouldn't. I'd set myself up for it.

After school, I lived with the hippies in Nimbin; spent a couple years naked as a jaybird. We built a house and made our own cottage cheese, yogurt. One of the best things I ever did. After a falling out, I hitched around and met the mother of my two kids. She was from a wealthy family that used to bail her out from her heroin dramas.

I worked extra shifts to put her through a social work degree. But she became convinced that because I was molested as a child, I would molest our children. We broke up and she summarily stopped me seeing the kids. I went through the courts so that my children could have access to me as we had a strong bond. I didn't have much of a father figure in my life and I wanted to make sure my children did.

Heroin was never an issue for me. It was more the speed. And alcohol was always there as I'd grown up with it. I started drinking in pubs at 14 and first put a needle in my arm at 18. I've got no interest in speed now.

I was on the streets for the first time when I was six, climbing out the window to escape my father. And I've been on and off for years. I'm a street survivor. I've done foolish things on the streets that I'd never have done in secure housing. I wouldn't have broken society's rules, broken the law.

Last time I was on the streets I went to the Homeless Centre and they got me into a boarding house. It was abysmal. I was surrounded by alcohol and drugs: that mentality, the violence. Kim from Micah came to rescue me. I was literally standing in a sea of broken glass and she said 'I won't have you live this way'. She started pushing to get me into public housing and got me into a secure flat within two months because of my chronic osteoarthritis. Furnished it and all.

And then they got me into Common Ground. Said we're going to get you a place where you've got easy access to doctors, nurses, schooling, the whole gamut of everything. TAFE being close was important as I'm going to do an IT course and set myself up as a computer technician. I loved it here from the beginning. I was awe inspired. I love being above everything, being taller than, bigger than.

It was a logistics nightmare to move but the wonderful staff of Micah yet again came through. David, Paul, Kim as a motivator. I like to drop names because they're good people who should be mentioned. I've got a not so secret crush on Kim. I adore the woman. Everything she says she's going to do, she does. A real go-getter.

MICAH PROJECTS INC 

**Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community**

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