

Future Melbourne Committee

Agenda item 7.1

19 March 2024

Notice of Motion, Councillor Dr Olivia Ball: Advocacy for Housing First Based Programs in the City of Melbourne

Motion

That the Future Melbourne Committee:

1. Applauds the success of the From Homelessness to a Home ('H2H') program, which since early 2021 has found permanent, supported housing for 1,845 unhoused people, including in the City of Melbourne;
2. Notes that the human right to adequate housing must be realised progressively, and deliberately retrogressive measures may constitute a breach of human rights;
3. Notes that the City of Melbourne is currently consulting the community on its draft Homelessness Strategy 2024-2030, a strategy founded on the right to adequate housing and the principles
 - (a) a city where everyone has a home,
 - (b) where no-one is left behind, and
 - (c) a city unified to end homelessness, which will be undermined if net funding for homelessness services and pathways out of homelessness is cut;
4. Maintains that programs for people facing homelessness need to be expanded in the City of Melbourne rather than contracted; and
5. Requests the Lord Mayor to write to the Premier and Minister for Housing to urge them to increase net funding for 'Housing First'-based programs until such time we achieve 'functional zero' homelessness in the City of Melbourne.

Background

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being, including housing and necessary social services (article 25, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*).

Our homelessness crisis is complex and multifaceted, exacerbated by factors such as trauma, domestic violence, mental illness, addiction, and rising housing costs alongside the costs of other essential goods and services while wage growth remains well below the rate of inflation.

The Victorian government's Housing First programs – like the City of Melbourne's (CoM) Make Room project – work on a proven model of providing housing alongside essential support services. Victoria's 'From Homelessness to a Home' is one such program and has succeeded in securing permanent, supported housing for 1,845 people.

A 2006 study of the Housing First model applied in New York City found housing retention rates of 88% after 2 years, and 75% after 4 years, compared with a 'traditional' model of homelessness support services (ie. 'treatment first'), in which only 47% of people were still housed after two years and (due to people dropping out of the program) 48% after 4 years (Johnson et al., p8). See Attachment 1 for more about the principles that define the Housing First model in the Australian context.

The 2021 Census, taken several months after the H2H program commenced, found 130 people sleeping rough in the CoM (11% of the total number of people then experiencing homelessness in CoM). Today (as at 1 March 2024), only 78 people are known to be sleeping rough in this municipality. This is the success of the H2H program. (Data is not available on the number of people who became homeless and were rehoused by H2H in the 2.5 years between data points.)

These remaining 78 people are experiencing entrenched, repeated and chronic homelessness. They, and the hundreds more who are homeless but not sleeping rough, have a right to adequate housing and may need sustained support to stay housed.

In the CoM, homelessness services have long been at capacity.

Expanding homelessness services in the CoM is essential to address growing demand, meet the unique, complex needs of each homeless individual and over-represented or especially vulnerable cohorts, prevent homelessness, ensure health and safety, and find long-term solutions.

The Age reported on 11 March 2024 that the state government plans to end the H2H program from 1 July 2024 and replace it with a homelessness program with only 25% of its capacity.

The right to adequate housing must be realised progressively over time, to the maximum of available resources (article 2.1, ICESCR). This fundamental principle of *progressive realisation* recognises that full realisation of the right to adequate housing “will generally not be able to be achieved in a short period of time.” It nonetheless imposes an obligation “to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible” towards realising the universal right to adequate housing (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, para. 9).

An action that leads, directly or indirectly, to a decrease in the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing is a retrogressive measure, and any such deliberate measure could be a breach of human rights.

According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

“any deliberately retrogressive measures would require the most careful consideration and would need to be fully justified by reference to the totality of the rights provided for in the [*International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*] and in the context of the full use of the maximum available resources.” (para. 9)

Mover **Cr Dr Olivia Ball**

Seconder **Cr Jamal Hakim**

Attachment 1:

R. Dodd, N. Rodrigues, T. Sequeira & L. Watkins (2020). ‘Housing First Principles for Australia’ (Council to Homeless Persons, Melbourne)

Sources

Australian Associated Press, ‘Once-in-a-lifetime housing crisis’ engulfing Vic: body’, *Daily Mail Australia* (11 March 2024)

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/aap/article-13181173/Once-lifetime-housing-crisis-engulfing-Vic-body.html>

Australian Bureau of Statistics, Homelessness data release (22 March 2023)

Carmody, B. 'Renowned homelessness scheme gutted with 1,500 fewer people to benefit', *The Age* (11 March 2024)

Dodd, R., N. Rodrigues, T. Sequeira & L. Watkins (2020). 'Housing First Principles for Australia' (Council to Homeless Persons, Melbourne)

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966)

Johnson, G., S. Parkinson & C. Parsell (2012). 'Policy shift or program drift? Implementing Housing First in Australia' (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne) p8

Launch Housing, 'Functional Zero: Ending rough sleeping in Melbourne local government areas' (2023)

Padgett, D., L. Gulcur & S. Tsemberis (2006). 'Housing first services for people who are homeless with co-occurring serious mental illness and substance abuse,' *Research on Social Work*, 16(1), 74–83

UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No. 3: The Nature of States Parties' Obligations* (1990)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Housing First Principles for Australia

The Housing First Principles for Australia have been developed to promote the implementation of Housing First Australia-wide. The principles were adapted from those used in the United States, Canada, Europe and England. This consistent and locally relevant set of principles is intended to be used in the Australian context to train staff, and to design services that use a Housing First approach.

What is Housing First?

Housing First is an international model for housing and supporting people who have experienced long term and reoccurring homelessness and who face a range of complex challenges. It supports strategies to end homelessness and is a methodology for effectively assisting some of the most vulnerable people in our community.



PEOPLE HAVE A RIGHT TO A HOME

Access – Immediate access to a permanent, self-contained home which meets people's cultural and social needs.

Eligibility – No treatment or behavioural eligibility pre-conditions.

Tenancy – People enjoy full tenancy rights and standard rental conditions with security of tenure.

Suitability – Location, affordability, access to services and quality of property meets the specific needs of the individual or family that are housed. Considerations include safety and community connections, and for people with physical disability – maximising their capacity to live independently.

Sustainability – People are able to keep their homes if they have absences for family, cultural or other reasons (eg. hospital or prison stays) and are assisted to quickly find a new home if a tenancy fails.

Safety – The housing provided must be safe and secure.



FLEXIBLE SUPPORT FOR AS LONG AS IT IS NEEDED

Continuity – Support does not have a fixed end date and people can return to or continue support for as long as needed.

Holistic – Support is directed by the people receiving the support, and is available across a wide variety of domains being sensitive to people's family context, cultural identity and past trauma.

Intensity – Support intensity can rise and fall with individual or family need so services can respond positively when people need more or less support on a day to day basis.

Accessibility – People are able to quickly re-engage with support without needing to undergo a new assessment or intake process.

Relationship – Support is built from an authentic relationship and it is practical, flexible and creative – responding to each unique set of circumstances as required.



HOUSING AND SUPPORT ARE SEPARATED

Separation – While they work closely together to maintain and support tenancies, the provision of housing and support must be functionally separate. This is to ensure housing and support are not contingent upon one another and unwavering advocacy is provided for the individual or family.

Tenancy – There are no additional requirements to participate in support or treatment as part of the tenancy and people are able to maintain their home regardless of their engagement in support services.

Continuity – The offer of support stays with the person if they choose to move home or if a tenancy fails. The support is available to people in their new living situations including a return to homelessness or to an institutional setting where support will actively assist people secure new homes.

Security – People are supported to follow the terms of their tenancies in the same way as anyone else renting a home. Support services work to maintain tenancies while understanding the critical part a home plays in the wellbeing of both individuals and families.



CHOICE AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Home – People define for themselves what makes a place a home which may include connection to particular land. People are given a choice of where they live and the type of housing in which they want to live.

Support – People are able to make real choices about how they live their lives and these choices determine the support they receive including how, where, when and by whom it is provided.

Household – People are able to choose with whom they live, who they invite into their own home and whether visitors are able to stay.

Person-centred – Support acknowledges that the best way to understand and respond to people's needs, is to listen to their views and questions, so that any planning is directly responsive to their particular concerns and dreams. This approach respects each individual and that person's strengths rather than focusing negatively on each person's limitations.



ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT COERCION

Responsibility – The onus is on workers to maintain the relationship and employ creative and imaginative approaches to ensure their work is engaging rather than blaming people for “disengaging”.

Persistence – While individuals and families can refuse support, staff persist without intruding and use their relationship to make ongoing and regular offers in ways that show care and respect for people.

Compassion – A deep understanding of people, means that support is designed to fit the individual rather than the individual being required to fit the service.

Availability – Caseloads are small and support is available outside normal working hours. This allows workers to be persistent and proactive in their approach, doing “whatever it takes” and not giving up and closing when engagement is low.

Trust – Because of people’s past experiences of trauma, extended homelessness and exclusion, it is critical that services build trust and have a strong commitment to “doing what they say”, so they are experienced as trauma and gender informed, reliable and transparent.



RECOVERY ORIENTATED PRACTICE

Recovery – Understanding that recovery is not about an expectation that people be symptom free. Rather recovery focuses on people being able to recover a sense of themselves and their place in their community.

Hope – Support offers hope and actively encourages people to dream and imagine a future for themselves, a future focusing on gaining a sense of purpose with the prospect of enjoying a good and secure life.

Dignity of risk – A process of trial and error involving small steps forward and backward celebrating successful experiences but also learning from experiences of pain and frustration without a sense of shame.

Strengths – Celebrating and working with people’s capacity and abilities that are quite separate from any diagnosis they may have.

Appropriate – To developmental stage, cultural and gender identities.



SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION

Belonging – Social and community inclusion is an integral part of support as it rebuilds a sense of self and connection to others, which in turn is a protective factor for people’s tenancy, health and well-being.

Relationships – People are supported to build friendships and relationships within their community, and where possible to reconnect with family, culture and those who are important to them.

Participation – People are supported to participate in a wide range of pursuits including education, employment and volunteering opportunities as well as cultural, artistic and recreational activities.

Community – Homes exist as part of a community. Support not only helps people connect to that community, but also uses strategies to build acceptance amongst neighbours of people with different experiences, lifestyles, and appearances.



HARM REDUCTION APPROACH

Safety – Support uses a wide range of proactive strategies to assist people to reduce the negative impact of substance use, gambling, self-harm and potentially high-risk behaviours.

Education – Factual information is provided in a non-judgmental style to enable people to make informed choices about their health, tenancy and relationships with others.

Change – Support is guided by individual choice and for those who choose it, connections are made to specialist services that are accessible and culturally appropriate. Support is also mindful that recovery is not a linear journey and does not necessarily require abstinence.

Inclusion – Housing and/or support are not withdrawn from people who choose to continue to drink, use, self-harm, gamble or participate in high-risk activities.

The Housing First Principles for Australia were adopted by the Homelessness Australia Board on 5 March 2020.

Authors: Rosie Dodd (Launch Housing), Natasha Rodrigues (Micah Projects), Tamara Sequeira (Homelessness NSW) and Leah Watkins (Ruah Community Services).

This project has been made possible through the generosity of the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation in Melbourne, the Sisters of St John of God and Ruah Community Services, along with the above-mentioned organisations who supported their employee's participation in Homelessness Australia's Housing First Project.

To find out more visit homelessnessaustralia.org.au.



Design and printing funded by:

