

CoMHWA



Consumers of Mental Health WA (Inc)

**Submission on 'The National Plan for Housing and Homelessness'
Issues Paper**

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Consumers of Mental Health WA

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1. Preliminaries

About the Respondents

Consumers of Mental Health WA (CoMHWA) is Western Australia's peak body for and by mental health consumers (people with a past or present lived experience of mental health issues, psychological or emotional distress). We are a not-for-profit, systemic advocacy organisation independent from mental health services that exists to listen to, understand and act upon the voices of consumers. We work collaboratively with other user-led organisations and a diversity of stakeholders to advance our rights, equality, recovery and wellbeing.

Request for Feedback

CoMHWA works to uphold the dignity and human rights of consumers, through providing advocacy in leading change with and for consumers. We appreciate notification of the outcomes of our submission to this consultation in order to understand and communicate the difference made through our work.

Please provide feedback via the contact details on this submission's cover page.

Language

CoMHWA uses the term mental health 'consumer' throughout this submission. Mental health consumers to refer to people who identify as having a past or present lived experience of psychological or emotional distress, irrespective of whether they have received a diagnosis of mental illness or accessed services. Other ways people may choose to describe themselves include "peer", "survivor", "person with a lived experience" and "expert by experience".

This definition is based on consumers' call for respect, dignity and choice in how we choose to individually identify. As individuals we choose different ways to name and describe our experiences that may confirm or trouble ideas about 'mental illness'.

2. Introduction

CoMHWAs welcomes the opportunity to make a submission about National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper (The Plan) to convey the impact of the housing crisis on mental health consumers. Housing is a key social determinant of mental health – research shows that when people have access to secure housing and support to maintain that housing, their mental health outcomes are improved.¹ Conversely, people who are homeless, have insecure housing, or do not have sufficient support to maintain their housing experience increased frequency and severity of mental health challenges.² This relationship thus operates in both directions; not only does insecure housing lead to or exacerbate mental health distress, but people with existing mental health issues are more likely to find it difficult to secure stable housing.³

This submission is made, for the most part, in support of the submission made by Mental Health Australia (MHA), who have developed an extremely comprehensive report that covers the intersection of mental health and housing in a concise and clear fashion.⁴ We have endeavoured to offer additional support for the key points made by MHA, as well as expanding their discussion to cover some issues that are relevant to CoMHWAs's membership. Our rationale for framing our response through the MHA's submission is that elevation is more important than duplication with regard to confronting the hidden impact of housing on mental health in our submission.

The relationship between stable housing and improved mental health outcomes is reflected through a key priority included in The National Mental Health Commission's Vision2030 report. In this roadmap, the Commission outlines the goal that '*people with mental ill-health have meaningful citizenship. They are engaged in a contributing life, achieving goals that are meaningful to them*'.⁵ The Commission states that one of the key measures for the success of

¹ Padgett, Deborah K. 2020. 'Homelessness, housing instability and mental health: making the connections' British Journal of Psychiatry Bulletin 44, pp. 197-201

² Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A., Davison, J. 2018. *Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Melbourne. p. 13
<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/e1395547-292e-4236-be86-eaff9a4f1e92/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>

³ Johnson, G. and Chamberlain, C. 2011. 'Are the homeless mentally ill?'. Australian Journal of Social Issues. vol. 46, no. 1 pp. 29–48.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233866491_Are_the_Homeless_Mentally_Ill

⁴ See Mental Health Australia's forthcoming submission to the consultation on 'The National Housing and Homelessness Plan'

⁵ The National Mental Health Commission. 2020. *Vision2030*.
<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/ad54b39b-ea46-458d-a1e6-71623f53accd/Vision-2030>

this goal is the 'increase in housing stability for those with mental ill-health'.⁶ CoMHWA is committed to advocating for better housing outcomes on behalf of people with a lived experience of mental distress, and accordingly we committed to emphasising the profound impact housing has on mental health struggles in our submission about The Plan.

3. Discussion and Recommendations

Homelessness

Relevant questions from Issue Paper:

2. *What short, medium, and long-term actions can governments take to help prevent homelessness or to support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless?*

3. *How can the homelessness system more effectively respond to those at risk of, or already experiencing homelessness?*

- *How can the homelessness system ensure those at risk of homelessness or in crisis receive appropriate support to avoid homelessness or so they are less likely to fall back into homelessness?*
- *What actions can governments take to facilitate early intervention and preventative responses?*

Recommendations:

CoMHWA wishes to offer our support for the recommendations developed by Mental Health Australia in their submission to The Plan. With regards to the Issue paper's question on the focus on homelessness, we concur with the MHA that better coordination between clinical and community mental health systems, on the one hand, and the housing and homelessness systems, on the other, is required to achieve better outcomes for people with mental health distress experiencing housing insecurity. CoMHWA also agrees that a formal nationwide policy that forbids institutional discharge into homelessness should be developed, made possible by the expansion of transitional housing programs as well as discharge planning and support. Policy to prevent discharge into homelessness is also supported by the recently released recommendation 7.39 of the *Final Report and Executive Summary* of the 2023 Disability Royal Commission.⁷

The final recommendation made by MHA about homelessness is the proposal that systems should be developed to ensure that people have the ability to access clinical and community

⁶The National Mental Health Commission. 2020. *Vision2030*.

<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/ad54b39b-ea46-458d-a1e6-71623f53accd/Vision-2030>

⁷ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability. (2023) *Executive Summary, Our vision for an inclusive Australia and Recommendations: Final Report*. Commonwealth of Australia. pp. 264-265

based mental health services quickly and easily, to help prevent the mental distress that can impact on housing security. CoMHWA is particularly supportive of the call to restore community based psychosocial services to cover the gap in support for those who do not qualify for the NDIS, and we continue to advocate for the development of community-based psychosocial support services. An example of such advocacy is CoMHWA's strong support of the campaign to bring back a psychosocial support service similar to the (now defunded) Personal Helpers and Mentors program (PHaMs).⁸

Homelessness Services

Relevant questions from Issue Paper:

2. *What housing or dwelling models may need to be considered to provide appropriate options for people experiencing chronic and repeat homelessness?*
3. *What are the medium and longer-term steps that can be taken to ensure we have a more consistent and coordinated service system to support people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness?*
4. *What are the best specific early intervention approaches to prevent someone becoming homeless?*
7. *What strategies can be used to build awareness of available services and supports for people who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness?*

Recommendations:

The recommendations developed by MHA are in response to questions 2—5 from the Issues Paper, and offer an excellent overview of already established and effective supported housing models that incorporate psychosocial support. They list the HASI, HASP, Doorway Program and the Haven Foundation models as examples of the kinds of programs that they recommend should be expanded and up scaled, a suggestion with which CoMHWA completely concurs. CoMHWA also agrees with MHA's suggestion that the healthcare needs of people experiencing homelessness should be guaranteed and supported through block funding these services under the governance of Primary Health Networks.

Beyond the excellent recommendations made by MHA, CoMHWA is also interested in addressing the seventh question from this section, namely what strategies may be useful to build a broader awareness of support services that help address housing insecurity. In line with our broader focus on the interplay between mental health and housing stability, CoMHWA recommends that The Plan develops a policy to support building the capacity of mental health navigation services, especially peer navigation services, to incorporate relationships and information about housing support services. Examples of such support services include CoMHWA's 'Peer Pathways', a peer navigation service that helps link

⁸For more information about the campaign to support the return of a psychosocial recovery program similar to Personal Helpers and Mentors <https://bringbackphams.com/>

consumers with the services that they need in their current circumstances.⁹ As outlined above, people experiencing a mental health crisis are more likely to also be experiencing housing insecurity. By building the capacity for peer navigators and others to share information about housing services within mental health service navigation programs, this knowledge can be delivered to a vulnerable cohort who are already in crisis, before their housing situation potentially deteriorates further.

Social Housing

Relevant questions from Issue Paper:

1. *How can social housing providers better support people with complex needs (such as people with disability, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and people with mental health, alcohol and other drug issues)?*

Recommendations:

CoMHWa fully supports the MHA response to question 1 in the Issue Paper's section on Social Housing—which asks what social housing providers can do to effectively support people with complex needs—by referring back to the effective supported housing models detailed in their response to Homelessness Services. They propose that the expansion of these programs, alongside increased training for housing workers, could ensure that social housing works to support the complex needs of people experiencing mental health challenges. Specifically, the MHA suggests that housing workers should be trained to develop the capacity to identify mental health crises and help tenants by connecting them to appropriate support services.

Housing costs, home ownership and the rental market

Relevant questions from Issue Paper:

8. *Are further wrap-around supports required to support vulnerable Australians in the private rental market to maintain their tenancies?*

Are there any examples of effective models that could be scaled up?

Recommendations:

In their response to the guiding questions from the 'Housing costs, home ownership and the rental market' questions in the Issues Paper, MHA addressed the issue of supporting vulnerable Australians in the rental market outlined in question 8. CoMHWa wholeheartedly supports MHA's recommendation that tailored tenant support programs are implemented to help people in the private rental market who are living with mental health challenges. These programs are argued by MHA to be effective and efficient, but require additional support to

⁹ For details about CoMHWa's peer navigation service see: <https://comhwa.org.au/programs/peer-pathways>

be scaled up to meet the demand. Developing and providing education programs (co-designed by people with Lived Experience of mental health challenges) for private rental sector property managers, landlords and other agents could provide a deeper understanding of mental health and build their capacity to better support tenants experiencing mental distress.

CoMHWAs would like to underscore the importance of considering rental conditions in The Plan. While there has been considerable prior discussion about housing challenges faced by people experiencing mental health concerns, there is comparatively little focus on the specific obstacles these people face in the private rental market. Private rentals make up over 60% of the accommodation for people who have been diagnosed with a moderate to severe mental health illness.¹⁰ The private rental market, however, is replete with discrimination against people living with mental health challenges, with reports revealing that up to 90% of surveyed consumers felt like they had faced discrimination in the private rental market due to their mental health challenges.¹¹ Additionally other publications have shown how the forced mobility involved with renting—the need to move if leases are not renewed or through eviction—entails an additional degree of both financial and social pressure that is especially difficult to manage for people experiencing mental health challenges.¹²

4. Conclusion

CoMHWAs's recommendations are shaped by the profound impact that housing insecurity can have on people experiencing mental health challenges. While The Plan is not explicitly focused upon mental health, there is a clear connection between the crisis in housing and the growing challenges facing people experiencing mental distress.

The current housing crisis in Australia, in addition to pre-existing inequities of the economic system more broadly, contributes to pressure and distress that can worsen mental health conditions: People experiencing mental health challenges who find themselves without accommodation are more likely to struggle in their recovery journey, and risk falling into a

¹⁰ Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A., Davison, J. 2018. *Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Melbourne. p. 13
<https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/e1395547-292e-4236-be86-eaff9a4f1e92/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>

¹¹ SANE Research. 2008. 'SANE Research Bulletin 7: housing and mental illness.' SANE Australia.
https://www.sane.org/images/PDFs/0807_info_rb7_housing.pdf

¹² Brackertz, N., Borrowman, L., Roggenbuck, C. Pollock, S. and Davis, E. 2020. *Trajectories: the interplay between mental health and housing pathways*. Final research report, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited and Mind Australia, Melbourne, p.67
<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/trajectories>

vicious cycle whereby the loss of accommodation causes a deterioration in their mental wellbeing, which in turn makes regaining accommodation more difficult.¹³

The recommendations developed by MHA about The Plan provide a path forward that would improve housing security as well improving the mental health of our communities. By ensuring that The Plan helps to support people with a lived experience of mental struggle to enter the housing market as either as home buyers or renters, The Plan has the potential to drastically improve the quality of life and prospects of recovery for these Australians who are particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity.

¹³ Bleasdale, Michael. 2007. *Supporting the housing of people with complex needs*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Melbourne.
https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/migration/documents/AHURI_Final_Report_No104_Supporting_the_housing_of_people_with_complex_needs.pdf