



#EndHomelessnessWA

Housing First: The answer to the question...

How do we end homelessness in 10 years?

Discussion Paper

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How do we end homelessness in 10 years?

“We first had to learn to stop letting our assumptions get in the way of listening to their needs. All we had to do was ask and listen to what they were telling us.”

Sam Tsemberis and Stephanie LeMelle (Tsemberis, 2015)

Housing First was first coined by Dr Sam Tsemberis as early as 1992. The concept may have existed prior to this, and Y-Saatio in Finland references 1985 as a start point. Its ‘big bang’ moment centres around the change in approach of the Pathways to Housing Program in New York, around this time.

There are too many books and articles to reference for this brief paper, but the shorthand tells us that Housing First, when followed to fidelity, works. It works to support people with the most complex histories, to sustain their lives out of homelessness beyond five years between a rate of 70-90%, depending on the setting (Homeless Link Policy and Research Team, 2015). It has become part of national policy in the USA and Canada and has spread throughout Europe, where Finland is the most prominent example at present. They are currently the only European country successfully ending homelessness.

Local Context

In Perth, it is estimated there are over 500 people rough sleeping. Our services system and our community are struggling to know what to do. We continue to follow maturation-based staircase approaches, rewarding people for changes in behaviour, then returning them to where they came once this behaviour is not sustained. We have a shortfall of 14,000 social housing properties.

We know the social determinants which have led people to be homeless, the impact of trauma past and present, and societal structures which disable opportunities for change, for example Newstart. We also know some of the enablers in this situation are: relationships, positive health responses, access to choose and control their lives, education, employment and connection to culture. However, without a safe and sustainable place of their own, it is impossible to maintain these.

We are starting to see the cost of propping up these enablers far outweighing the cost of putting someone in a home and supporting them to live there.

The case for change

'If you always do, what you've always done, you'll always get...'

There is possibly no better way of saying it than Guy Johnson's essay on the policy in context in Australia. In his essay, Johnson talks to the fact that in setting an agenda to end homelessness from 2008 to 2020, the Australian government has overseen an increase from 45 to 50 people per 100,000. His essay, similar to the timeline for the WA Alliance to End Homelessness's strategy to end homelessness, sets the target at around 2030. If we are looking back in ten years' time, with an increase in homeless people per 100,000 as a measure, what will we have failed to do?

"Let's start with a business as usual scenario. If we continue what we are currently doing the number of homeless people will be at record levels, as will the rate. We will be funding more support programmes. We will be spending more on transitional accommodation and more on crisis accommodation. We will have more 'coordinated entry points', more 'scientific' assessments, more 'co-designed' services, and more assertive outreach. We will have larger organisations with a well-paid managerial class increasingly disconnected from their client base and reliant on a fully casualised labour force. We will be housing people in converted shipping containers, in 'tiny' houses and 'pop-up' rooming houses because we haven't built enough affordable housing. None of this will help us end homelessness because none of it tackles the root causes."

Abstract from Guy Johnson's essay, Australia - Getting out of the Policy Quagmire (Y-Foundation, 2019).

What can we do about it?

"This requires adopting the Housing First principle, where a person does not have to first change their life around in order to earn the basic right to housing. Instead, housing is the prerequisite that allows other problems to be solved."

Juha Kaakinen (Y-Saatio, 2017)

We can move the system from one maintaining homelessness and sustaining out-of-home services to one that is driven to end homelessness, delivering services to people in housing - a housing led approach.

The Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2017-18 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018), as their previous reports do, talks to the point that homeless services do their job well. This is the challenging fact; we are doing the job of maintaining homelessness, but we are not decreasing or ending homelessness. If we were not there the story would be worse, but we must think bigger and start with people in housing, then service delivery; housing led and housing first.

Why Housing First?

“Housing First is a principle. It is also an operating model, an ideology and a way of thinking. The Housing First principle is guided by the notion that having a place to live is both a human right and a basic right. All the work done for homeless people starts from the assumption that the first support measure should be the provision of housing.” (Y-Saatio, 2017)

Housing First flips the staircase or readiness model on its head. By providing access to housing without pre-conditions of readiness or suitability, it values the opportunity to recovery created by housing. This takes a long-term view of the relationship required to sustain someone with complex challenges in a house.

The diagram below, Figure 1, illustrates the potential savings to be made by putting someone in a house and providing recovery-oriented services to support them to stay there. It highlights the costs associated with servicing someone who is homeless.

Perhaps most importantly, is the evidence base supporting a Housing First approach delivered with fidelity. Put simply, if you do it right, you can end homelessness and increase someone’s opportunity to recover, between 70-90% of the time (Homeless Link Policy and Research Team, 2015). Pathways Housing First reports an 85-90% success rate for housing outcomes, and they also evidence reductions in hospitalisations, ambulance transports, police contact and remand (Tsemberis, 2015).

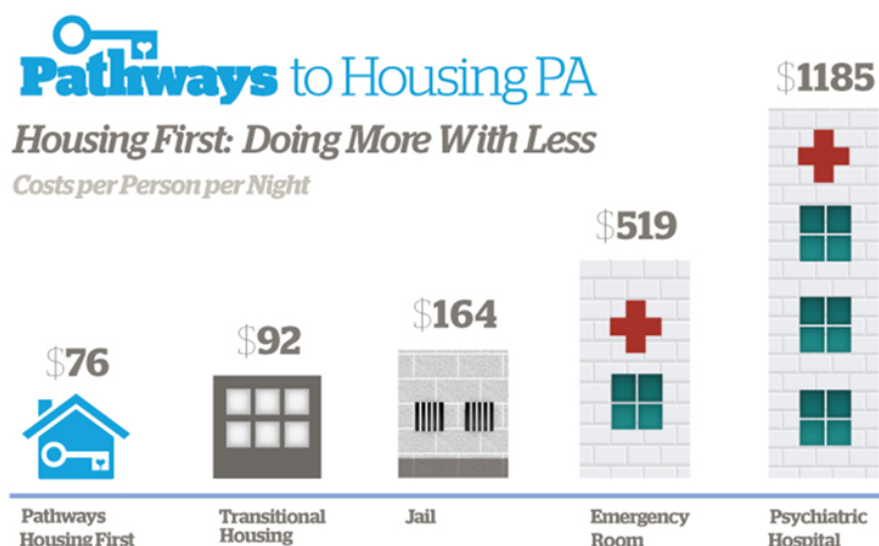


Figure 1: Pathways to Housing PA, Housing First: Doing More with Less

What is Housing First?

“In the Housing First model, a dwelling is not a reward that a homeless person receives once their life is back on track. Instead, a dwelling is the foundation on which the rest of life is put back together. When a person has a roof securely over their head it is easier for them to focus on solving their other problems.” (Y-Saatio, 2017)

Five Core Principles

Housing First is based on five core principles first developed by Dr Sam Tsemberis as the Pathways Housing First Model. In subsequent years, other cities around the world have chosen to provide Pathways Model or adapted it to a local context following the five core principles. The Pathways Model is a specific way of working and ‘fidelity’ to this model is evidenced based to produce an outcome. It has been said, if a program does not include the five core principles, then it is not a Housing First model.

1. **Housing** - Immediate access to housing with no readiness conditions
2. **Choice** - Consumer choice and self-determination
3. **Recover** - Recovery orientation
4. **Support** - Individualized and person-driven supports
5. **Community** - Social and community integration

Often adaptation takes place to enable uptake of the change in a local context. For instance, where the concept of Recovery Orientation does not explicitly challenge communities to have a Harm Reduction focus, it is useful to include Harm Reduction in the list of principles.

The following two sections provide a brief history and background of Housing First, important to consider when adapting to a local context.

Background

- Housing First has formally existed since 1992.
- Defined by Dr Sam Tsemberis of Pathways Housing First in New York.
- Developed to respond to the need of chronically homeless people, made homeless by the de-institutionalisation of the mental health system in the US.
- The Pathways Housing First model has developed to focus on ending homelessness for people experiencing mental health challenges and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) problem use.
- The uniqueness of Housing First, is its offer of housing without a precursor for readiness.
- The Pathways Housing model is based on five fundamental principles, if the program is not compliant with these, then it is not Housing First.
- The Pathways Housing First Model is two separate services, a housing service and a support service.

Overview

- The Housing First approach has spread to many countries around the world. It is prominent homeless policy in the USA, Canada, and Europe.
- The Pathways model believes in scattered site accommodation, where other versions support both, scattered, and communal site, for example Common Ground.
- The model has been replicated and, in many cases, re-organised based on the local context.
- Where the Pathways Model has been followed, there is evidence of 70-90% success rate for people in these programs, no matter the complexity.
- Pathway Housing First is an Evidence Based Practice (Tsemberis, 2015).
- According to Richard Cho of the United State Interagency Council on Homelessness (Hud Exchange, 2014), “Housing First is a whole-system orientation, and in some cases, a whole-system re-orientation.”

Perth Context

Housing First Perth is the guiding principle of the WA Alliance to End Homelessness. It is referenced in the WA Alliance to End Homelessness strategy, *The Western Australia Strategy to End Homelessness*, and the Department of Communities’ *Directions Paper for the 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness Western Australia 2019-2029*.

It will require a whole of community response - the fifth principle. Community is crucial for people to be accommodated in the areas they chose, feel welcomed, supported, and a valued member of that community. We need everyone on board if we are to avoid ‘NIMBYISM’ and promote diversity in our communities.

Though Housing First is proven to achieve success if followed to fidelity, many communities globally have piloted the project on a small scale before implementing whole of system change. It is possible in our context, there may be an option for a pilot of the state view of Housing First and the community sector view. However, if we know it works when delivered correctly, why not just do it?

Pathways Housing First promotes scattered site accommodation. This may seem like a major challenge. We understand the challenge of a shortfall of 14,000 social housing properties, so we need to be creative and collaborative to make this work. Though attractive, communal sites limit the principle of choice and may create unintended challenges. We must work with scattered site and communal site to make best use of housing resource available to participants. This is where we need to look to re-purpose existing transitional accommodation options, work with the Department of Communities to explore positive options for scattered site accommodation, connect with initiatives like Hygge’s Home Hub, and work with local government, the community, and the business world to find socially conscious landlords.

Support services are separate to tenancy support. Sam Tsemberis of Pathways Housing First, talks about Housing First being two services, housing and support. This seems similar to what many services provide currently, however it is acutely different. The Pathways approach sees these as almost entirely separate services. To do this well we must reframe our thinking in this area, it is not a simple shift. It can be difficult for organisations to move from worrying about the cost of providing accommodation and the need to maximise yield. There may need to be stimulus funding to support this change of thinking.

This paper is delivered as part of an awareness exercise. How we apply Housing First in the Perth context is a conversation yet to be had. We have explored the idea of the Pathways Housing First core principles, plus potentially three additional principles for the Perth context. These additional principles advocate for the need to be Culturally Responsive, ensuring Aboriginal people drive the response to their community in a Housing First context. We also advocate for a similar principle, 'Minority Aware and Responsive', to support marginalised communities to develop the response their community needs. Lastly, 'Partnering in the System', is a principle to govern how we work together to achieve long lasting and meaningful change.

This is a whole of community response; it requires partnerships across all areas of service delivery and government, health, homelessness, disability, multicultural interests, and mental health, to name but a few. Intersections in policy and service delivery will need to be mapped and responsive relationships formed.

Most importantly, this is about partnering with each individual we work with in homelessness. No one should have to experience this, yet far too many do. The Housing First Principles speak to recovery oriented and trauma informed principles; they advocate for genuine empowerment of people to have choice and control over their futures. This work will require real empathy from service providers, it will require a strong peer workforce and commitment to the clients' voice and choice in the services they receive.

How can Perth develop a Housing First approach?

Next Steps to Consider

- A collaborative approach to procurement policy to enable the system to change to a housing led approach including a housing first approach for chronic rough sleepers.
- An agreed timeline for the system to shift from staircase or readiness model-based service delivery to housing-led with housing first.
- Resourcing the system to transition to a new way of working. Including assessing the cost of renovating existing transitional accommodation to long term accommodation, as per the Y-Saatio approach in Finland.
- Assess the ability of parts of the sector to transition in the short term, even on the smallest level.
- Explore the current workforce capacity to transition to new ways of working and develop a schedule to build capability. This may include changes to how educational systems like TAFE supports the community sector.

Questions for Perth

The opportunity for a shared agenda going towards 2030 has emerged with a collaborative approach to a 'Ten Year Plan.' Homelessness Week 2019 gives us an opportunity to reflect on what part we can play. The below abstract from Guy Johnson provides his view of where we are at. This is followed by ten reflective questions to consider, individually and collectively. These questions will help us to form the 'How' for Perth. There are lots of questions and fears we will all have; what we are faced with is an option to do something we know will work or continue something we know does not work for a lot of people and may in fact be detrimental to change.

“Years of funding uncertainty combined with a lack of political interest in structural reform has dulled our critical edge - researchers and practitioners alike. We have become an entrenched, competitive industry that often shies away from change.” Guy Johnson (Y-Foundation, 2019)

Reflective Questions

1. What are we prepared to do to end homelessness? What is your pledge? Would you give up your role, your funding, or your assumptions?
2. What does a move to a Housing Led or Housing First principle mean for services in Perth?
3. What will services have to give up in order to end homelessness for the people we serve?
4. What part can government play in representing homeless people in the holding services to Housing First approaches?
5. What does ‘real choice’ mean, and what does ‘real partnership’ with people who are supported by homeless services mean?
6. What is the role of lived experience professionals in your workforce? How can you create an appreciation for lived experience professionals?
7. Do we continue to put the welfare of bricks and mortar ahead of our people and our communities?
8. What are the assumptions that ‘get in the way’ of our listening to people’s needs?
9. What does the path to forgiveness from our clients look like?
10. If your service receives money from the pot to end homelessness, is it really to end homelessness, or is it to maintain homelessness at the expense of an effective evidenced model?
11. ‘It takes a village...’ How do we ensure we are not creating services in people’s homes, at the expense of building community?

Places to Look

Pathway Housing First <https://www.pathwayshousingfirst.org/>

Housing First Canada <https://www.homelesshub.ca/HousingFirstCanada>

The Alex, Canada <https://www.thealex.ca/housing-programs/>

Y-Foundation <https://ysaatio.fi/en/home>

Housing First Scotland <https://www.housingfirst.scot/>

Housing First UK <https://hfe.homeless.org.uk/>

Housing First Ireland <https://pmvtrust.ie/housing/housing-first/>



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