



No Exits from Government Services into Homelessness: A framework for multi-agency action 2020

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1 Background

The *Framework for Multi-Agency Client Transition Planning to Prevent Homelessness* was released in November 2012 to strengthen NSW government agencies' transition planning policies and practices to prevent homelessness. The participating agencies at the time were the Department of Family and Community Services, NSW Ministry of Health, Department of Attorney General and Justice, and Department of Education and Communities.

In 2017, the NSW Government endorsed priority areas and actions for the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* ('Homelessness Strategy'). This included an action to review exit planning from government services (including out of home care, social housing, health services and justice facilities) to improve processes, policies, linkages and coordination to prevent homelessness.

The Homelessness Strategy highlights that transition points and significant life events can be periods of instability or uncertainty which expose people to a range of stressors and challenges that lead to increased risk, particularly for vulnerable groups. This includes people leaving government services.

The causes of homelessness among this group are complex and multifaceted, but include poor identification of risk factors, poor transition planning, a lack of coordination in responding to unmet support needs, and limited appropriate accommodation options on exit. The Homelessness Strategy emphasises the need for accountability across government so all agencies share responsibility for preventing homelessness and increasing access to supports and services.

The Premier's Priority on Reducing Homelessness announced in June 2019 will build on the work underway, providing increased opportunity for cross agency cooperation to deliver positive, sustainable outcomes. The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is the lead agency responsible for delivering the Homelessness Strategy and Premier's Priority on Homelessness.

This review and update of the 2012 Framework was undertaken by the Homelessness Interagency Group which has representation from DCJ, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Treasury, Health, Education, Legal Aid, Aboriginal Affairs and Department of Planning, Industry and Environment.

2 Service context

There have been significant changes to the service system since the original Framework was developed, driven by a number of key policy initiatives:

- **Premier's Priority to Reduce Homelessness:** In February 2019, the NSW Government, together with the City of Sydney, Institute of Global Homelessness and seven non-government partners, signed the Act to End Street Sleeping Agreement. This agreement committed signatories to reducing street homelessness in the City of Sydney by 25 per cent by 2025 and by 50 per cent in the City of Sydney and across NSW by 2025. In June 2019, reducing homelessness was announced as one of the NSW Government's 14 Premier's Priorities. The target for this priority is a 50 per cent reduction in street homelessness by 2025 across NSW.
- **NSW government agency clusters:** Under machinery of government changes announced following the March 2019 NSW election, the Stronger Communities cluster brings together the former Family and Communities, and Justice clusters. The new cluster provides for the first time the opportunity to focus on prevention and early intervention into the social welfare system within the entire law and order system. This will drive major change in the culture of how NSW looks after its most vulnerable people.
- **NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023:** The Strategy recognises that homelessness is not just a housing problem. A person's pathway into homelessness is driven by the intersection of structural drivers (such as housing affordability, labour market forces), risk factors (such as financial stress, family breakdown) and protective factors (such as employment, involvement in community). For people leaving statutory care, custody or government health facilities these drivers and factors are intensified and there is no 'one size fits all' transition plan to prevent homelessness. The Strategy recognises that these transition points present a critical opportunity to maximise a person's protective factors and resources, mitigate risks through more joined-up planning, and leverage available resources in the service system.
- **Future Directions in Social Housing:** The Future Directions strategy was announced in January 2016 and sets out the Government's 10-year vision for social housing. It focuses on expanding housing opportunities by increasing the supply of social housing and strengthening options for vulnerable households to secure and sustain housing in the private rental market. A key focus is to expand options to divert people from social housing to the private rental market. The policy recognises the barriers faced by many clients exiting government services in securing private rental accommodation.
- **Their Futures Matter:** This is a cross-government reform to better support vulnerable children and families by moving away from a placement-based system to one where services are tailored to individual needs.

- **Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS):** This program has an explicit focus on early intervention services, working with people at risk of homelessness, and supporting them to sustain a tenancy once they establish new accommodation. There are opportunities to improve outcomes for clients exiting government services through closer collaboration between government services and SHS providers. As part of the 2020 recommissioning of SHS, new outcomes reporting is being introduced that will include monitoring the number of clients presenting as homeless after exiting a government service.
- **Aboriginal Outcomes Strategy 2017-2021:** This Strategy seeks to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities across all programs. The Strategy recognises the multiple barriers to securing stable accommodation, particularly after exiting government services. It puts in place a range of actions to improve service system responsiveness through direct service delivery by Aboriginal organisations and more culturally capable service delivery by mainstream organisations.
- **Safer Pathways:** The Safer Pathways strategy changes how agencies and organisations support victim's safety in NSW. The key components of Safer Pathways include:
 - Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT) to better and consistently identify the level of domestic violence threat to victims
 - central referral point to electronically manage and monitor referrals
 - state-wide network of Local Coordination Points that facilitate local responses and provide victims with case coordination and support.
- **Commissioning strategies:** While the focus of this Framework is on government services, increasingly government is commissioning non-government organisations to take on whole-of-location responsibility for key aspects of the service system (e.g. the Social Housing Management Transfer program). While this update to the Framework continues to focus on government agencies, future updates will incorporate shared service system partners.

3 Vision and aim

3.1 Vision

Our Vision is that no person exits from a government service into homelessness. The Framework recognises that many highly vulnerable people leaving government services have multiple and complex needs or experience unpredictable exit pathways that significantly increase their risk of homelessness. No single agency is able to address the full range of needs that may encompass:

- health problems (physical and mental health)
- drug and alcohol issues (including relapse prevention)
- unresolved legal problems (including criminal history, current involvement in the criminal justice system or outstanding fines)
- parental and carer responsibilities
- people escaping domestic and family violence
- disability support
- income support
- living skills
- readiness for education, training and employment
- social support
- connection to community and country.

3.2 Aim

This Framework will coordinate and focus effort within and across government agencies to prevent exits into homelessness through:

1. **Consistent service principles and practices**

The Framework's Service Principles will inform government policies and procedures to promote consistent practice in reducing or preventing exits into homelessness. This includes commissioning strategies to ensure consistency in service delivery by non-government organisations to priority cohorts.

2. **Strengthened partnerships**

The Framework recognises that the NSW Government works in partnership with the Australian Government, non-government and funded service providers. The Framework will strengthen interagency collaboration and effective multi-agency transition planning to address the full range of a person's needs and risk factors.

3. **An integrated approach for vulnerable clients**

The Framework recognises that there are particular cohorts more vulnerable to homelessness after exiting government services (see Section 4.2). The Framework will be supported by annual action plans which will be based around these cohorts rather than individual agencies to facilitate a holistic, integrated approach.

4. **A shared understanding of what works**

The Framework recognises the importance of collecting and sharing data and evidence to understand the pattern of exits from government services and inform the critical success factors and barriers to preventing homelessness.

4 Service principles and protocols

4.1 Service principles

Building on the original Framework, there are eleven agreed service principles for multi-agency planning to prevent homelessness:

1. **A person-centred approach** - each person's needs should be identified and addressed in a way that supports them to transition to independence and maximises self-direction.
2. **Strengths-based and culturally appropriate practice** - agencies should work in a way that promotes and respects the person's culture and diversity, builds their self-determination and resilience, and focuses on outcomes.
3. **Clear policy direction for 'no exits into homelessness'** - all relevant policies and procedures in each agency should clearly articulate the intention of transition planning, which is 'no exits into homelessness'.
4. **Transition planning from the point of entry** - transition planning should occur as soon as possible after the person enters the facility/setting.
5. **Housing solutions linked to support** - people at risk of or experiencing homelessness often have complex needs and require support in the community.
6. **Appropriate services available at transition** - access to appropriate services on re-entry to the community are required for effective transition planning.
7. **Commitment to interagency cooperation and collaboration** - agencies producing transition plans should work collaboratively with other relevant government and non-government organisations.
8. **Clear and detailed transition plans** - transition plans should clearly outline the type, duration and intensity of support that will be provided.
9. **Effective information exchange between relevant agencies** - agencies should ensure that staff involved in transition planning are aware of the need for effective information exchange including relevant tools, procedures and consent requirements.
10. **Effective data collection** - agency data collection systems should, where possible, identify people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
11. **Clear roles and responsibilities for transition planning** - agency staff need a clear understanding of their role in facilitating multi-agency transition planning for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

More detail on each Service Principle is provided in the Appendix.

4.2 Translating principles into action

The Framework service principles are intended to guide government agencies' actions to prevent exits into homelessness. This is reflected in an agreed whole-of-government approach with specific protocols and actions for preventing homelessness for priority client cohorts. The key client groups identified in the Homelessness Strategy that are particularly vulnerable to homelessness after exiting government services are:

- Young people leaving statutory care
- Young people released from youth justice centres
- People released from adult correctional facilities
- Vulnerable people transitioning from health facilities/settings
- People leaving social housing following a failed tenancy.

These groups include Aboriginal people and people in rural and regional areas who are vulnerable to homelessness after leaving government services.

The Framework will monitor existing and future programs through an annual Action Planning process. These plans will identify and map existing and new initiatives within each agency against each Action Area outlined below.

This update of the 2012 Framework and development of the Action Planning process is the first stage of work to enhance cross agency collaboration. The second stage will involve data collection and monitoring implementation of the Framework. This will be overseen by the Homelessness Interagency Group.

Action area 1: Aligning policies with best practice

In order to prevent exits from government services into homelessness, agency transition planning policies and practice need to be continually reviewed and updated to reflect the opportunities and challenges in the contemporary service system. Specifically:

- Current initiatives to prevent exits into homelessness
- Local and district initiatives to improve partnerships with Housing Pathways providers
- Local and district initiatives to improve partnerships with SHS.

Action area 2: Initiatives to prevent exits into homelessness

There are a number of funded initiatives under the *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023* and other government priorities that are specifically aimed at expanding existing programs and piloting new approaches to reduce exits from government services into homelessness. For example, new initiatives that will be implemented and monitored under this Framework include:

- Premier's Youth Initiative to support vulnerable young people leaving care
- Futures Planning and Support which provides enhanced, individualised aftercare planning for young people leaving out-of-home care
- Sustaining Tenancies in Social Housing pilot to sustain tenancies where there is a high risk of tenancy failure and exits into homelessness

- Home and Healthy which commenced in Sydney from July 2019 for six years to help people leaving hospital and health facilities to avoid homelessness.

Action area 3: Improving Housing Pathways partnerships

Housing Pathways providers (Housing Contact Centre, Department of Communities and Justice Housing teams, community housing providers) manage access to Temporary Accommodation, private rental assistance (Rent Start, Rent Choice) and social housing, all of which have specific eligibility, targeting and demand constraints. Housing Pathways providers also manage specific entitlements for social housing tenants that vacate their tenancy for up to six months while in custody or hospital.

Improved partnership arrangements and protocols are needed with Housing Pathways providers to ensure transition plans and referrals for housing assistance are streamlined and effective in connecting clients to the right products at the right time.

Action area 4: Improving NGO partnerships

There is a higher risk of failure of transition planning (resulting in people experiencing homelessness) where a person's needs or circumstances are complex. Improved partnerships and local protocols between government agencies, SHS and other NGOs will:

- maximise the expertise and resources available for supporting people with complex needs who are at risk of homelessness, and
- ensure government agencies meet their responsibilities for transition planning and support.

Key priorities include:

- a consistent approach to making referrals
- clear local protocols for warm referrals to SHS
- clear local protocols for raising, escalating and resolving issues (e.g. inappropriate referrals; people presenting as homeless at SHS after exiting a government service)
- shared commitment to continuous improvement to reduce exits by developing expertise in behaviour management and trauma-informed responses for clients in SHS presenting with complex needs.

In 2018 DCJ commenced implementation of a commissioning approach to contracting homelessness services, which means:

- shifting the focus from the services a provider offers to the outcomes they achieve for their clients by having agreed outcome measures and data to track these
- using data to inform continuous improvement to meet client needs.

This will put clients at the centre of the contracting approach. Outcomes based commissioning provides opportunities to improve outcomes for clients exiting government services through closer collaboration between government services and SHS providers. One of the key program expectations is that services

contribute to the Premier's Priority to Reduce Homelessness, with a particular focus on preventing people exiting government services into street homelessness.

Action area 5: Improving data and evidence

Better data and evidence is needed to understand the pattern of exits from government services and the critical success factors and barriers to preventing homelessness.

Key priorities include:

- collection of individual agency data on the number of people exiting their service who were identified at risk of homelessness
- standard data reporting on progress in preventing exits into homelessness
- dissemination of available data on presentations to SHS after exiting homelessness
- dissemination of the findings of any evaluations of funded initiatives to prevent exits from government services into homelessness.

Action area 6: Addressing service system gaps

Data and evidence will be used to identify service system gaps, facilitate the re-focusing of current effort where possible, and contribute to the development of business cases to improve service system capacity and prevent exits into homelessness.

Key priorities include:

- Local coordination of referrals for people exiting government services where there is a high risk of transition plans failing or circumstances changing and clients becoming homelessness
- Availability of funding packages to allow SHS and other NGO support providers to prioritise referrals to provide intensive support to prevent homelessness
- Availability of short and medium term transitional accommodation for clients exiting government services who need to build their capacity to live independently.

Appendix: Service Principles for Multi-Agency Planning to Prevent Homelessness

1. A person-centred approach

Each person's needs should be identified and addressed in a way that supports their transition to independence.

- Effective transition planning involves the person and, where appropriate, their family/carers. A person-centred approach recognises the needs and expectations of the individual in their particular circumstance. Developing plans with the person accessing support provides a stronger sense of ownership and empowerment.
- The plan should include all aspects of the person's service needs across the system including (and not limited to):
 - health problems (physical and mental health)
 - drug and alcohol issues (including relapse prevention)
 - unresolved legal problems (including criminal history, current involvement in the criminal justice system, or outstanding fines)
 - parental and carer responsibilities
 - people escaping domestic and family violence
 - disability support
 - income support
 - living skills
 - readiness for education, training and employment
 - social support
 - connection to community and country.

2. Strengths-based and culturally appropriate practice

Agencies should work in a way that promotes and respects the person's culture and diversity, builds their self-determination and resilience, and focuses on outcomes.

- Agency practices should acknowledge and support diversity, including people who are Aboriginal, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and/or have disability.
- Agencies should refer Aboriginal clients to culturally appropriate service providers and when known, include family and kinship networks to assist in supporting the client in the community. Aboriginal people may require a Confirmation of Aboriginality to access some services and Agencies should assist clients with this process where possible.
- Agencies should ensure staff are well informed about Aboriginal, culturally and linguistically diverse, and other specialised providers in the local area so that appropriate referrals can be made.

3. Clear policy direction for 'no exits into homelessness'

All relevant policies and procedures in each agency should clearly articulate the intention of transition planning, which is 'no exits into homelessness'.

- Policies should outline any statutory requirements and focus on:
 - Prevention: agencies should ensure that all efforts are made to prevent homelessness upon exiting a government service.
 - Responsiveness: agencies should ensure that people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, receive effective responses so that they do not become entrenched in the system.
 - Breaking the cycle: agencies should ensure that people who have been homeless do not become homeless again, which can be achieved when support is oriented towards sustaining their accommodation.

4. Transition planning from the point of entry

Transition planning should occur as soon as possible after the person enters the facility/setting.

- It is recognised that this will vary for different settings and agencies need to identify their own benchmarking for this practice.
- Transition planning on entry should involve a full needs assessment that takes into account the person's history of homelessness, current accommodation, and likelihood of homelessness upon exit.
- Where a person is assessed as being at risk of homelessness upon exit, planning to address this should commence as soon as possible with all necessary agencies and a documented support plan prepared.

5. Housing solutions linked to support

People at risk of or experiencing homelessness often have complex needs and require support in the community.

- Stable and suitable accommodation is required in order to effectively transition a person and assist in their successful reintegration back into the community.
- Agencies should ensure that support provision is also geared towards assisting people to sustain their tenancies such as supporting people to build their living skills.

6. Appropriate services available at transition

Access to appropriate services on re-entry to the community are required for effective transition planning.

- It is imperative that agencies ensure that all staff involved in the creation and implementation of transition plans are aware of the available services including housing options (e.g. HSNET).
- Agencies should ensure that staff understand referral pathways and the timeframes that are needed to secure these services. This understanding should be facilitated by local partnerships.
- Agencies identifying service gaps that are preventing effective transition planning to prevent homelessness should escalate these to the Homelessness Interagency Group.

7. Commitment to interagency cooperation and collaboration

Agencies producing transition plans should work collaboratively with other relevant government and non-government organisations.

- This includes ensuring that all parties understand the person's needs and understand each other's roles and responsibilities.
- Agencies should utilise existing local partnerships, or form new arrangements where required, to improve transition arrangements.

8. Clear and detailed transition plans

Transition plans should clearly outline the type, duration and intensity of support that will be provided.

- Some people may experience non-participation (through illness or choice), disconnection from the transition plan, unplanned transitions from facilities, or decline services when they re-enter the community.
- Transition plans need to anticipate these situations and attempt to identify alternative resources that will meet potential needs. Strategies should be implemented to allow the person to re-engage at a later stage, should disengagement occur.

9. Effective information exchange between relevant agencies

Agencies should ensure that staff involved in transition planning are aware of the need for effective information exchange including relevant tools, procedures and consent requirements.

10. Effective data collection

Agency data collection systems should, where possible, identify people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- Robust IT systems are required that can flag homelessness upon entry, collect relevant data and track the client from the facility into the community.
- Tracking clients informs understanding of service gaps.
- Agencies should consider approaches to flagging clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

11. Clear roles and responsibilities for transition planning

Agency staff need a clear understanding of their role in facilitating multi-agency transition planning for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- Agencies should ensure that information on transition planning policies, procedures, and best practice is readily available and promoted within their agency.
- A communication strategy should be in place to ensure that information can be widely disseminated via emails, intranet and internet. This may include learning and development elements for staff responsible for transition planning such as workshops or e-learning packages.