

ANTI-POVERTY WEEK

October 15-21 has been designated as Anti-Poverty Week. Master Builders director Michael McLean reports on poverty in Western Australia and how we might alleviate it.

ACCORDING to Shelter WA, approximately 240,000 people in WA live in poverty, with a further 150,000 at risk of falling below the poverty line.

It is concerning to know that WA households are the second-most vulnerable in the country to a severe financial shock placing them in severe financial stress. This is not surprising though, given the recent downturn in the WA economy and the impact it has had on our workforce and unemployment.

In 2016, the poverty line (50 per cent of median income) for a single adult was \$426.30 a week, and just \$343 after housing costs were taken out. The consequences of living below this line are severe. It means you are unable to meet the most basic cost of living. People living in poverty cut down on life's essentials, including food, to make ends meet. They also often find themselves behind in utility payments, and generally need to make use of emergency relief just to get through the week. As you can imagine, the day-to-day stress on these households can be immense.

Families living in poverty find it hard to give their children the best start in life. Of great concern is the child poverty rate for children in lone-parent families. This increased from 36.8 per cent in 2012 to 40.6 per cent in 2014. Lone parents experience the highest poverty rates among all households, at 33.2 per cent. Children in lone families are more than three times more likely to be living in poverty than their counterparts in couple families, with a poverty rate of 40.6 per cent compared to 12.5 per cent.

For people living in poverty, the most significant hardship is the cost of their housing. Poverty, severe housing stress and homelessness are intrinsically linked. Unfortunately, the circumstances of poverty can often lead to homelessness. In 2015-16, 41.7 per cent of those presenting at homelessness services did so due to financial issues; and a further 35.4 per cent had accommodation issues, a symptom of poverty.

Having an abundant supply of social and affordable housing that meets the need of individual households can assist in reducing housing costs for those in poverty. Local governments can help by allowing smaller lots to be developed and more compact homes to be built in their suburbs. Builders and developers can assist by using cost-effective materials and more energy-efficient designs. These can all work to reduce the cost of living for lower-income households. Landlords having greater awareness of the circumstances of their tenants will assist them to understand when they are doing it tough, and potentially not evict them in times of difficulty, further exacerbating issues.

During Anti-Poverty Week there is a great opportunity to highlight some of these worrying statistics and for us all to have conversations with family, friends and colleagues about the drivers of poverty and inequality in WA. For more information about the week, visit www.antipovertyweek.org.au or contact apw@antipovertyweek.org.au. More information and education materials are available under the 'resources' tab on the site.

