

Housing for the homeless

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Everyone needs and deserves a roof over their head at night. For most of us, we call the place where we sleep most nights 'home'.

The quality, size, shape, type and location of our home can vary a lot depending upon our economic circumstances, lifestyle, job, preferred location and family composition.

So, what would you consider to be a minimum standard of housing that should be acceptable for a person experiencing homelessness in WA?

This is a difficult and complex question but one which is currently being considered by Shelter WA and several social and affordable housing providers whose objective is to end, not just manage, homelessness.

I recently returned from a holiday to South Africa.

To provide you with a context, South Africa has a population of 55 million, nearly 30 per cent unemployment (and over 50 per

cent youth unemployment) and with a minimum wage of about \$350 per month. Social security is also very low at around \$200 per month.

Thousands of economically poor South Africans live in what are known as 'townships'. These are shanty towns whose 'homes' are like sheds built from recycled materials such as corrugated iron, timber panels, brick blocks and rocks to keep the roof in place. Most of these homes have no water or electricity.

Ablutions are communal and water needs to be collected from nearby outlets.

From my observation, the people living here have accepted their lot in life, many worked long hours to improve their standard of living, while others promoted their own skills, such as hairdressing or selling clothes, amongst neighbours to boost their income.

The surprising thing to me was that, despite their basic living conditions, these people really appreciated living independently in their own home.

Clearly there would be an outrage if any of our governments decided to build a shanty town in the outskirts of Perth.

But what is an acceptable form of housing for someone experiencing homelessness, living rough on the streets or couch-surfing from one friend's place to another?



Having visited South Africa and observed several townships which house thousands of people living in poverty, my view is that our taxpayers' dollars in Western Australia can go a lot further if we had a conversation about what is the most appropriate housing response to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

Research shows providing the right type of housing, with appropriate services and wraparound social support, will enable people to maintain and sustain their tenancies.

The building industry can help through innovative construction designs and methods that are cost effective to build and cost effective for people to maintain.

Having recently inspected the narrow lot homes developed on 120sqm lots by Now

Living, and having seen the plans and walked the site of its 80sqm micro lots in Ellenbrook, I was impressed with how clever designs can achieve compact living areas for individuals and families.

Although this type of townhouse won't suit everyone, it will assist many Western Australians live in an affordable home or buy their own home at an affordable price.

For those experiencing homelessness, however, we should now focus on how we can design and build more cost-effective dwellings which will provide these people with their own home; something the rest of us often take for granted.

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