

BUILDING A WORKABLE SOLUTION TO HOMELESSNESS IN WA

Providing affordable housing options for the homeless requires renewed focus and more innovative solutions to the problem. Master Builders director Michael McLean shares his thoughts on this complex issue.

I'm told by Shelter WA that on any given night in Western Australia that at least 9000 people are homeless.

The 2016 Census recorded 1083 Western Australians sleeping rough, 1055 in supported accommodation for the homeless and 3871 in severely crowded dwellings.

Most of us have never experienced or witnessed homelessness, so it is difficult to imagine what it would be like to be homeless.

The causes of homelessness vary, but the dominant reasons appear to be domestic and family violence, financial difficulties or experiencing a personal or health crisis. Nobody chooses to be homeless.

We are fortunate to have a number of organisations which specialise in assisting about 25,000 homeless people each year.

These organisations include Anglicare, UnitingCare West, Foundation Housing, Vinnies, St Bartholomew's House, Ruah Community Services, St Patrick's and The Salvation Army. A number of these organisations have come together to form the WA Alliance to End Homelessness. Over the last 18 months, it has brought together contributions from many people to develop a 10-year action plan to end homelessness in Western Australia.

If our society believes the provision of some form of housing is a basic human right, then we all have a collective responsibility in contributing to ending homelessness.

Increasing the availability of affordable housing for people experiencing homelessness is fundamental to ending homelessness. In my opinion, three initiatives to support this should include:

1. Identifying suitable vacant land on which housing could be built by undertaking an audit, and repurposing and reinvesting in underutilised government land assets for additional housing supply. This will enable appropriate housing to be constructed at a low cost and close to services.

2. Encouraging local governments to develop and implement affordable housing policies and strategies to allow innovative housing solutions in their neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, the planning approvals process has hampered these well-meaning projects from proceeding in the past.
3. Providing greater housing choice for people who are at risk of being homeless. This might include a caravan, studio villa, modular unit, granny flat or shared accommodation with private or shared amenities with access to support services as required. Incentives for industry to partner with the community sector to deliver more affordable and diverse housing types should be a priority.

Housing Minister Peter Tinley is keen to find solutions to homelessness via innovative and affordable housing options.

Once we agree upon the objectives and scope of a project, I am confident architects and builders can create and build suitable dwellings that can house our homeless.

Involving and incentivising the private sector to come up with workable solutions to this blight on our society provides the best way forward.

With the housing industry currently experiencing a downturn, many builders would be keen to take on this challenge.

A roof over their head and a secure place to call home will assist people who experience homelessness to obtain appropriate professional help to address the problems that may have caused their plight.

Our society will be a more decent and equitable one by embarking on this journey sooner rather than later.

The WA Alliance to End Homelessness and Shelter WA are commended for their work in developing a series of strategies to end homelessness in our great state. Check out www.endhomelessnesswa.com for details.

