



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

(Reference: [Review into Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013:
National partnership agreement on homelessness](#))

Members:

MR B SMYTH (Chair)
MS M PORTER (Deputy Chair)
MS N LAWDER
MS Y BERRY

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 2014

Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Cullen (Ph: 620 50142)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 11.30 am.

GILBERT, MR TRAVIS, Executive Officer, ACT Shelter Incorporated

THE CHAIR: Good morning all and welcome to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts inquiry into Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013, *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness*. In accordance with the committee's resolution of appointment, all reports of the Auditor-General stand referred to the public accounts committee after presentation for inquiry and report.

The public accounts committee has established procedures for its examination of referred Auditor-General's reports. The committee considered Auditor-General's report No 4 of 2013 in accordance with these procedures and resolved to inquire further into the audit report. The terms of reference are the information contained within the audit report.

Whilst the terms of reference are the information contained within the report, the committee's inquiry is specifically focusing on three areas: measuring the success and effectiveness of policies and programs targeting homelessness, progress on the implementation of audit report recommendations as agreed by the government, and any other relevant matter.

Today the committee will be hearing from ACT Shelter Incorporated, followed by the St Vincent de Paul Society of Canberra and Goulburn. The committee expects to conclude its hearings at approximately 1 pm.

On behalf of the committee I welcome and thank the Executive Officer of ACT Shelter Incorporated, Mr Travis Gilbert, for attending today. The format of the hearing will be that we will ask you to give a brief oral submission, after which the committee will then ask questions. If I could remind witnesses of the protection and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink coloured privilege statement before you on the table. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Gilbert: Yes, I do. I did read that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you; so acknowledged. Can I also remind witnesses that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes, as well as being webstreamed and broadcast. Mr Gilbert, would you like to make your oral submission to the committee?

Mr Gilbert: Nine days ago I commenced in the role of Executive Officer of ACT Shelter. Before I get started I would like to acknowledge that I am speaking today on the lands of the Ngunnawal and the Ngambri people and acknowledge and pay my respects to their elders—past, present and future.

I do not really have a coherent opening statement so I thought I would start by just talking a little bit about the level of excitement, I guess, that was generated within the homelessness sector when we had the white paper on homelessness and the accompanying national partnership agreement on homelessness.

I started out in the sector as a youth worker in the homelessness refuge in 2003, and by 2009 I had been in the sector on and off for the best part of five years. I was in Housing SA and its office of homelessness and high needs housing when the white paper came out. In our discussions with the sector, people were overjoyed that finally, after many years, homelessness and housing affordability had begun to be taken quite seriously at a national and a state and territory level. That is the first thing I would say.

At Homelessness Australia, where I worked after that from 2009 to 2013, we did a report on the implementation of the white paper. We found, as the Auditor-General appears to have done in this report, that it was a little bit difficult to follow the money. We found that the data seemed to be contained in a range of sources, and it was often difficult to match budgeted expenditure with actual expenditure. We found that nationally, as well as here in the ACT, the vast majority of it had been implemented and that the initiatives were and are achieving very good outcomes in the main for people experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

Moving on to the ACT, the \$21 million-odd funded nine initiatives. The Auditor-General's report focused on three of them, which was interesting. I would like to see more in the future in terms of public reporting on the outcomes being achieved by those initiatives. Understandably for an Auditor-General's report, there was a lot in it on ensuring that financial accountability was met and the reporting requirements to the commonwealth were met.

One of the other terms of reference for that report, or scope of that report, was outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. There was data in there about the number of people supported through those initiatives. In the main, it looks as if the initiatives that it does report on met or exceeded their targets; so that is a good thing.

From ACT Shelter's perspective, we think that in the place to call home initiative we get access to good quality housing. The national target was 13 months of ongoing support, but I could be wrong. I think that is a really good model because we know that stable housing, with the right supports wrapped around the person, so to speak, does achieve good outcomes in terms of reducing tenancy failure in the long term.

The our place model, which was one of the other three programs highlighted, is an excellent model. I have visited that service. While it is not specifically called a foyer, I believe it is aligned with the international Foyer Federation. One of the great things about the Foyer Federation is that it challenges us to not talk about the deficits of young people in their service. In Britain the head of the Foyer Federation actually does not speak of it as a homelessness service. The foyers are located near universities and TAFEs and they speak of it as student housing. They speak of building the capacity of the young people and talking about them as who they are; that is, holding the keys to the nation's future. They are young people who speak very positively in the main about their experiences with Foyer and the opportunities that it provides.

For many of the young people it is the first time they have considered and believed in their ability to complete higher education and training, be that university or TAFE. So it really does offer a very positive future. I would urge all members of the committee to also talk positively about our young people, whatever situation they find

themselves in.

The housing and support initiative is based on a very successful model in New South Wales. I have just come from Mental Health Australia. In our consultations with consumers and carers, housing came up every time as the first or second issue of importance for people with severe and persistent mental illness. That housing and support initiative, which you could argue is supporting a small number of people, does serve as a very good model going forward. It too appears to have achieved quite good outcomes: 50 per cent of people in the program reported improved physical health, two-thirds reported improved psychological wellbeing—I gather the Kessler 10 scale would have measured that—and 84 per cent had a reduction in hospitalisation rates.

While the program required an investment of just over \$1 million, it would be really beneficial to get an evaluation that tries to track the cost savings across other service systems. Many of the models funded under the national partnership agreement on homelessness were aiming to generate cost savings across other areas of government to support the initial investment. I might leave it there.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for that. Firstly, could you expand a little on the Foyer Federation? You also talked about it being an Auditor-General's report so the concentration was on the financials, understandably. But you said there was a need for more public reporting. What form should that take?

Mr Gilbert: Evaluations of the programs' successes and where there might be areas for improvement would be good. That would probably involve speaking directly to the people who have benefited from those initiatives, the people delivering support and the tenancy managers, as well as the Community Services Directorate and other directorates involved in the provision of those services.

THE CHAIR: What does the Foyer Federation do and how does it operate?

Mr Gilbert: It is a global federation. It is a model of housing and support for young people with a history of homelessness who are required to participate in education and training or pre-employment programs in exchange for accommodation with a rent-setting model that is generally a proportion of whatever income they are receiving. That can be quite low if the person is entirely reliant on youth allowance, but as they progress to employment it can actually lift the financial viability of the provider because it is generally 25 per cent of what they are earning.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for that. Ms Porter?

MS PORTER: Thank you. I have a supplementary to that. The model is that they pay 25 per cent of what they are earning. What if they are not earning anything? Under the new regime, if it gets through the budget, there may be a six-month period when young people are not earning anything at all.

Mr Gilbert: Yes. That is extremely concerning. I would suspect it would be concerning for Housing ACT and community housing providers that also have a rent-setting model based on a proportion of their income. For the moment I understand that that measure has been stalled.

MS PORTER: What would you suggest might happen, though, if it went through? That was my question, Mr Gilbert. I am sorry I did not say good morning.

Mr Gilbert: That is okay. I would be extremely concerned, having started out my professional life, so to speak, as a youth worker. Young people already are struggling on the \$29 a day youth allowance. While there are caveats in place which suggest that people that were in the old stream 3 and 4 and the new stream 3 and the new employment services model are exempt from the measure, it would seem that you may fall into that stream of higher needs if you are not getting any money and you get evicted from your accommodation. Not every young person has middle-class parents, as I did, who can support them.

MS PORTER: Could you talk a little bit more about what you found good about the Foyer program? I think you were saying it is the one that has this way of measuring the income to take the rent and is also about the attitude of workers or the attitude of the organisation. Was that the one you were talking about?

Mr Gilbert: Yes, it was. Colin Falconer is the head of the Foyer Federation. I have heard him speak now at three housing and homelessness conferences. It has been really energising and quite revolutionary, sadly, because even in our own sector we can get caught up in using terms like “disadvantaged”—the sector does not use them so much, but things like “street kids” and “runaways”—whereas the Foyer Federation tends to have a model which takes the homelessness completely out of it and just talks about the young person as living in student housing and talks about valuing and lifting up young people, forgetting about the deficits model and harnessing the strengths available to the young person and the workers that are supporting them.

MS PORTER: You are also saying there should be some more data about the outcomes, particularly the outcomes from the point of view of the person who is using the service. Is that correct?

Mr Gilbert: Yes, I would like to see that. That is not ACT Shelter’s official position.

MS PORTER: But how would you see that data being collected? As you are aware, it is it is difficult to collect that quantity of data.

Mr Gilbert: Yes, and there would be issues around confidentiality and privacy and getting the consent of the people to provide feedback, but I think that can be achieved. It has certainly been achieved in the mental health sector, where there are a lot of opportunities for consumer participation, and in the disability sector as well. I think there would be ways around it.

MS PORTER: So you are suggesting that we should look at other models in other service provision?

Mr Gilbert: Yes. There is also the reconnect model, which does support young people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. That has a participatory action research component where the people using the service and the workers can design questions and projects to look at how the service model can be improved, based on the

experiences of both the workers and the people benefiting.

MS PORTER: Do you see the data that is collected at the moment as difficult to collect in any way from the point of view of someone who is working in Shelter? Do you find that the data that you are asked to collect against the various programs, not necessarily you but your members, member organisations—do you see them struggling to collect that data? Does it match their experiences in terms of the work that they are doing?

Mr Gilbert: I have not worked in direct service delivery since 2004 and that was with the old SMART reporting tool. I am told that the new specialist homelessness services platform is better and less time consuming—from memory, it would want to be—because red tape and reporting do take up a lot of time for many people in direct service delivery, and that is time taken away from directly working with people. I suppose that would be an issue if I were to ask for more outcome-based reporting or more reporting on how people are actually benefiting from the service. I think it would be more of an onus on the workers. So that is another issue.

MS PORTER: ACTCOSS made a point when they were before us recently that the sector needed more training in actually interpreting data, in literacy around data. Would you think that would be an issue or would you think that should be a service that could be provided to people who are collecting data so they understand a bit better why they are collecting it and how they can interpret it better?

Mr Gilbert: I suppose that might depend on the individual services and the workers. It is probably an issue. I think there is always a need for training around the importance of collecting data with whatever you are doing. I guess I am little bit too early on in this role to speak on behalf of the ACT sector.

THE CHAIR: Ms Lawder, a new question.

MS LAWDER: There has been a bit of discussion with some people who appeared before the committee about the impact of the Australian Bureau of Statistics redefinition of homelessness for the 2011 census. For example, the Auditor-General's report on homelessness says that differences in the definition contributed to an overall increase in persons counted as homeless through the census. It also says:

The ACT government has identified the revised definition of homelessness coupled with an increase in supported accommodation places has had the effect of significantly increasing the number of homeless people reported in the ACT.

The minister, at the time of the hearing, also flagged the possibility of going back to COAG and requesting of his fellow ministers a redefinition of the redefinition of homelessness. From your experience, do you feel the redefinition contributed to the increase in homelessness in the ACT? What was the impact of the redefinition and what would be the impact of a redefinition of the redefinition?

Mr Gilbert: This was a bit of a concern, reading this in the report. I think it said something along the lines of:

From the census data 2006 to 2011 it could be erroneously assumed that there has been a very significant increase in homelessness in the ACT of approximately 88 per cent.

Does the data bear that out? I looked at it.

I actually sat on the homelessness statistics reference group with the ABS that was involved in arriving at a reasonably mutually agreeable new definition. No-one really understands the anxiety and the pain—not no-one but not many would understand the anxiety that that caused within the homelessness sector more than I. I looked at the data.

It is true to say that it is quite a different definition. It has more in common with the European ETHOS definition developed by FEANTSA which focuses more on control of social space in the house and access to privacy, having lockable rooms and that sort of thing, than the previous definition which was largely about ensuring that there was a minimum standard of housing which was taken up by Chamberlain and MacKenzie, who developed the old cultural definition to be a small rented flat with a kitchenette and a bathroom as a minimum standard, with some security of tenure. You fall behind that and you are in a category of homelessness, which is where the boarding and rooming houses came in. Until fairly recently, when there were some improvements to occupancy rights in those places, you could be evicted at a moment's notice. You did not have any privacy. The proprietor had a key to your room, stuff got stolen et cetera.

But in terms of the new categories created by the definition, the largest category in that is a group now called people living in severely overcrowded households. It is true to say that there were 280 of those, up from 77 in 2006. There were five in another category that was newly created, other temporary lodging. If we take that group out we still see that it went up from 867 people in 2006 to 1,500 in 2011, an increase of 73 per cent. It is not 88 per cent but I do not think it is fair to say that there was not a significant increase in homelessness.

These other categories would have been picked up through the Chamberlain and MacKenzie definition because we still have a green sticker system where people staying in specialist homes for services on census night are de-identified and that data is sent through to the ABS. That would have been counted under the previous definition. People couch-surfing or staying temporarily with other households would also have been counted, as would people in improvised dwellings or sleeping rough.

We still would have seen a very significant increase in homelessness, and I would not want it to get out there in the community that this city does not have a housing affordability problem and does not have a homelessness problem, because we very much do. And there are a few relevant factors that can explain that increase. The September quarter 2011 saw a record crisis for two-bedroom units, \$440; three-bedroom homes, \$520. It has cooled off by about \$50 to \$70 a week since that time but that was up by about \$150 and \$160 over the five years from 2006. In fact, the unit price doubled from census night 2006 to 2011. We had a vacancy rate at the time of 1.6 per cent. AHURI tells me that a healthy vacancy rate is three per cent.

We also had the impact of the global financial crisis. While it was less severe in Australia, there were reports at the time that it did push some people to default on their mortgage and push others to default on credit cards and incur debts that may have pushed them out of private rental into specialist homeless services. But the increase in people in specialist homelessness services on that night, the significant increase of 600 people, was because the national partnership and the boosted NAHA funding funded more places in the ACT.

It is a good thing that the ACT has a strong track record of funding the highest proportion of public housing dwellings, giving more money to specialist homelessness services, per capita. Those extra beds enabled normal people to be accommodated. They may have been sleeping rough or in another area of the homelessness population had it not been for that. But I do believe there was a significant increase in homelessness.

MS LAWDER: If there was to be a redefinition of the redefinition, what effect would that have?

Mr Gilbert: For me personally that would be a nightmare. But I think that we have arrived at a definition that is more difficult to explain to the general public—I certainly support that assertion—than the previous cultural definition. But I do think that it has regard to things like domestic and family violence where you do not have control of social relations in the house. It is not a safe environment for you or your children to be in and you are constantly at risk of homelessness because, hopefully, one day you will find a way to get out of that situation. You are at risk of homelessness.

That is where changes in the definition came from. I think there were very strong advocates from the domestic and family violence sector that wanted to look at a home as a home, not just a dwelling that shelters you. We had a lot of debates about what constitutes a home. And things like safety, having privacy when you need it, having access to somewhere to cook if you wanted to, feeling safe and secure and having security of tenure so that you cannot be evicted at a moment's notice influenced where the definition landed.

I can really understand how the general public would think, “Just because you are in a house that has four or more bedrooms you are not homeless, you are housed. How can you be homeless if you are housed?” I can really understand that that is a difficult concept to grasp, but I would not want to see the definition revisited, I do not think.

MS LAWDER: Continuing on with that, there was, I recall, an article by a former federal politician—I cannot remember his name—which suggested that it was in the interests of the homelessness sector at the time of this redefinition to redefine because they wanted the numbers to increase to perpetuate their funding. Was the redefinition driven by the homelessness sector? Was it at their request?

Mr Gilbert: No, it was not. There was a bit of confusion as to where it came from actually—my memory of it is a bit fuzzy at the time—but I know the homelessness sector was a bit surprised to see this great body of work that was about to be undertaken because we had thought that the cultural definition had broad support. It

appeared in ABS reports. It appeared in state and territory reports. The figures that it generated were the basis for the homelessness white paper. Within the sector there were not many objections to the primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness definitions. It certainly was not generated by the sector.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry, a new question.

MS BERRY: Ms Porter touched on young people and the 25 per cent of them who are not getting an income because of the six-month period where they have to live on sunshine and air alone under this proposal by the federal government. I am interested, though, in women's accommodation. There has been an increase in reporting of domestic violence. I am interested in women who are on middle incomes and who are left homeless because they have had to leave a relationship that was violent. They are on an income which puts them just out of the market because they are earning slightly more than the threshold for social housing, community housing. I am interested in them because I think they are missing out in our community by not providing homes for them and their families. I am interested in what you think the solution would be to that.

On community housing organisations like we have here in the ACT, I was reading an article in the paper about a conservative politician who had bought housing units that were community housing units and he was going to charge market rent for all of them. The people were all on low incomes, paying that 25 per cent, and then he bought them out and wants to charge them market rent.

What I am getting to is this: how accountable are community housing associations, and is moving away to that kind of housing from public housing a solution to some of these issues, given that we have removed ourselves from providing that and somebody else is doing it now?

Mr Gilbert: I think you are right in that there is a national trend, not so much here in the ACT but in other states and territories, where there are significant stock transfers at the moment of public housing dwellings. Queensland, I think, has the highest target of about 85 per cent of their public housing stock to be transferred to community housing providers. There are possibly risks in that once something is not on the public books you would have less control over whether those properties are sold on.

I am a pretty big fan of community housing. I think it is quite a good, low cost housing model for affordable housing consumers. Community housing providers tend to be very well connected to support services in their local communities. They have quite a strong community development focus. It is a model that could serve women escaping domestic and family violence. I think there is a huge gap in the supply in the ACT and elsewhere between that model that you talked about, the 25 to 30 per cent rent model, and the 80 per cent or 74.9 per cent of market rent that NRAS and some of the higher end, affordable housing models provide.

Certainly women and their children escaping domestic and family violence do not have enough housing options at the moment anywhere in Australia, including here in the ACT. It is very difficult, particularly if the perpetrator has had significant control over the finances that a person has access to, for such women to have the ability to

make connections with services, employment or otherwise, outside of the home. If that has been quite strongly controlled, which it often is in a violent situation, then it is incredibly difficult to see how women escaping domestic and family violence could hope to afford the bond for private rental and the ongoing costs, without a job, because we know that even if they were getting parenting payment single, that is probably about the same cost as a one-bedroom unit in the ACT, the weekly allocation for that payment.

THE CHAIR: I will defer my question to Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned, as did the Auditor-General, that you appreciated the focus of the white paper on homelessness and housing affordability. And certainly now in your work at ACT Shelter I am sure housing affordability will be a major issue for you. Can you talk a bit more about what you see as the challenges specific to the ACT in housing affordability?

Mr Gilbert: Specific to the ACT, I think we do rely quite significantly on federal funding—and all the states and territories do—but I think for the ACT there are unique challenges. We do not have a huge revenue-raising capability as a territory—government funded initiatives that might support housing affordability. We really need to benefit from federal funding going forward.

There are still supply challenges in the ACT, although the vacancy rate in private rental is increasing. That may be due, in part, to the allocation of, I think it was, several hundred at least allocations of NRAS to the University of Canberra and the ANU, which appear to have taken students out of the private rental market and lifted the vacancy rate. This, combined possibly with public sector job losses, has seen a bit of a cooling-off of about 15 per cent in rents, down to about \$450 on average for three-bedroom and \$390 for two-bedroom accommodation. That still does not meet my definition of affordability.

We do face significant challenges and I am wondering whether the territory would be in a position to do some pilots around affordable housing supply bonds where they might partner with institutional investors, but I am not an expert in that area. But I think we do need some innovative solutions to housing affordability in the ACT.

It is more than just a question of land supply. I think that there are some good initiatives that are going on in the territory, but we do face significant challenges and I think it is an opportunity to learn from other jurisdictions and overseas about what has worked in similar environments.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned a cooling-off in rentals but, as you said, it does not necessarily mean that those people perhaps in the lowest quintile can still afford those particular properties. Apart from the public housing provision, do you have much of a feel for the unmet need, I guess, in that lowest quintile?

Mr Gilbert: I think there is a significant level of unmet need. I think there are about 2,200 people on the public housing waiting list in all categories. We have got a fairly small but growing slowly community housing sector in the ACT. We have got a common social housing waiting list now. All of those 2,200-odd people can go into

public or community housing.

I think that there are problems probably for people in the bottom 40 per cent. I guess that is where a scheme with a rent setting model slightly below NRAS, which was 74.9 to 80 per cent—if you could find a model that worked with a rent setting model of around 60 to 65 per cent of market rent—is probably going to be fairly viable for a not-for-profit housing provider and also affordable for key workers. I am not so much talking about police, nurses and teachers who possibly can afford the lower end of private rental reasonably well, but I am thinking about hospitality workers, construction workers, people whose employment is probably less secure and not often full time. They might be able to afford that 65 per cent market rental band—expanding those options between the 30 per cent of income and the 74.9 per cent of market rent.

There are some models that the Brisbane Housing Co and others run where they subsidise their very low income tenants by providing a number of properties at the 74.9 model and lower than that and higher than that.

THE CHAIR: I have a supplementary. Has the shelter done any work or does it have a view of what the impact of the Mr Fluffy homes will have if up to a thousand families have to move out of their existing homes and into the market over the next couple of years?

Mr Gilbert: I have not formulated a view with my board or with our members on that at the moment, but whenever there is an increase in people who will be looking for rental accommodation I would expect a slight upward trend in rents, although I understand that it is steeped over five years. I am not sure what the impact is. To answer your question directly, no, we have not formulated a position but I am concerned.

MS LAWDER: I am interested in Brisbane Housing.

Mr Gilbert: The Brisbane Housing Company is probably one of the larger affordable and community housing providers in Queensland. Because of that, they have a fairly significant stock of properties of about 2,000—but do not quote me on that. It means that they can probably offer a broader range of rent settings because with some of those higher income tenants—when I say higher income, I am only talking of up to about \$70,000—if they are paying almost market rent for properties, that provides an income stream that state and territory housing authorities could only dream of. It then enables them to provide more properties to people on the very lowest incomes.

MS PORTER: What is your sense of supply for older women who, for whatever reason, are no longer able to afford to purchase their own home, particularly maybe because of separation, the death of their partner or something like that? Do you have any comments around any models that you know of that can assist older women who, as Ms Berry was saying before, will not qualify for public housing necessarily for whatever reason? It might be because of some assets they have but they cannot afford to divest themselves of those assets as they would end up in a very serious situation. Also, what experience do you have in relation to Indigenous people in the ACT?

Mr Gilbert: On the first question, Shelter did a project on women's housing issues. Shamefully, I have not yet read all of it, but it did identify, as other reports have nationally, that it is an emerging issue, and it has been over the last several years. It might just be a case of not having purchased a home, not having quite enough super to purchase a home, or the super is allocated on a fortnightly or monthly basis, in the same way as a pension. As you say, you cannot access it all. You might have had assets. You only got 50 per cent of those in a post-marriage settlement, so that was not quite enough. It is an issue. There are models that are being looked at by AHURI. I think they may have done some work in that area. I do not have that with me but I am happy to take that on notice and provide that to you.

Shared equity models have worked for some people where they have other family members that might be able to contribute. But in the case where you do not have that, you might need to look at a shared equity model where a bank owns half of that asset, until such time as you have paid off the other half, or that kind of model. Certainly, I am happy to take that on notice and investigate that for you.

In terms of Indigenous people, I do not have a great deal of knowledge of that in an ACT context, except to say that they are dramatically over-represented in the homelessness population and in people in overcrowded dwellings, and I would expect there would be a bit of that here in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: You have mentioned AHURI a number of times. What does the acronym stand for?

Mr Gilbert: The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. It is a collaboration of a number of universities.

THE CHAIR: A new question, Ms Lawder, and then we will go to another question from Ms Berry.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned HASI in your opening statement—the housing and accommodation support initiative—and that it was a good model based on the New South Wales model for people with severe or persistent mental illness. In the ACT, according to the Auditor-General's report, only 66 per cent of the initial expected expenditure was expended. You mentioned that Homelessness Australia did a review of the white paper generally. Does that result accord with things you have found in other states or are you surprised by the fact that they only spent 66 per cent?

Mr Gilbert: Unfortunately, I am not surprised at the differences between budgeted and actual expenditure. I am a little bit relieved that the Auditor-General found the same difficulty that I did when I worked on that report part of the white paper, in terms of tracking the money. I guess that will happen with the implementation of anything. I think it was also redirected to headleasing programs for people with mental illness—so used for a similar purpose.

Unfortunately, it does accord with other states and territories. I say that is unfortunate in terms of what the federal government is thinking. The federal government is finding it quite difficult to track where its NAHA and national partnership agreement money has gone. I think Minister Andrews used the term that it is like throwing

money over the back fence and kids or someone will collect it. You do not really have full accountability for spend, which worries me particularly. I think that with the potentially flagged housing and homelessness review, those kinds of things will be looked at, and it may result in a reduction in funding or significant changes, which I certainly would not want to see.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry, a quick question to finish.

MS BERRY: I do have a quick question. Has ACT Shelter formed a view about negative gearing?

Mr Gilbert: We do not have an official view on it. National Shelter certainly has done some work around it. It would be very simplistic to say that we should get rid of it altogether. There is a bit of confusion about what happened when negative gearing was abandoned very briefly under either the Hawke or Keating government, about it actually pushing up rents. Really, all of the data comes from certain areas in Sydney, so it was not a large-scale test of that.

Shelter has some concerns about negative gearing. We know that it is about a \$7 billion subsidy and that about 80 per cent of that goes to people on incomes of over \$150,000. With negative gearing, it could be limited so that it actually does what it was intended to do and increases housing supply options in the rental market. If you were to restrict that negative gearing tax concession and the 50 per cent capital gains tax discount to new-build dwellings, so that you add to the total pool of stock, you would get that taxation subsidy to encourage people to actually build new dwellings and rent them privately. While it is on properties that already exist, that subsidy is being paid out and it is actually not adding to the total pool of rental stock. That is not an official Shelter position but that is one option.

THE CHAIR: We might leave it there. Thank you for your attendance today. I think you have taken a couple of things on notice. If you could provide answers to the committee within two weeks, that would be our normal expectation. A copy of the proof transcript will be forwarded to you as soon as we have it available. Could you check it, and if you have any suggestions for corrections, we will receive those and look at those for you. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Mr Gilbert, for attending today on behalf of ACT Shelter.

Mr Gilbert: Thank you, and that transcript might prompt what I offered to provide on notice.

THE CHAIR: We will follow you up, have no doubt.

BRASSIL, MR FRANK, President, St Vincent de Paul Society, Canberra/Goulburn
PICKLES, MR SHANNON, Director of Special Works, St Vincent de Paul Society, Canberra/Goulburn

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Could you confirm for the record that you have read the privilege statement and that you understand the implications of the statement?

Mr Brassil: I have.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Brassil, would you like to make an opening statement on behalf of St Vincent de Paul?

Mr Brassil: I would. First I would like to introduce by colleague Shannon Pickles. Shannon is our director of special works and has direct line responsibility for managing all our funded services, including our homeless services. He is here as our subject matter expert.

I thank you for the opportunity to make this statement in support of our submission. The St Vincent de Paul Society has been active in Australia since long before the ACT was brought into existence, and since its earliest days it has provided continuous support for people who are struggling in Canberra. We have a deep history with the capital city and a longstanding commitment to its people. In the past year we have spent over \$1.2 million on direct emergency assistance alone.

My role is president of the society in the Canberra-Goulburn area, which includes the ACT and surrounding areas of New South Wales as far west as Young, West Wyalong and Lake Cargelligo and to the east along the far south coast from Batemans Bay to Eden. The society in Canberra-Goulburn has approximately 2,000 members and volunteers and over 100 staff.

Our principal focus is on our members' face-to-face support of people needing assistance through home visitation, and working with them on a personal basis to address their needs. Supplementing this, we provide a range of professional support services in the area of youth, mental health, education, corrections and homelessness. Most of these professional services are funded through a range of local and federal government contracts.

We have a long record of working with the ACT government to provide high quality services to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in the community. We value greatly the partnerships we have had with the ACT government and strongly hope that such partnerships will continue in the future.

The St Vincent de Paul Society is deeply concerned about poverty and need in the ACT in all its forms. Homelessness and housing stress have been a great concern to the society and its members, and this concern has been accentuated in recent years. In 2012 we published a report on our perspective of homelessness and housing stress at the time, especially focusing on the stories of the people we help.

The November 2009 roadmap for ACT homelessness and related services identified key targets for measuring the success of responses to homelessness. It also noted that,

despite previous efforts, the 2006 census showed a small but significant increase in the number of homeless people compared to the 2001 census. We further note that the 2011 census reported that the ACT had the second highest rate of homelessness of any state or territory in Australia.

We understand there are concerns regarding these statistics given the changing definitions of “homelessness” and that most of the increase was in areas of homeless service provision. The fact remains that homelessness and housing stress continue to be a key element of poverty in Canberra. We argue that these figures do not demonstrate a lack of success in addressing the overall rate of homelessness, nor should they be a reason to abandon current responses; rather, it indicates that the problems are deeper and more complex than may be realised and that we need to learn from existing experience to develop future responses—responses which will require essential involvement from key mainstream services and departments such as police, hospitals, mental health, corrections and Centrelink help services. Further, the overall economic environment itself is not stable, so the context in which people are vulnerable can change from one period to another.

Let us now move to the society’s response to the performance audit report. The value of an audit of this nature is the opportunity to learn from the experience and feed that information into future work. The essence of our response is that the focus of the audit was not appropriately targeted so as to enable such learnings to be developed. The focus seems to have been on where and how accountably the majority of money was spent. This is a financial efficiency focus, not a social outcomes focus, and we see this as a lost opportunity. We do not disparage the importance of good financial oversight; money used inefficiently is money not available for more good work. But we are of the view that a stronger focus on the outcomes would have provided a better insight for the efficacy of this expenditure.

A good case in point is that four key reduction targets were highlighted by the ACT in the 2009 roadmap: a seven per cent overall reduction in homelessness, a one-third reduction in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons who are homeless; a 25 per cent reduction in the number of people sleeping rough; and a 25 per cent reduction in those persons experiencing three or more repeat experiences of homelessness over 12 months.

Our street to home program, which is funded through the national partnership agreement on homelessness, works closely with and supports rough sleepers, but was not looked at closely in the audit. Working with rough sleepers is hard and slow work, dealing with the extreme end of the homelessness spectrum where people have many complex and interacting problems. Measuring outcomes is not necessarily easy. However, we would have been delighted to have been audited on the results we are getting.

Recognising our earlier remark on the difficulty of census data, it is still worth while noting that between 2006 and 2011, whilst the number of overall homeless may have risen, the number of rough sleepers has actually dropped by almost 50 per cent, from 50 down to 28. Given that the society operates the only service in the ACT specifically targeting rough sleepers, we are incredibly proud of this result.

We continually provide ample statistics through the SHIP system and in our six-monthly reports to the ACT government. An important element of these reports is the case studies they contain because they highlight the fact that we are dealing with real people with real and challenging problems. Every person is unique and their story is their own. I know of no stronger motivator for wanting to respond to homelessness than experiencing the real stories of the people who undergo homelessness and housing stress.

I urge the committee to support a continued strong response by governments at territory and national levels to homelessness, and there are two key areas where St Vincent de Paul thinks real progress could be made. Firstly, I urge all governments to commit explicitly to recognising access to housing as a human right in the same sense that access to education and medical care are recognised. This would provide an underlying policy context on which specific programs could be built and held accountable.

Secondly, although we can all agree easily that homelessness is a complex and multidimensional issue, there remains a fundamental problem with the supply of affordable and social housing. The unwillingness of governments to address the supply side of the housing problem is a critical element of homelessness across Australia, including the ACT. From the very practical experience of our delivery of homelessness services in the ACT, the most common blockage in access to service is not in access to crisis support but in exit points to affordable housing for those persons we are already supporting.

I was heartened to read the words of Graham Searle, the Director-General of Housing in Western Australia, this week when he shared his disappointment with the lack of priority and resources given to housing and homelessness by local and federal government. At a forum we held last year as part of the centenary of Canberra it was pointed out that, if there was a sufficient supply of housing, at least half of the problem would be addressed. This needs to be done Australia wide to avoid honey pot effects, but it could be done if there were sufficient political will.

In conclusion, the St Vincent de Paul Society of Canberra/Goulburn does not so much criticise the auditor's report for what it looked at and said as for what it did not look at, and sees this as a missed opportunity to provide quality input into future responses to homelessness. In saying that, we remain of the view that to address the question adequately requires governments across Australia to increase by an order of magnitude the commitment that is made to ensure that there are enough places in Australia for all Australians to have somewhere to call home.

THE CHAIR: Ms Berry, you can have the first question.

MS BERRY: Could you give us an update on the street to home program, what you have achieved through that program and how things are going now for people who have been part of the program?

Mr Brassil: Our experience of the street to home program is that it is certainly kept busy and it has certainly been delivering good results. I will defer to Shannon to give a more precise answer to the question.

Mr Pickles: The street to home program has been very successful, primarily through looking at things differently in terms of using an assertive outreach model. That means we actually go looking for referrals; we do not wait for them to come to us. So our workers quite literally have been out on the streets of Canberra, walking around the lakes, going out into the city, finding people and almost aggressively trying to engage them with support.

One of the big differences is to reject the concept of people choosing to be rough sleeping. That was a common misconception even within the sector. We have found that it is patently not true. For the absolute worst that we take, sometimes “no” means “not right now”, but when we come back tomorrow it has been fine. We have quite literally seen dozens of people in Canberra that have been homeless for up to decades and have now been housed through the program, so it has been an absolutely fantastic result.

We have a lot of buy-in from other people in the sector. We have a very close partnership with mainstream services and the ACT government. We have basically kicked every mark and every result we are after. I think it has been a fantastic program, and I think the ACT government recognised that when they provided additional funding from their own resources to increase mental health support through that program as well. We have had real appreciation from Mental Health ACT for that fact as well.

MS BERRY: Through the Auditor-General’s report we have been asking a whole bunch of questions about homelessness more broadly. John Falzon has always said that, when somebody asks about a solution to homelessness, his solution is “build more houses”. That is one part of the solution but there is more to it than that, isn’t there? What else do you think needs to happen?

Mr Brassil: John is echoing a position that is put right across St Vincent de Paul Society, in that we think the supply issue is absolutely critical. For example, building more houses is not as simple as it sounds. Of course, they have to be the right kinds of houses in the places where they are needed, suitable for the needs of the people who you are housing. That is not a simple answer, because people are hugely diverse and complex. So we need adequate consideration of that complexity.

What John is really getting at is that what is really needed is a substantial increase in the total investment in this level of housing in our community by a very significant degree, and it needs to be done across Australia. There is no point, for example, in solving the problem in the ACT and nowhere else, because you will just have a lot of people moving to the ACT, which moves a problem and does not solve it. So it needs to be done at a national level.

Obviously, the amount of money involved is very large, but it is not money which is going to be squandered or wasted. It is money which is in fact converted into assets which are at least returning some form of income. It would fall into the category of capital investment rather than simply money being lost.

We think that government has a key responsibility in this area. I do not believe that

“the market will provide” is sufficient. “The market will provide” as an answer is merely exposing the most vulnerable and the weakest in our community to the worst excesses of market forces, and I do not think that is acceptable in a society where equality is regarded as a key virtue.

MS BERRY: In the ACT, given that our society has changed a lot in the last couple of generations, we have more sole-parent families who have different needs, and now we are having to move towards a different public housing stock, away from bedsits to two-bedroom and four or five-bedroom homes, for lots of different reasons. Obviously, that cannot happen overnight, but do you think the community housing sector can pick up that shortfall in the meantime? Is it a partnership that needs to work, or are there other things that we are missing? I feel that some of the funding for these programs—the street to home programs and some of the ones that were looked at in the Auditor-General’s report—are kind of bandaids on this festering sore. We are doing all this stuff all over the place, but we have this problem which we think can be resolved.

Mr Brassil: It goes to complexity of the problem. To use slightly different language, there is handout and hand-up stuff as well. Sometimes people say, “We want a hand-up and not a handout,” but sometimes when people’s immediate needs are desperate you have to respond to those immediate needs. You cannot ignore them. It is easy to get lost in dealing with the crisis situations.

I think that the long-term solution is in fact action to dramatically increase the supply. In the short to medium term you need various measures to break down the market-induced barriers to that. The gentleman who was here previously—Travis, I think—whose expertise in this area is greater than mine, covered a number of those options. But in the end it amounts to putting money into bridging the gaps that the market is inducing in this end of the market.

There are many ways of addressing the supply problem. People of a certain age will remember the great swathes of housing commission houses in places like Sydney. Governments were willing to do those things at those times. That model was not perfect and the houses were not perfect, but there were a lot of houses provided for a lot of people. In more modern times we could build better quality housing, better distributed throughout the community so that you do not create insular groups of people. But we ought to be able to find the resources to provide enough housing for everybody in this country who needs it. In the meantime the solutions to housing people while we are getting there really involve improving the ability to access the existing housing stock by people who are locked out by the existing costs of housing, particularly rental.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter had a supplementary; then a new question from Ms Lawder.

MS PORTER: It goes to Mr Pickles’s statement that you target people rather aggressively at times. I wondered what you meant by that statement and how you would see that statement sitting comfortably with some of the commentary that Mr Travis Gilbert gave us before about the way that particularly the Foyer program worked with young people in particular.

Mr Pickles: What I mean by that is that most rough sleepers, specifically those who are chronic, traditionally will not engage services. They have gone through the system. They quite often experience quite high levels of paranoid schizophrenia. They will not engage. They are not the type of people that will call up First Point and say, “I need assistance.” When I say that we aggressively pursue them, we do that—whether or not “aggressively” is the most appropriate word, we go out, we try to find them, and we try and engage them in support. By the time we get to them, they are over it. They do not want to have anything to do with people anymore, especially not government services and often not support services. That is what I am talking about in terms of that. In terms of the Foyer—

MS PORTER: Just before you go on, Mr Pickles, I still do not understand what you mean by “engage”. What do you actually do when you get there? I can imagine that if they told everyone else to go away, they would tell you to go away.

Mr Pickles: Sure.

MS PORTER: The next step is?

Mr Pickles: We are extremely persistent. A really good example is a guy in Civic who we could get maybe a word or two out of each time. We would go and maybe drop off a food pack to them. It took one of our Indigenous outreach workers six months. Eventually it just came down to you slowly building up a relationship: “Hey, how are you going? What’s going on?” He sat down one day and they started talking about the footy. They talked about the footy for about two hours. At the end of that conversation, they got to the point of: “You know what, you have been talking to me a while about how you can get me an apartment. Can you tell me a bit more about that?”

One of the great things with the street to home program that we were able to do in consultation with the government as well was getting rid of the concept of time frames. We got rid of the idea that a crisis support period was three months and a transitional support period was six months. We basically said, “With these guys it is going to take as long as it takes.” We have been engaging with quite a lot of them for two years. Sometimes we get stuff done within six months; we get them into a house. Sometimes it has taken 18 months. I suppose when we talk about “aggressive” and “persistent”, that is the sort of engagement cycle that we do with people. We have found that works.

THE CHAIR: Perhaps “concerted”.

Mr Pickles: Yes; let’s use that word, Brendan.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

MS PORTER: I am not very comfortable with the word myself, and I was just wondering how you interpreted that.

Mr Pickles: Sure.

MS PORTER: Obviously it is different from me. You were going to go on to talk a bit more about the approach of the Foyer model.

Mr Pickles: Yes. The Foyer model is a good model. For better or for worse, it links support predicated on mutual obligation. It is the concept of: “Let us come in; let us get accommodated; let us actually support you. But at the same time let us really understand that you are a young person and we want to get your development and life back on track, so let us get you back in education and training.” That sort of model is really important, especially if the young person does not have perhaps the other level of complexities. That is one of the things around Foyer. They cannot really come into Foyer if they have got an active addiction, and they cannot really come in there if they have got an active unwell psychosis or something like that. They need to have some level of capacity to engage in that sort of education, training and support.

That is important. What we see often, and what the research will show you, is that if a young person gets engaged in the chronic cycle of homelessness from a young age, their long-term prospects are nil. They will be in that sort of homelessness cycle for the rest of their life.

Going back to one of Yvette’s questions, I think pre-intervention is really important. I think that is a really big focus. I do not want to see pre-intervention coming at the cost of existing services: I do not think that we are doing band-aids; I think we are doing trauma work at the moment. We are literally stopping people from dying, stopping people from experiencing massive trauma, family breakdown. With all the services doing that, it is important to stay doing that. What we need to see extra is those pre-intervention services, engaging those people very early in the cycle of homelessness, very early in the cycle of poverty. And it is engaging children that come from families of poverty, of trauma, because that is where often this will start. If you look at the statistics around the number of people that are homeless that have experienced childhood trauma, it is very high. That is a very real issue. We also need more trauma counselling, so more free access to counselling services.

MS PORTER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: A new question from Ms Lawder, then Ms Porter.

MS LAWDER: We have the national affordable housing agreement, which is an ongoing special purpose payment, and the national partnership agreement on homelessness, which is a time-limited amount which funded new projects. We discussed with one of our previous witnesses from ACTCOSS that in a worst-case scenario, if you like, if there was no more extension to the national partnership agreement, rather than those new projects funded under the NPAH ending, there needed to be some kind of audit of which programs were achieving the best outcomes and perhaps a way to move them around rather than having to end them. Has St Vincent de Paul done any work on looking at those types of things if there was that worst-case scenario?

Mr Brassil: No, we simply do not have that level of research capability within our own office in Canberra. All the resources we have are tied up and committed to delivering services and managing ourselves and the organisation. I would love to be

able to afford that, but we just have not got those sorts of resources.

MS LAWDER: You had a good result. You said you were the only service specifically targeting rough sleepers, and that there has been a reduction in rough sleepers. Would that service go if there were no more NPAH funding?

Mr Brassil: It is funded under NPAH, so I think the obvious answer would be yes. The society is not totally dependent on government funding; we do a lot of private fundraising. But equally the demands for that money are very high, and we run a whole range of services, some of which are funded, some of which are not. We would have to look at the total money available and the priorities of the services we give.

I will give you another example, which is not directly a homelessness service. The Australian Catholic University ran a program called Clemente, which provided access to tertiary education for people from the backgrounds who we help. This is one of these transformative programs that, if you like, give people the experience of learning how to learn and to bring out their own capabilities. We fund that entirely ourselves. How do you put that up against something like street to home? It is a pretty difficult question to answer. That would be the sort of question that we would be facing in determining those priorities. Don't ask me to give an answer now. It is too hard.

MS LAWDER: Yes, sure. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter?

MS PORTER: I would like to go back to the data collection question and whether you believe that the data that you are being asked to collect reflects the work that you are actually doing. Mr Pickles is shaking his head, I think; I am not sure whether he is or not. And also, I would like to ask whether or not you think there would be different kinds of data that could be usefully collected, and whether you could manage to do that, given the situation you are in and the fact that you want to do the service delivery, not necessarily be stuck in a room doing other things. I think you can see the value of doing the other things; it is just that you do not have the wherewithal, the resources, to do it. I just want some commentary around that and whether you think you need additional assistance sometimes in actually interpreting the requests that you have to collect data on via those that fund you?

Mr Pickles: In terms of SHIP data, it is extremely quantitative data. Basically, what they are after is widgets: "How many people have you seen?" "What particular things have you been doing?" What is really lacking is outcomes-driven data.

MS PORTER: Qualitative stuff.

Mr Pickles: Yes. The people you are seeing—in three years time, are they still homeless? In five years time, do they have a job? In 10 years time, have they gotten over their trauma? Are they stabilised? There is very little longitudinal examination of the data that is provided.

I think what you find across the ACT as well, and Travis alluded to it before, is that you get quite a lot of variation between services in how they utilise that system. Some

of it is open to interpretation. The ACT government has done a lot of work on this recently. Only in the last six-month period have we actually trialled a new outcomes reporting based framework. So in addition to the SHIP data, we are trying to do a much stronger focus on outcomes reporting. One of the difficulties of this is that the data that services provide to SHIP goes over to the national data collection agency and then comes back. It is disaggregated data. They cannot pull as much out of that around individual services and which individual services are actually providing which particular statistics.

So every six months we have started trying to provide much more of that outcomes-based data, which I think is a very good way forward. But we do need that training that Travis mentioned, and I think that training needs to be around consistency. If we do not have consistency of understanding the data system, of what we are actually putting in and of what they are actually asking, then the responses we are going to get are going to be very difficult.

MS PORTER: So it would be like comparing apples with oranges?

Mr Pickles: In essence, yes. A really good example is this. One of the questions in the SHIP data is: “Can you tell us what percentage of the case management goals you think have been achieved?” Your options are less than 50 per cent, more than 50 per cent, more than 75 per cent, or 100 per cent. The problem is that it does not actually designate what that means. Does that mean case management goals on that particular day? Does it mean on a monthly basis? Does it mean over the last six months? Is it referring to the case management goals of the worker? Is it referring to the case management goals of the client? And what do you mean when you say “case management goals”? Until we have a consistent understanding in the sector of what that means, that sort of data is, in essence, useless.

MS PORTER: Because another organisation is going to interpret it differently? Is that what you are saying?

Mr Pickles: Absolutely. And also, we have been given different understandings around what questions within that SHIP data are compulsory and which ones are really optional and voluntary. There is a case management system built into SHIP, but using that had always been voluntary, because the ACT government did not collect that data.

MS PORTER: SHIP is an acronym?

Mr Pickles: The specialist homelessness information platform. It replaced the SMART system which Travis referred to earlier.

MS PORTER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: The unfortunate circumstance of the Mr Fluffy homes may see a thousand families coming into the rental market and the purchasing market. Indeed with the government’s objectives to redevelop the ABC flats and other large complexes, plus the likelihood of Northbourne Avenue changing significantly, does the society have a view on how the government should handle the people who

currently live in those facilities and what their needs are over the long term?

Mr Brassil: Mr Fluffy and the Northbourne flats are two quite different situations. With regard to Mr Fluffy, I do not know. I have a personal family connection with a family that is affected by it. I certainly know the circumstances, the situations and the uncertainties they are facing. I am not aware that anybody who is in that situation has, as a result of that, directly called on support from us. But I would not be so silly as to rule it out, because the circumstances these people are going to find themselves in are going to be difficult over the next few years. You might well find that people have not got enough food to survive for a fortnight; so we may certainly be responding in that sort of way.

More generally, on the impact of that whole process on the market, if it has a significant effect on supply it is going to send prices up. That is just the way markets work. It is a bit hard to tell just how big that effect is going to be, and there are still a number of uncertainties there.

With regard to the Northbourne flats, the people who are living there—and we visit quite a number of those very regularly—are all people with individual stories and all sorts of needs. The issue there is to make sure that, no matter what happens there—and we do have to recognise the reality of land values in market situations—these people are simply not shipped out to somewhere as some sort of surplus nuisance. These people are human beings and citizens whose needs and responsibilities are as worthy of recognition as those of any other people, and the people who might be buying into these situations. Often these people are living in these situations for family connection reasons, for access to services, for health reasons, and the needs of these people need to be given equal priority to every other need when considering any of these developments.

MS BERRY: I have a supplementary regarding the redevelopment of the flats, and along Northbourne as well. I understand that Housing has attempted to speak with people in these flats, but for lots of reasons they have not wanted to do so. But they speak to organisations like yours. I thought that the housing minister at the time had a process in place called “linked in”, where organisations like yours could then tell Housing what was happening with tenants. Is that “linked in” process still happening?

Mr Pickles: I do not know whether it is called “linked in”, but the—

MS BERRY: I cannot quite recall.

Mr Pickles: There has definitely been a lot of consultation; I will say that. They have come out to Shelter forums for example; they have done stuff with the Joint Champions Group; they regularly communicate with services. A number of community agencies are in those places at the moment—the ones that are going to be decanted. We do not have any ourselves, but I know those agencies in particular have still been heavily involved with that. My biggest concern around that whole redevelopment process is that they are not increasing the number of dwellings. They are still trying to maintain the same amount, which I think is great, but I would really like to see more properties, because I can guarantee we need them.

MS BERRY: I think that is the plan, and we can have that conversation later—to renew and increase the supply. But it is a long-term plan. It cannot be done overnight. It is complex. What I am concerned about is that we do not want to just shove people out to the edge where there are no services or anything like that. We do want to know where they want to live, and, as much as we can, I would think, be able to provide opportunities for them. How do we find out that information? Nobody really knows. We can assume that some people will want to stay where they are, some people might want to live somewhere else, to be closer to family or schools. But how are we finding out that information? Is that something your organisation is doing? When you are having these conversations with people who live in the flats over here—

Mr Brassil: We have our groups of volunteers right across Canberra who do what we call our home visitation service. That is when people call up and say, “I’ve got no food,” or, “I can’t pay my bills.” We have people who visit these people individually. I have not spoken in the last couple of months to the people who do that, although I know a number of them. They are, in general, very concerned about it, and they have expressed that through our own internal channels.

In terms of the government finding out the needs, the best thing to do is actually to sit down and talk to them as individuals. There will not be any sort of one-size-fits-all solution. Treat everybody as a unique individual and spend time talking through the situation with them. Understand that you will have varying degrees of literacy, varying degrees of life skills and varying degrees of capability to deal with the complexity of this situation.

For some people, just simple change is itself traumatic, and that is always going to be difficult. Some people may see it as an opportunity to improve their lot in life. But there is no general rule. I think the most valuable thing you can do is to spend the time with each individual, talking to them. Certainly, sending letters in the mail, for a lot of people, is an intimidating thing. Giving them a whole bunch of forms to fill in is, for some people, very challenging. But sitting down with them at a one-to-one level on a gentle, constructive basis is the best suggestion I can come up with for dealing with them.

MS BERRY: I have a question on what you were talking about before regarding trauma. It goes to how we hopefully stop people before they get into a situation where they do not have a job, are on low incomes or have some terrible thing that has happened in their life as a child. With the human services blueprint that is being piloted in west Belconnen, are you guys part of that?

Mr Pickles: Not directly, but we work with them quite a lot, obviously. We are aware of it.

MS BERRY: So you know what it is about?

Mr Pickles: Yes.

MS BERRY: With that sort of thing out in west Belconnen, which is on the edge, where services are not readily available for people who might be in need, is that the sort of thing where a person can be identified as somebody who needs supports, needs

to tell their story once—so they go through one gateway to wherever they need to get that support from, which hopefully identifies them early in their life, particularly children? Hopefully, they can be supported early in their life so that this trauma work that we are doing now can stop at the beginning, and that sort of early intervention with families can be done.

Mr Pickles: I definitely think that helps. It is a good project and a good start. My concern is that the only way someone gets flagged through that process is when things have already started going really badly, and that is when they start going in. When I think of pre-intervention, I really want us to try and think of much earlier. The problem is that the only people that are going to see that is the mainstream services. It is going to be your local GP, it is going to be your schoolteachers, it is going to be your employer.

The problem is that a lot of people do not really know who to go to if they have these concerns. It is really clear if someone is homeless these days. You give First Point a call; that is what you do. If you are concerned that someone is not treating their child well, you call Care and Protection; that is what you do. But what do you do if you are worried about someone? If you are worried about a family that are not doing particularly well, or if you are an employer and you are worried that this woman is taking a lot of sick leave and she is really stressed, who do you call and how do you manage that?

That is what we are missing. At St Vincent de Paul we do a lot of that work through our conference volunteer network—going out and engaging people because they have given us a call. But on a broader level, on a systemic approach level, how do we do that? Who do you call in terms of pre-intervention to get in there earlier? That is the sort of service I would like to see promulgated widely: “This is a number you can call if you are worried about how someone is tracking. If you are worried about this family, if you are worried that they are starting to decompensate a little bit, if you are worried that they are getting sick a lot, if their kids are sick, if they can’t afford their bills, call this place and they can come in and help out.” At the moment we are a response-driven sector. Basically it is once things go wrong that we come in. I would like it to occur before things go wrong.

Mr Brassil: I have been visiting people in Canberra since about 1976. So I have seen a lot of the faces—the ordinary banality of poverty in Canberra. I think there are three key things, apart from economic factors, that sustain people in poverty. The first is relationship failure. Mostly, but not always, it is the woman who is left holding the baby. The second is mental health, and that is a key lock-in for poverty. The third is what I call lack of life skills—the basic things that we learn, to use the phrase, at our mother’s knee about how to manage relationships, how to manage our expectations in life. For people who do not grow up in an environment where these things are passed on, they are in fact deeply and severely handicapped for most of their lives. Every local group with which we have conferences at St Vincent de Paul has a couple of families that they have been seeing for two, three and four generations, because these problems are not being addressed.

It is a really hard problem, because sometimes people do not even recognise that they have a problem. Until we understand that somehow we need to inject these basic life

skills—relationship management, conversation management, how to treat people respectfully and manage your own expectations—the lack of these things really does trap people in poverty in our community, and it locks them in for multiple generations.

MS BERRY: I think it says something about how our community has changed and how we isolate ourselves from each other. I think there is a deeper issue that we need to work harder on.

Mr Brassil: I wish I had the answer. I do not.

MS BERRY: Yes, wouldn't it be wonderful? With our young people in their education, when you are growing up in an environment where relationships are not respectful, you can give teenagers the theory, but if their observation every day is of this relationship that is not respectful, how do we do something about that? That is coming back to the beginning again, isn't it?

Mr Brassil: That is right. This is the really hard problem. Yes, you are going to identify, through lots of channels, people having difficulty. That does not mean they know they are having difficulty, and that does not mean they are capable of responding if they are told. It is as hard as that.

Mr Pickles: There are a lot of really good mentoring programs around as well. St Vincent de Paul in Western Australia do a unique family mentoring program. They actually get a more stable family that will link with a more disadvantaged family, and they will do things like catch up for a family dinner or something like that.

THE CHAIR: Who ran this?

Mr Pickles: St Vincent de Paul in Western Australia.

THE CHAIR: And it is called?

Mr Pickles: I can find that out for you. I cannot remember the name of it now. It is about mentoring those positive life behaviours, as opposed to experiencing and only ever being witness to those negative life behaviours. It really is around what you witness and understand as normality. You especially get that a lot with domestic violence. They understand that violence is normal. It is about understanding and seeing that there is a different way of experiencing living. If we had a lot more of those types of programs, that is one way. It is not necessarily the way.

Mr Brassil: Interestingly enough, some of our Indigenous communities are taking on this in a very clever way. I recently had a presentation on a group called Malpa. I do not know whether you have come across them. They call themselves the Aboriginal doctors. They use the Aboriginal tradition, the cultural doctors, to identify the bright, capable young people and work through them to influence their own peer group. They have got this going in a number of places throughout Australia. It is an entirely voluntary funded program, but it seems to be very effective because it is getting kids at a young age and getting them to influence their peers. Perhaps there is a lot we could learn from our own Indigenous community about how to handle these sorts of issues.

THE CHAIR: Our time is drawing to an end. If you could find out whether the program in WA has a name, that would be great. Where would one find information about the Aboriginal doctors program?

Mr Brassil: I will send that to you.

THE CHAIR: That is very kind. We might finish there. Gentlemen, thanks for attending today. With the questions you have taken on notice, if you could provide an answer within two weeks, we would be most grateful. A copy of the proof transcript will be forwarded for you to check, and you can offer any suggestions or corrections if you feel the need. I am sure I speak on behalf of all the committee in thanking St Vincent de Paul for all your great work.

The committee adjourned at 12.58 pm.