

## Best Practice: Comprehensive Data Collection to Inform Homelessness Policies

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**CITY: SYDNEY****POLICY AREA: SOCIAL SERVICES**

### BEST PRACTICE

In 2010, the City of Sydney augmented its efforts to collect comprehensive data on the nature and characteristics of its homeless population under the initiative, "Street to Home." Led by the Sydney's Homelessness Unit, the initiative is a collaborative partnership between the City and a number of private, philanthropic, government and non-government stakeholders, including people experiencing homelessness. The data collected through Street to Home will inform Sydney's new *Homelessness Strategy* and will set clear targets for a reduction in the number of people sleeping on the streets and aim towards the elimination of chronic homelessness.

### ISSUE

Street to Home will address potential problems created by the current reliance on outdated or limited data collected from fragmented sources. Data will be used to inform the direction of policy, set targets and identify responses. Street to Home is also a manifestation of Sydney's commitment to measurable outcomes and accountability for results.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The national and state goals influencing the City of Sydney's revised approach to homelessness are:

- A national reduction of 50% in overall homelessness by 2020.
- A reduction of 25% in street homelessness (rough sleepers) in New South Wales by 2013.

The overall goal of Street to Home is to provide baseline data to enable Sydney to adapt the national and state goals to the local area by October 2010.

Street to Home objectives include to:

1. Quantify the actual numbers of people who are living on the streets and in homelessness hostels within the local government area;
2. Determine the demographics and characteristics of the homeless population and identify the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals in order to prioritize their needs;
3. Analyze and compare the cost of maintaining the current number of people living on the street versus the cost of placing the same population in long-term housing with support;
4. Measure the long-term impacts of stable housing on quality of life indicators and changes in service usage.

The Homelessness Unit aims to complete objectives 1 to 3 by October 2010. Objective 4 will be a research project carried out by the University of Queensland and will be completed by the end of 2013.

### IMPLEMENTATION

Sydney is the only local council in Australia with a dedicated Homelessness Unit. The Homelessness Unit is responsible for direct service provision, contracting services, policy and project development, community development, sector coordination, advocacy and research. Working in partnership with the Commonwealth and State government, the not-for-profit, philanthropic, corporate sectors, and with people experiencing homelessness, the Homelessness Unit will redraft the

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*Homelessness Strategy* in the first half of 2011. A key component will be the research undertaken as a part of the Street to Home initiative. The data collected will focus the group's efforts on increasing opportunities for people to quickly exit homelessness and to prevent homelessness.

The Street to Home research project is overseen by a taskforce consisting of corporate, philanthropic, government and non-government partners and is guided by a number of advisors who are individuals who have lived the experience of being homeless and who have directly participated in the research. The taskforce is chaired by a corporate member. The diverse blend of experience on the taskforce means that the focus remains firmly within the sphere of actions and outcomes.

The Street to Home objectives and anticipated outcomes are described in more detail below.

1. The **Street Count** will collect accurate up-to-date information about the numbers of people sleeping on the streets and in temporary shelters, homelessness hostels and hospital beds across the City of Sydney Local Government Area (LGA). The Count will provide base line figures with which to establish targets and measure progress against objectives and those of the New South Wales and Commonwealth governments. The Street Count will involve the participation of approximately 180 community members including 20 advisors with current or previous experience of homelessness and will take place on August 17, 2010 between the hours of 1:00 a.m.–3:00 a.m.



### Results from previous Street Counts (last updated: July 29, 2010)

Roughly two thirds of the City's local government area was covered in both counts.

Approximately 165 volunteers, including about 20 advisors, participated in each Street Count.

	Aug-08	Feb-09	Aug-09	Feb-10
Rough Sleepers / over night shelters	354	340	399	418
Occupied Hostel Beds	469	424	438	470
<b>Total</b>	<b>823</b>	<b>764</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>888</b>

2. The **Vulnerability Index** is a survey that will be conducted of those identified during the Street Count. The purpose of the Vulnerability Index is to enable the Homelessness Unit to understand the demographics and characteristics of the homeless population and identify the most vulnerable. The Vulnerability Index has been adapted from an index first created by Dr. James O'Connell, a founding member of Boston's Health Care for Homeless People organization. The index was converted into a practice model by the Common Ground Institute in

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New York and is used in several cities across the U.S. The Vulnerability Index will involve approximately 60 volunteers and will take place over three days, August 18-20, 2010 between the hours of 4:00 a.m.–6:00 a.m. The adaptation of a U.S. model for local purposes will also enable comparisons across international borders.

3. **The Cost Analysis of Rough Sleeping** (homelessness) will provide an opportunity to identify the cost of homelessness to the government and wider community. It will also enable Sydney to compare the costs of maintaining people in homelessness against the costs of providing housing and services for this population. The results of the cost analysis, paired with the results of the Street Count and Vulnerability Index will be converted into a Business Plan for solving homelessness in the inner-city. The Cost Analysis will be conducted with a sample of 35 homeless people in an area of the inner-city that is most densely populated by homeless people. Surveys will be carried out by the Assertive Outreach Service and will take place on August 23, 2010.

The Assertive Outreach Service is a homeless outreach service that is funded by the City of Sydney, NSW government and the Federal Government. It has an outreach and support team as well as a health outreach team that is run by a consortium of Neami (a non-governmental organization) and Saint Vincent's Hospital. The focus of the service is to deliver a suite of coordinated services to rough sleepers with a focus on referring them out of homelessness into secure housing and to support them there. The service now has the name "Way2Home."

4. **Longitudinal Study on the Impact of Housing** - The University of Queensland will work with local partners to conduct a three year study of the impact of supportive housing on the quality of life for people who exit homelessness. The study will also track the changing levels of service usage among people who have exited homelessness. Through this research the Homelessness Unit will be able to track the journey of some of Sydney's most vulnerable people into independent housing where they will receive the support. This study will commence in December 2010.

### COST

Through the sharing of resources and the in-kind contributions of partners and community members, the actual cost of the Street to Home initiative, in monetary terms, is less than AUD 8,000 (\$7,312 USD). Given the quality of the data that Sydney expects to produce and the anticipated outcomes, this project represents significant value for the investment. It further demonstrates that the injection of money and new resources is not always what is required to achieve results.

### RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The results of the Street to Home research will be released as a combined body of work that will include recommendations for actions necessary to accomplish the federal and state goals regarding homelessness. The results will also form the foundation of the revised goals and targets of the City of Sydney's *Homelessness Strategy*.

The Street to Home research will culminate in the Housing Now Forum that will take place in late 2010 or in early 2011. The results of the various pieces of research will be presented and discussed with a targeted audience of public, social and private landlords, property industry stakeholders, social planners, policy makers and other related stakeholders. The aim of the Forum will be to explore public, private and other partnerships to increase the stock of housing available to the most vulnerable and at-risk homeless people. The forum will also be an opportunity to discuss opportunities for reducing the costs to the public and private sectors of continuing to service the homeless population. Participants in the forum will be invited to pledge housing or other resources towards for the 50 most vulnerable people identified through the Vulnerability Index.

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The Street Count is conducted twice yearly, once in the winter and summer, and allows the City to track changes and fluctuations in overall numbers of the homeless population and across seasons.

The results of the Vulnerability Index will be entered into a data base that will be maintained as a dynamic register where individual records can be updated and new people added.

It is anticipated that a significant portion of the people who are surveyed as part of the Cost Analysis will also be assisted by the Assertive Outreach Service to enter housing. These individuals will be tracked through their journey from street to home over a period of three years which will enable the Homelessness Unit to assess the impacts of housing on not only their level of independence and quality of life, but also the impact of housing and support on the nature and levels of service usage and associated costs.

### TIMELINE

June to August 2010	Planning stage
August 17, 2010	Annual Street Count
August 18-20, 2010	Vulnerability Index survey
August 23, 2010	Cost Analysis
September 1-3, 2010	Release of preliminary results at the Australian National Homelessness Conference
Late 2010/early 2011	Release of comprehensive report at the Housing Now Forum in late 2010 early 2011

Other key dates:

- Federal Election: August 21, 2010
- New South Wales State Election: March 2011

### LEGISLATION

In December 2008, the Commonwealth Government released its white paper on homelessness, "The Road Home," a national policy document. This was a significant milestone in Australia as the white paper was the first ever national policy on homelessness and the very first policy initiative announced by the new incoming government.

The white paper was followed by the release of the New South Wales government's Homelessness Action Plan (HAP), a state plan for addressing homelessness, the first of its kind in New South Wales. The goals and targets of the HAP are directly linked to those of the white paper.

To reflect the emergence of new policy at the Commonwealth and State level the City of Sydney has committed to revising our own *Homelessness Strategy* to integrate its goals and targets with those of the federal and state governments while maintaining a focus on local issues and priorities as identified by community stakeholders. Due to the upcoming elections at Commonwealth and State level and the potential for change in government and policy focus at both levels of government, the City of Sydney will release its new *Homelessness Strategy* in approximately April 2011. This will allow the opportunity to assess the need to accommodate any shifts in policy and focus related to the outcomes of the elections.



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### LESSONS LEARNED

The City of Sydney maintains a dynamic and flexible approach and continues to analyze its strategy in line with the lessons learned, other international best practices and feedback from consumers. The overall goal is to ensure that the approach to homelessness is based on achieving outcomes against the objectives set and that all are held accountable.

The City of Sydney's focus rests firmly on results and long-term outcomes for people who are homeless. The City believes that it no longer finds it acceptable that homeless people cycle endlessly through the service system without achieving enduring results and an end to their experience of homelessness. Sydney's focus has also shifted to include preventative measures for people who are not yet homeless or who are newly homeless.

Efforts to facilitate exits out of homelessness are hindered by the scarcity of affordable housing for vulnerable people. People who are homeless are among the most vulnerable and the least competitive in terms of access pathways to available housing. This makes finding exits challenging. The City of Sydney is working with the state government and private and community stakeholders to facilitate the increase of new housing stock and its availability and affordability for those who are most in need.

### TRANSFERABILITY

The majority of the work carried out by the City of Sydney is completed in the context of developing communities and is based on working in partnership with others to achieve sustainability and enduring success rather than short-term achievements.

Sydney believes that an injection of new resources does not always provide the solution to a problem. Rather, more effective and coordinated use of existing resources not only produces better results, but prevents the proliferation of ineffective approaches and promotes results measured against the investment of finite resources.

### CONTACTS

Liz Giles  
Manager Homelessness Unit  
City of Sydney  
[egiles@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au](mailto:egiles@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au)

Level 5, Town Hall House  
456 Kent Street, Sydney  
NSW, Australia, 2000  
Tel: 02-9246-7676

<http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/community/homelessnessservices>