

## Homelessness And Mental Health: Slipping Through The Cracks *article by Simon Smith*

A new study released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has again highlighted the issues facing people experiencing homelessness who have a mental health or substance abuse problem. The AIHW report, 'Homeless SAAP clients with a mental health and substance use problems 2004-05' was released in March.

According to the data contained in the report, half of all people with a mental health problem, and almost two-thirds of people with a substance abuse problem, remain homeless after their period of support in SAAP has ended.

A significant proportion (around one-in-five) move onto another SAAP service when their period of support ends.

**TABLE: SAAP clients with mental health and substance abuse problems that remain homeless after a support period, 2004-05**

Type of accommodation	Immediately after support, clients with a substance abuse problem (%)	Immediately after support, clients with a mental health problem (%)
SAAP or other emergency accommodation	<b>21</b>	<b>19.5</b>
Living rent-free in house/flat	<b>8.4</b>	<b>8.9</b>
Rooming house/hostel/hotel/caravan	<b>8.5</b>	<b>10</b>
Living in a car/tent/park/street/squat	<b>13.9</b>	<b>6.4</b>
Institutional	<b>12.7</b>	<b>9.4</b>
Proportion that remain homeless	<b>64.5</b>	<b>54.2</b>

The report shows that it is unclear whether people with mental health and substance abuse problems are getting access to clinical services. According to the report, requests for psychiatric and psychological services were provided directly in around 40-50% of cases. A large proportion of people (about 35-40%) were given a referral to a clinical service, but no data is kept on whether people who were given a referral were subsequently able to access a service.

Clearly, homeless service providers need more resources to meet the needs of people with a mental illness. In its National Action Plan on mental health, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) did not adopt a specific

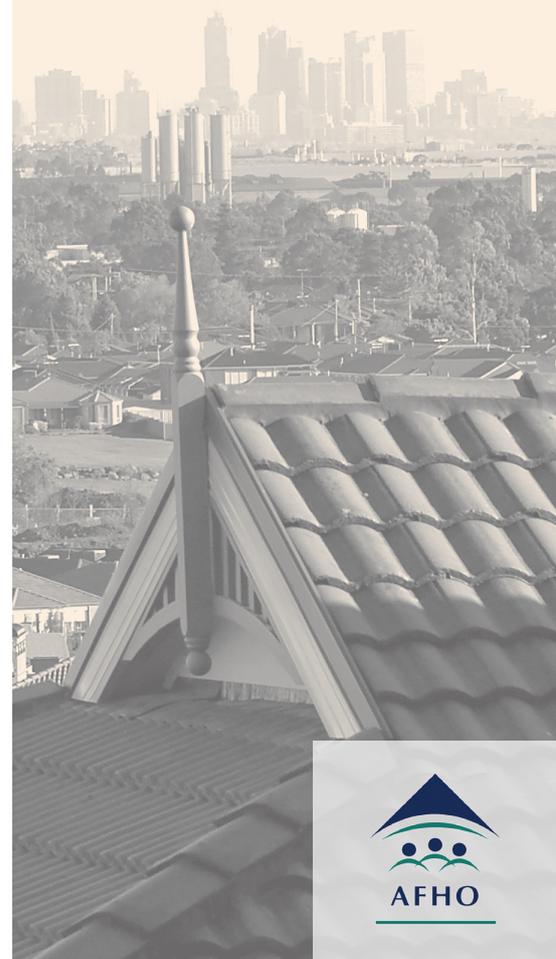
national measure to provide assistance to homeless people with a mental illness. Some of the new Commonwealth funding under the Action Plan might lead to greater resources for people experiencing homelessness and mental illness. For example, the new Personal Helpers and Mentors Program will link people with a mental illness to a recovery support worker, who will assist them to live independently in the community. Some of these workers may be located in SAAP services, but this is not a specific requirement of the program.

State and Territory Governments can also play a role in increasing support for homeless people experiencing mental illness. Some, but not all, States and Territories have included measures to address the housing needs of people with a mental illness in their contribution to the National Action Plan.

The report also emphasises the need to better understand the relationship between mental health and homelessness. It is not clear if mental illness, per se, is a contributor to people becoming homeless. Mental illness is probably an element of the factors that lead to homelessness for different client categories in SAAP. For example, women escaping domestic and family violence are likely to be experiencing anxiety disorders and/or depression. More research is needed to demonstrate the link between mental health and homelessness.

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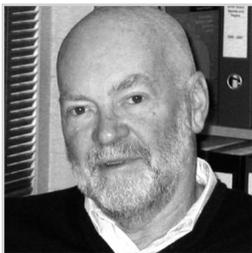
**Annabel Senior**  
*Chairperson of AFHO*

## Message from the **Chair**

Since the development of the three year strategic plan in October 2006, AFHO has a new and invigorated platform from which to move forward. This federal election year provides an excellent opportunity to represent the interests of our members and stakeholders to politicians in order to move homelessness further up the agenda in terms of awareness of the issues, and more importantly a holistic and integrated approach to tackling the problem.

AFHO recently took the opportunity to meet with the newly appointed Family and Community Services Minister, Senator Nigel Scullion. We found the minister interested and engaged in discussing our concerns and recommendations. He has worked with a number of Indigenous groups in the Northern Territory and has a good understanding of many of the issues confronting Aboriginal Australians and those living in remote areas.

The Advance Australia Fair campaign launched by ACOSS in 2005, has struck a chord with concerned Australians and the two leaders of the major political parties are also talking about creating a fairer Australia. We urge members to visit the website to find out more about the campaign, and if interested, to “sign up” as individuals and organisations. The web address is [www.australiafair.org.au/public](http://www.australiafair.org.au/public) It's only by creating awareness in numbers and translating that concerns to the decision makers, that we can achieve change.



**Gordon Melsom**  
*Executive Officer of AFHO*

## Message from the **Executive Officer**

Since joining AFHO in October, the last six months has been both challenging and rewarding. Challenging because of working my way through the labyrinth of pathways by which people come to experience homelessness, the number of organisations providing either direct service or supporting services and the longer term impact of homelessness on people particularly children and the sheer number of people affected.

The reward comes from working within a broader community of people who are dedicated and professional in seeking to achieve a fairer society in Australia.

Since arriving in the ACT in June 2004, I worked as Manager ACT & WA for a large psychological services provider, until the opportunity to return to the community services sector was presented. Prior to moving to the Bush Capital, I was CEO of Relationships Australia (WA) for nearly five years and previously operated a professional services consultancy in WA.

Concurrently, I worked as a part time lecturer in management studies at Edith Cowan University for 13 consecutive years as well as stints at the Curtin Graduate School of Business and for four years with the University of Notre Dame Australia.

As the national peak for homelessness organisations AFHO has a major responsibility in representing over 450 member organisations and bringing to the attention of government and politicians generally the issues encountered in both assisting people experiencing homelessness and developing strategies to prevent people at risk of becoming homeless.

With the support of the board and more broadly by council members I have embarked on a familiarisation program, meeting service providers and exchanging information to develop closer links with our stakeholders.

I welcome inquiry or comment on (02)6247 7744 or email [gordon.melsom@afho.org.au](mailto:gordon.melsom@afho.org.au).

## 5th National Homelessness Conference

AFHO is very excited to announce that AFHO will be hosting the 5th National Homelessness Conference in Adelaide 22-23 May 2008.

Under the leadership of conference organiser Beverly Atkinson, the conference is set to be bigger and better than ever. The theme for the conference is "Homelessness: New Horizons", focusing on emerging trends, best practise and ideas sharing.

Make sure to keep an eye out for more information about the conference at [www.afho.org.au](http://www.afho.org.au)

If you have any ideas for conference themes or keynotes, please email [afho@afho.org.au](mailto:afho@afho.org.au)

Look forward to seeing you in Adelaide!!!

## Membership 2007-08

Its that time of year again!!!

AFHO memberships need to be renewed in July of each year, so if you or your service is a current member, you will be receiving an invoice from us in the next couple of months. If you are interested in becoming a member of AFHO, please contact [afho@afho.org.au](mailto:afho@afho.org.au).

Remember, there will be Member discounts for the 5th National Homelessness Conference, so sign up now!!!

Being a member of AFHO means that you support the national policy framework which AFHO uses to advocate for the prevention of homelessness. As well, you will receive numerous information tools about homelessness. For more information about any of these please refer to the back cover of this publication.



## New Staff Member | Simon Smith

**Simon Smith has recently joined AFHO as the Policy and Research Manager.**

Prior to joining AFHO, Simon was a Policy Officer with Catholic Social Services Australia for the last 2 years. He worked on a broad range of social policy issues that relate to homelessness, including employment policy, family law and mental health. He brings strong networks with other peak bodies that will help AFHO to develop its policy and research agenda.

Simon has published two papers on welfare to work, including 'Go and Get a Job' presented at the University of Queensland welfare to work conference in 2006.

In his spare time, Simon is a rugby league referee and keen Canberra Raiders supporter. He is a devotee of the annual Parkes Elvis Festival in country NSW:  
<http://www.parkeselvisfestival.com.au/>

# National Oral Health Alliance | Australian Council of Social Services

ACOSS and its members have joined with the professional bodies that represent dentists, therapists, hygienists and other health professions to form the National Oral Health Alliance.

ACOSS published Fair Dental Care for Low Income Earners in October 2006. The paper called for Federal Government leadership to deliver better care for those least able to afford dental treatment. It found that:

- over 2 million Australians who are not eligible for public dental treatment put off or avoid visiting a dentist because of the cost;
- those most unlikely to access dental care include indigenous people, people living in remote areas and people struggling on low incomes.

On March 20, 2007, eighty-five people from every state and territory, representing 35 national organisations, headed to Canberra to meet with Members of Parliament on oral health.

While the Federal Government has argued that it has limited jurisdiction over oral health, the National Oral Health Alliance has called for national leadership to target those most in need of affordable dental care and services.

In back to back meetings with Federal politicians of all parties, members of the community and welfare sector, together with colleagues in the health professional, asked the Federal Government to fix the worsening problems in Australia's oral health.

The oral health day followed the release of Australia's first survey of oral health since 1987-88<sup>1</sup>. The survey reported improvements since that time, most notably a halving of the level of decay among young adults of the 'fluoride generation' (people born 1967-83) compared to the level of decay experienced by their parent's generation as young adults.

This provides strong evidence that exposure to fluoride in water and toothpaste during childhood produces substantial benefits for oral health among adult Australians.

Unfortunately however, the overwhelming story told by the data is that Australia is a country divided when it comes to oral health and dental care.

## Oral disease

One quarter of all Australian adults had untreated decay. This level was more than twice as high among Indigenous Australians (57%) compared with non-indigenous Australians (25%) and more than twice as high for people who usually visit for a problem (37%) than for a check up (16%).

People who visit a dentist for a check up tend to be more highly educated, hold dental insurance, live in a capital city and be ineligible for public dental care (that is, they do not live on a government pension or allowance). In other words, people who usually visit a dentist for a check up tend to be more socially and economically advantaged. This group has the lowest level of untreated decay. By contrast Indigenous Australians had the highest level of untreated decay, or more than three and a half times the level of people who usually visit a dentist for a check up.

On the measure of gum disease, nearly a quarter of all adults had moderate to severe gum disease. Within this population wide figure, there are again some stark disparities. For example, among people of all ages, those with the highest prevalence of gum disease were people who completed year 9 or schooling or less (39%), or twice that of people who usually visit for a check up (19%), who recorded the lowest prevalence of moderate to severe gum disease.

## Dental care

In the words of the report, 'despite the widespread distribution of oral diseases only about half of Australia's adults (45%) have a favourable pattern of dental visits. That is, they visit annually, usually for a check-up and at the same dentist. Those that did so overwhelmingly attended a private dentist, paid for their own dental care, and frequently held dental insurance. For the other half of the adult population, the dental attendance pattern presented a striking contrast. Dental visiting was irregular and mostly associated with a dental problem and for some, there was no effective contact with a dentist at all.'<sup>2</sup>

The report clearly identified affordability and hardship in purchasing private dental care as barriers to visiting a dentist and obtaining treatment when visits are made.

The report found that nearly one in three Australian adults reported avoiding dental care due to cost, one in five said that cost prevented them from having recommended treatment and nearly one in five also reported that they would have had a lot of difficulty paying a \$100 dental bill.

The National Oral Health Alliance is calling for Federal Government leadership to reverse the decline in oral health among the bottom end of Australia's population. Starting with an injection of funds, the Alliance, which brings together the organisations which travelled to Parliament last month, wants a regular check ups and basic treatment to be available to those on low incomes.

1 Slade G, Spencer A J, and Roberts-Thomson K F, Australia's Dental Generations, The National Survey of Adult Oral Health 2004-6, AIHW cat. No. DEN 165

2 Slade et. al., page xvi

# New social security compliance system placing more people at risk of homelessness | Welfare Rights

The use of 'breaching', i.e. the loss of social security payments in whole or in part, as part of the social security compliance system, has been a contentious issue for some time.

Previous research found that the use of 'breaching' under the old social security compliance regime placed people receiving Centrelink payments at significant risk of homelessness. Under the previous system, Centrelink payments were progressively reduced for each 'activity test breach'. The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW found that when payments were reduced for an extended period (under the old system, this was generally by 24% over 26 weeks), or suspended for 8 weeks, people experienced problems maintaining housing. A large proportion of people in the study were unable to make rent or mortgage repayments. More than one-third of people (36%) lost their accommodation.

The Federal Government's Welfare-to-Work package introduced a number of changes to the social security compliance system. These took effect from 1 July 2006. The major concern expressed at the time the legislation was being debated was the potential greater likelihood of 8 week 'non-payment periods'. Under the new system, people who commit a 'serious' participation failure would have their payment suspended for 8 weeks. 'Serious' participation failures include refusing a suitable job.

People could also have their payment suspended for 8 weeks where they commit 3 'less serious' participation failures over a 12 month period.

In response to concern about the number of people who might have their payment suspended, the Government introduced a system called 'financial case management'. People who have their payment suspended for 8 weeks would be able to have their essential expenses paid over time. Eligibility for financial case management was defined very narrowly. In the May 2006 Budget Estimates, officials from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations estimated that during 2006-07, about 18,000 people would have their payment suspended for 8 weeks, and that 4,000-5,000 would be eligible for financial case management.

Apart from increasing the risk of people becoming homeless, the new social security regime is also an important issue for people experiencing homelessness. Almost all homeless people rely on Centrelink payments. Around 85% of SAAP clients rely on a Centrelink payment at the end of their period of support.

The National Welfare Rights Network has done an initial analysis of the impact of the new compliance system. In the first 5 months, there has been a dramatic surge in the number of people who have had their payment suspended for 8 weeks, with very few people being able to access the financial case management 'safety net'.

The following article below is from 'rights review' (vol.25, no.1, March 2007).

"Eight week penalties surge and few get bills paid"

In the first five months of the new compliance regime, over 4,500 people have been subjected to an 8 week no payment period. This represents a massive 160 per cent increase in the number of Centrelink clients losing their payment for 8 weeks relative to the first 3 months of the new compliance system which came into force from 1 July 2006. In contrast in the whole of 2005-06, a total of 3,801 people had an 8 week non-period imposed.

Most eight week non-payment periods are for 'serious' offences, such as refusing a suitable job offer or being dismissed for misconduct.

Few getting essential expenses paid

To make matters worse, only 6% of people subjected to an 8 week penalty were considered eligible for financial case management. This figure refutes the Government's claims that one in every four of those whose payments were cut for 8 weeks would be eligible for financial case management.

To be eligible for financial case management, a person has to have 'vulnerable dependants' (i.e. a dependant child under 18) or be classed as 'exceptionally vulnerable' by having a disability that requires medication that cannot be paid for. By December 2006, only 288 people were found to be eligible under these strict criteria.

The eligibility criteria for financial case management are so bizarre that a person who is homeless is not seen as 'vulnerable'. Welfare Rights has called on the Minister for Workforce Participation, Dr Sharman Stone, to review the rules for the scheme.

# Application for AFHO Membership 2007-2008

*Tax Invoice on Payment*

AFHO Membership Fees for organisations are progressive and are based on the audited income for the previous financial year (2007-08). You will need to identify from the table below the relevant fee for your organisation.

If you are not able to meet the fee level please contact the AFHO Office to discuss.

Estimated Income (2007-08)	Membership Fee
<b>Associate Membership Non-Government Organisations</b>	
Under \$350,000	\$60.00
\$350,000 - \$600.00	\$135.00
\$600,000 - \$1,000,000	\$205.00
Over \$1,000,000	\$265.00
Individuals working with homeless people	\$30.00
<b>Affiliate Membership</b>	
Corporations	\$600.00
State/Federal Agencies or Departments	\$600.00
Academics and other individuals	\$50.00
Low income earners (students/concession card holders)	\$11.00

To apply for membership please complete the following details and return with payment to:

**AFHO**

Attention: Ms Belinda Semmler

PO Box 603

DICKSON ACT 2602

Please note payment can only be made by cheque payable to Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations.

Name of Organisation: ..... ABN: .....

Estimated Audited 2007-08 income: ..... AFHO Membership Fee: .....

## Contact Details

Name: ..... Position: .....

Telephone: ..... Fax: ..... Email: ..... Web: .....

Postal Address .....

Suburb: ..... Post code: .....

# Incarceration To Homelessness

article by **Cécile Dutreix**  
*Manager*

**Freshstart Accommodation Services**  
Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation  
Services of SA Inc

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OARS SA provides a Housing, Information and Referral Service to all the states prisons. During the period July 1 – Dec 31 2006 HIR provided a service to 795 sentenced and remand prisoners. A possible 795 people exiting prison into homelessness. One of the causes of high numbers of people exiting prison to homelessness is the large number of people who lose not only their accommodation when incarcerated but all their possessions, making a return to the community particularly difficult.

Accommodation options available to people exiting prison are dwindling. A small amount of post-release accommodation is provided specifically for people exiting prison. People exiting prison are also able to access all services available to people experiencing homelessness, including: SAAP, boarding houses, HousingSA and housing associations. However, the waiting lists for these options may be as long as two years.

There are also many barriers to accessing accommodation for people exiting prison. The options above have lengthy waiting lists but may also not be suitable due to a lack of appropriate support connected to the accommodation. The private rental market is extremely tight for all but for people exiting prison accessing private rental is nigh on impossible. Issues of affordability, lack of past references, the increasing use of unregulated tenancy databases, private rental costs such as bond, rent in advance, connection of utilities, relocation costs and the ever pervasive discrimination based on race, background, gender, marital status and children.

The consequences of the lack of appropriate, affordable and safe accommodation and support for people exiting prison are dire. The impact on the wider community of allowing people recently released from prison to remain homeless has the scope to be huge. People living in homelessness are more likely to resort to crime due to the high cost of living on the streets and the associated dangers of living on the street. People living in homelessness are more likely to be victims of crime and exposed to drug use and violence. If people exiting prison have care and custody of their children then the propensity for these living conditions to encourage the cycle of inter-generational offending is high, leading to continued and increased levels of crime in the community. This in turn leads to increased costs of crime, both financial and social.

The path to incarceration is often long and winding. Unfortunately the path from incarceration to homelessness is fairly straight forward and swift. An increase in appropriate, supported accommodation ranging from 24 hour supported care to outreach services for those in social housing or private rental immediately upon release to aid the transition from prison to community is vital if we are to effectively reduce recidivism and increase community safety for all our citizens.



## **AFHO** **news**

Our national newsletter is distributed bimonthly five times a year to homeless service providers, researchers, and federal, state and territory government agencies. It provides information on current policy, research, practice and other developments relevant to the national response to homelessness. Contributions are sought nationally from a range of sources. Each issue profiles a different AFHO Member.

## **AFHO** **events**

AFHO convenes the National Homelessness Conference and other events. AFHO Members are entitled to discounted rates for participation in all events sponsored by AFHO.

## **AFHO** **web**

Our website provides a range of information on homelessness research, policy and practice. Our Members Only section of the website will be launched during 2006 and include the latest information on national advocacy. Our website includes a wide range of international, national, and state-territory links including links to AFHO Members websites.

## **AFHO** **inform**

Our national weekly e-newsletter on homelessness advocacy, research and policy. It provides timely information on emerging issues, media stories and new research publications. To subscribe simply visit AFHO's website.

## **AFHO** **facts**

Our fact sheets on homelessness. These include the latest statistics and research findings and provide information on how homelessness impacts on different people in our community. Fact sheets are updated regularly and hard copies are posted to AFHO Members. Alternatively fact sheets can be accessed on our website.

## **AFHO** **@afho**

Our national inquiry email address where AFHO Members can send requests for information or raise national advocacy issues you would like AFHO to take action on.