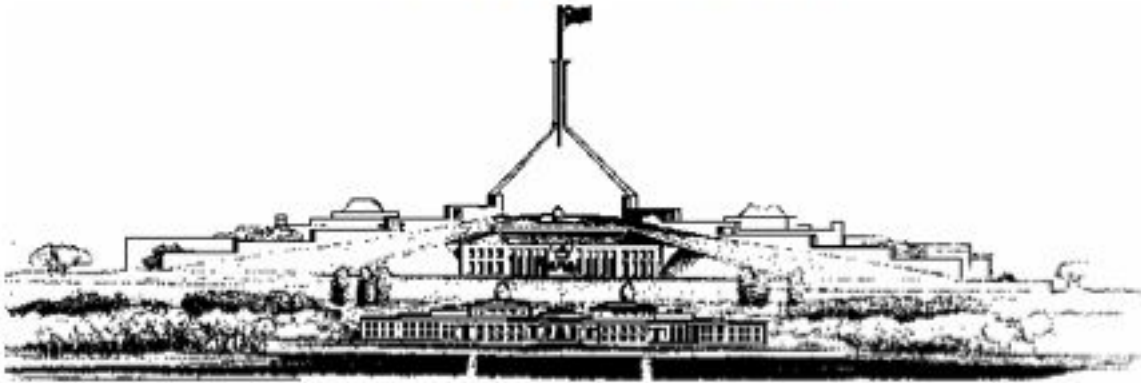




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Homelessness

SPEECH

Wednesday, 17 September 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 17 September 2008</p> <p>Page 4940</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Polley, Sen Helen</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof No</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
--	---

Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (12.45 pm)—After 17 years of continuous economic growth, it is simply unacceptable that on any given night 100,000 Australians are homeless. This truly is a national disgrace. Half of these homeless Australians are under the age of 24 and 10,000 of them are children. To build a clearer picture: tonight, half of Australia's homeless will stay with friends or family, about two in every seven will find a bed in a boarding house, a lucky one in every seven will find a bed in the homeless service system and one in every seven will sleep rough on the streets of our cities and towns. Young people, particularly those who have not finished school or cannot rely on support from their family, will continue to be among those hardest hit if housing gets even more unaffordable in the future.

Homelessness is a complex issue resulting from a variety of personal and societal factors. Every person has a different story and a different set of circumstances which brought them to homelessness. Factors such as poverty, unemployment and an inadequate supply of affordable housing are major contributors to homelessness in Australia. Personal circumstances such as discrimination, poor physical or mental health, intellectual disability, drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, family and relationship breakdown, domestic violence and physical and sexual abuse may also increase a person's risk of becoming or remaining homeless. Homelessness is a window into the wider debate on Australian disadvantage—the rising costs of housing, the rising cost of living and the particular challenges facing many young people and senior Australians on the fringes of our society.

Addressing homelessness is now a major priority for the Australian government. We understand that shelter is a basic human need, and there is a strong correlation between housing, health status and living standards. We announced and funded in the 2008-09 budget an additional \$150 million to build new homes for homeless Australians. A green paper on homelessness, 'Which way home? A new approach to homelessness', was released in May 2008 to promote discussion about how to reduce homelessness. We received many submissions, and it became very clear that a one-size-fits-all approach was not going to work. All the submissions and feedback we received are now being worked into the government's homelessness white

paper, which will be released later this year. The white paper will include a comprehensive national action plan to reduce the number of Australians who are experiencing homelessness. The government's white paper will set the agenda for tackling homelessness to 2020.

The white paper process is a once in a generation opportunity to devise a strategy to tackle this serious problem. Of course, there is no point us having this research and information unless we encourage practitioners, academics, policymakers and journalists to use it. Therefore, our Minister for Housing, Tanya Plibersek, recently announced a national information clearing house. The Rudd government has committed \$500,000 over three years to the clearing house. Through this web based tool, users will be able to share relevant homelessness information and good practice examples across the sector.

Homelessness is a complex problem, but the government is confident that by taking action now we can reduce homelessness over the next decade. The problem is not just a lack of shelters for the homeless. If it were, then why aren't all the homeless shelters always full? So simply building more shelters will not resolve the problems. Homelessness is more an inability to connect with family and/or community. Family and relationship breakdown with parents, siblings and extended family all contribute to homelessness. For most people, having a home means having a place where they belong. Being homeless means belonging nowhere, as well as having nowhere to sleep. There are many Australians today who do not have a place where they belong. This government wants to ensure that all Australians are able to participate in the social and economic life of this nation.

The government established a small steering group to assist with developing a new, bold and broad approach to homelessness. The group will provide leadership and direction on the core elements of a new approach that will prevent homelessness; improve services; create exit points to secure, longer term housing; and stop the cycle of homelessness. We as a government understand that homelessness is a complex issue that cannot be easily resolved. However, the federal Labor government are prepared to invest in new

housing in an effort to close the current gap between requests for accommodation and the supply of secure and affordable housing for homeless Australians. This plan forms part of federal Labor's commitment to making housing more affordable for all Australians, including through first home saver accounts, which will help young Australians save for their first home through special low-tax, superannuation style savings accounts; the Housing Affordability Fund, which will increase housing supply by providing money for local infrastructure and giving state and local government incentives to lower development charges; and the National Rental Affordability Scheme, which will provide investors with tax incentives to increase the supply of new, affordable rental properties across Australia, saving 50,000 low-middle-income families 20 per cent on their rent bills.

Linking homeless Australians with education, training or work opportunities is a major factor in overcoming the cycle of disadvantage experienced on a daily basis by people who face living on the streets or moving from one temporary accommodation to another. The Rudd government has committed \$880 million for an extra 238,000 training places for job seekers under the Productivity Places Program. To reduce homelessness we need to increase the economic opportunities for homeless people, or those at risk of becoming homeless, to gain financial independence as well as participate in our communities. Getting a job is a significant step towards securing permanent housing.

On a recent visit to the United States I visited a number of homeless shelters and I want to speak about some of what I saw and learnt. I think it is important that we share views and learn from our experiences. The first homeless shelter I visited was Raphael House in San Francisco. It was the first homeless shelter in San Francisco and is financed solely by donations. Established in 1971, Raphael House has a mission to provide a safe haven to families experiencing homelessness, while strengthening their family bonds and personal dignity. Ella Rigney, the founder of Raphael House, is a keen advocate of keeping families together. She believes families need to stay together during times of crisis.

This is an area that needs addressing in Australia. When a family becomes homeless they are quite often split, with mothers going into women's shelters with their young children and fathers going to men's shelters. Of particular concern to me is that young teenage boys may have limited options and many end up in youth hostels. Youth hostels are primarily set up to house young adults, not young teenage boys. Those young boys may be exposed to troublesome situations that they may not have confronted previously, and I

believe mothers need to be with their children in times like this because their children rely on them for support.

Another homeless shelter I visited was the Boston Rescue Mission. Since 1899, the Boston Rescue Mission has been providing basic life necessities like food and shelter to the poor and homeless. In addition, Boston Rescue Mission provides programs and services that assist men and women breaking out of the cycle of homelessness and addiction into mainstream society. When families of Greater Boston have budgets stretched so thin that they must choose between feeding themselves or staying in their homes, the Boston Rescue Mission's meals program relieves pressure on caregivers and allows them to focus resources in other areas to prevent a homeless situation.

As men and women in need of employment struggle to make ends meet, the Boston Rescue Mission's vocational development program helps them to prepare for higher-paying jobs. On the journey through recovery from alcohol and drug addiction, the Boston Rescue Mission's residential recovery program strengthens and empowers clients by building and reinforcing a solid foundation of sobriety. From a state of sobriety, clients can then rebuild their self-esteem in a positive and accountable recovery environment and break the cycle of addiction that so often leads to homelessness.

The Boston Rescue Mission's range of services also strives to meet the needs of a population of female ex-offenders. The goal of this re-entry program is to break the cycle of crime, increase public safety and help ex-offenders to come back into society as independent women living fulfilling and crime-free lives. Through the mission supporting people in their time of need, those people can focus on maintaining a stable housing situation for themselves and their families.

For those clients caught in the throes of street living or in the vicious cycle of addiction, detoxification and relapse, the Boston Rescue Mission's facilities and programs work towards ending homelessness. I am pleased to say that they have a 75 per cent success rate in these programs, and the core of the Boston Rescue Mission programs and services is rooted in the principles of Christianity. Last year Boston Rescue Mission provided 35,000 shelter beds and over 130,000 meals. They do a fabulous job in addressing the needs within their community, and I must say that I was impressed with their achievements and the commitment of their staff and volunteers.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness in the United States has collated data on the success of homelessness programs in America. In Columbus, for example, homelessness has declined by 40 per cent due to prevention programs. By redesigning the programs

to focus on prevention and housing first and regularly measuring performance, Columbus has reduced the number of families that become homeless and increased the percentage of families that successfully move into permanent housing. Columbus also uses data and performance measures to ensure that homeless families move through the homeless assistance scheme quickly and receive the services they need to maintain stable housing. It also provided families with short-term rental subsidies and utility assistance to help families move into housing. The Community Shelter Board, a non-profit umbrella organisation, oversees this system and fosters collaboration between the numerous community based organisations.

In New York, homelessness has been reduced under the leadership of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Department of Homeless Services Commissioner Linda Gibbs. Preventing family homelessness became a top priority and a critical goal of the city's five-year plan, United for Solutions Beyond Shelter. The plan draws on a set of principles that guide homelessness prevention such as expanding affordable housing, creating community support, utilising a variety of settings for intervention and prioritising high-need neighbourhoods, understanding the unique needs of families, increasing legal services interventions and drawing on family support networks.

In 2003, the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance also adopted new strategies in response to family homelessness. At that time, inadequate shelter space forced the state to temporarily house families in motels at a cost of \$100 per family per night. To turn this situation around, they focused their attention on rapid rehousing of homeless families. This saved the state millions of dollars, which was then redirected into housing affordability programs.

There are a variety of models that are working worldwide with varying degrees of success. I am pleased that the Rudd government is taking the time to look at all of these options. The homeless shelters I visited in my home state of Tasmania, particularly in Launceston, were typical of what I saw in the United States—with dedicated and committed staff who truly put their hearts and souls into their jobs. I would like to put on record today my sincere thanks to all of those people who work within the homeless shelter industry and their volunteers. It is a tough job. They have few resources and are sometimes faced with the reality that they have to turn people away if the shelter is full.

The cost of homelessness to individuals and their families is enormous. It is not just an economic cost. It is also an acute social cost. For children, homelessness affects school routines, friendships and their education. Worse still, experiencing homelessness as a child makes adult homelessness more likely. That is why

we need to turn the corner. We need to break the cycle. Together, we have a unique opportunity to make a difference to homelessness in Australia. This is an issue that we all have a responsibility to solve. All levels of government should and need to play a role. We need to be an inclusive community. We need to have our eyes open, and we need to be compassionate. Effective working relationships between all levels of government, business and community organisations are essential if we are to make a real difference in the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

As Peter Lyall, Tasmanian state president of the St Vincent de Paul Society tells me often:

This is not about giving a hand out; it's about giving someone a hand up.

I am pleased to say and I am also grateful that we now have a Prime Minister who is committed to efforts to reduce homelessness. The Howard Liberal government did not even have a housing minister, which demonstrates to me how much interest they really had in this very important issue. They tended to turn a blind eye to this terrible problem. But we can and really do need to make a genuine difference in our community. We owe it to those 100,000 homeless Australians to get this right.