



**ethnic  
communities'  
council of  
victoria**

**3 March 2010**

## **ECCV SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

### **Response to the discussion paper: Homelessness 2020 Strategy**

#### **Background**

1. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (eccv) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the Victorian Homelessness 2020 strategy discussion paper released by the Department of Human Services in Victoria.
2. Established in 1974 as a voluntary community-based organisation, eccv advocates and lobbies all levels of government on behalf of multicultural communities in a range of areas. For over 35 years eccv has remained the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community in Victoria. Our role includes supporting, consulting, liaising with and providing information to Victoria's ethnic communities.
3. Eccv believes that the provision of equal access to adequate, safe, sustainable and affordable housing for disadvantaged individuals is a vital condition for the equitable social and economic participation of citizens in our society. We applaud the Australian government's commitment in recognising homelessness as an urgent matter that needs to be addressed through the development of the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) and we welcome the Victorian Government's White Paper on homelessness.
4. In response to the discussion paper, the eccv highlights that homelessness is not solely a housing issue but a combination of social, economic and complex structural failures. To ensure the equitable civic participation and social engagement of all Australians, there is a need to shift attitudes on homelessness and defend the right to access adequate housing as a fundamental basic human right. Policies need to adopt this underlying principle of the right to adequate housing for all.
5. Eccv supports the broad thrust of the Homelessness 2020 strategy discussion paper and in this submission focuses on four underlining areas relating to the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) group of the Australian population. These areas are social inclusion; prevention and early intervention; taking a whole of government approach; and a person centred approach.

#### **Our Vision for Victoria**

6. Eccv believes a critical item that should be included in the homelessness 2020 strategy is a mechanism to effectively share information about homelessness and its remedies with CALD communities.

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7. Eccv is concerned that many in this specific target group are unaware of the causes and impacts of homelessness and of housing support services available. Plus, access to services is severely limited by their lack of or limited English language proficiency.
8. Eccv calls on the Victorian government to develop a communication strategy that aims to inform the CALD communities about homelessness, its causes and impact, the services providing support and assistance, and the homelessness 2020 strategy vision and commitment.
9. Education, awareness raising campaigns and training should form part of the communication process and be directed towards at risk groups in the CALD communities who are vulnerable to homelessness, namely women who are victims of domestic violence, single mothers, children, unaccompanied youth, older people and refugees.
10. Eccv believes that one key challenge associated with achieving the goals of halving homelessness is to recognise there is stigma attached to people who are homeless. There is a tendency in some communities to attach stigma to the homelessness label and blame the disadvantaged for their predicament.
11. Negative attitudes towards people who are homeless are exacerbated on a day-to-day basis and particularly when seeking employment. This makes homeless individuals less inclined to identify themselves as homeless.
12. Thus, to break down the homelessness stigma and address potential issues of discrimination towards the growing problem of occupational deprivation through homelessness, eccv recommends rolling out an awareness raising campaign as this will ensure there is a comprehensive understanding of the determinants and impact of homelessness.

### **Homelessness and Social Inclusion**

13. Eccv believes that the homelessness 2020 strategy would best achieve social inclusion by clearly defining the commonwealth's social inclusion principles within a new homelessness act to ensure its uniformity. The need for clarity and consistency is to eliminate the varied and changing interpretations of these principles depending on who is in government.
14. Barriers for homeless children accessing education or homeless adults accessing employment are obstacles in the way of social inclusion. People experiencing homelessness are unable most of the time to provide the necessary documents in relation to social security, voting and healthcare because they do not have a place of residence. Therefore, there is a need to remove these barriers and enact laws that do not seek to exclude people because of their homelessness.

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## **Prevention and Early Intervention Responsibility**

15. Eccv would like to see increased inter-agency cooperation and greater cross sector shared responsibility. We believe there should be a 'whole of government' approach and that the responsibility for the prevention of homelessness should rest with all government human service departments and service delivery agencies in the areas of housing, health care, disability services, aged care, corrections and juvenile justice, police, drug and alcohol support services, education and training, and employment services.
16. While we call for increased inter-agency collaboration, we suggest that agencies with specialist expertise need to lead in addressing the issues that are relevant to the areas of their expertise. This is crucial to achieve particular outcomes in each area.
17. Eccv also suggests that more funding be targeted towards boosting inter-agency cooperation to improve the coordination and integration of services.

## **Setting minimum standards**

18. Eccv welcomes the White Paper targets but we are concerned that a significant portion of CALD people experiencing homelessness are still reliant upon individual services for both definition of their rights and provision of grievance procedures. Eccv recommends that a consistent set of minimum national service delivery standards are identified and established.

## **Improvement of services with early intervention practices**

19. Eccv believes that case managers should receive cultural sensitivity training to better support CALD clients and understand their needs. We recommend an improvement in professional development through the provision of cultural competence training.
20. Eccv acknowledges the value of diversity planning that government departments, community groups and service providers have in place, however we advocate for a targeted focus on cultural diversity within the overall diversity framework where the causes, experiences and outcomes of homelessness for CALD communities are considered.
21. This would see government and non-government services, including housing, health, justice, education and employment services, adopt a culturally responsive and sensitive approach to facilitating accessibility of facilities and programs. To improve outcomes and ensure that the services delivered to the CALD target group are responsive to their needs, eccv recommends that the experiences of CALD people encountering homelessness, their related support-seeking behaviours, healthcare needs, employment and educational requirements, and discrepancies in their social and economic situation are recognised in policy design and program delivery.

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### **Whole of Government Approaches**

22. Eccv applauds that the nation's response to homelessness is framed by the values outlined in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) Act (1994). This unique legislation does not only recognise and address the powerlessness of homeless people as a social justice issue but it also highlights the importance of securing their community links and allowing them to identify with and celebrate their cultural beliefs and background. This is of particular importance to our CALD constituents as it focuses on reconnecting homeless CALD individuals back to their community groups and sets the tone for the service system to conduct services to address homelessness while upholding the notion of human rights. However, we are concerned that this national program has been weakened when the SAAP Act is replaced at a national level due to the National Partnership Agreement.

23. Eccv welcomes Victoria's commitment to a 'whole of government' approach to addressing homelessness. We recognise the urgent need for the Victorian government to partner with the private and not-for-profit sectors to increase the supply of social and community housing for the homeless and those at risk of homelessness if we are to thwart and significantly reduce homelessness.

24. Eccv recommends building on existing formal and informal partnership arrangements and linking them to a holistic approach to service provision because it is the combination of support and housing which delivers outcomes. This concerted collaborative effort across sectors in the government human service areas and service delivery agencies requires commitment, clear targets, effective communication and coordination, and marshalling of resources.

25. While the discussion paper recognises the importance of creating better alignment across government and service delivery systems, we highlight the importance of adopting this 'whole of government' approach when developing broader legislative and policy frameworks.

### **Consistency in defining homelessness**

26. The Council of Homeless Persons identifies three key characteristics of the homelessness definition, namely people with no or in temporary accommodation, those who have no or limited finances and a breakdown in key community and family relationships. These key characteristics apply to low income and disadvantaged groups in our CALD constituency including migrant and refugee unaccompanied youth, single families with no support, migrant and refugee women who have experienced domestic violence, older ethnic persons and people who have mental illness.

27. Eccv believes that there is a need for clear and consistent articulation of what homelessness means. This definition needs to reflect the three key characteristics mentioned above and include

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people moving between temporary and inappropriate forms of accommodation and those in crises and transitional housing.

### **Focus on the Individual**

28. Since the prevention of homelessness is the major theme and driver for the homelessness 2020 strategy, achieving this outcome is reliant on service providers working directly with individuals to address their problems quickly. This requires service delivery agencies to adopt innovative approaches that may not always conform to a set of guidelines but which do enable effective assistance to ensure that a person's situation is attended to quickly.
29. Eccv would like to see in the Homelessness 2020 strategy a specific focus on CALD children and young people, in particular those who are unaccompanied by their parents.
30. Eccv calls for an improved level of service for this target group to ensure they have immediate access to safe and secure housing appropriate to their circumstances. Thus, a 'youth centred' focus in housing delivery is necessary to prevent this vulnerable group from reaching crisis point.
31. Eccv suggests that this target group have priority access to integrated services such as housing, education and training, and job search facilities with the aim to sustain community connectedness and civic engagement.

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