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Mental Health Council welcomes Homeless White Paper

The MCHA welcomes the Australian Governments White paper on Homelessness, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*.

The strategies presented in the White Paper target issues of homelessness and unstable housing holistically, looking beyond housing to address other needs of homeless population, including employment, education, health and social support.

These strategies, combined with the bold targets of fifty percent reduction in overall homelessness and the availability of accommodation to all rough sleepers by 2020, have the potential to provide real benefits to homeless and unstably housed Australians.

The MHCA particularly welcomes the recognition in the White Paper of mental health issues for homeless and unstably housed populations, and the development of specific strategies targeted at these populations.

- The Australian Government's Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMS) program has proven successful in assisting people living with a mental illness to live in and engage with their community, including housing stabilisation. The expansion of this program to provide services to an additional 1000 Australians will assist these people to obtain and retain appropriate and stable housing.
- New or expanded services developed under the National Partnership on Homelessness to assist people with mental illness to maintain their housing and connect with their communities will also provide significant benefits, particularly through new or enhanced links between mainstream agencies, specialist homeless services and specialist mental health services.
- A new 'No wrong Door' approach to homelessness services will mean that people with a mental illness experiencing difficulties with their housing can be connected to specialist homelessness services through their interactions with other services, including mental health services. This will be of particular benefit to people with mental illness, who often experience significant difficulties navigating confusing and poorly connected service systems.
- Additional assertive outreach programs for rough sleepers will provide major benefits for people with a mental illness who are currently sleeping rough. In many cases there is reluctance among these people to engage with health services, as a result of past negative experiences or difficulties assessing services. Assertive outreach will assist people to obtain treatment while also

connecting them with other essential services to facilitate a move off the streets and into stable housing. In addition, a national network of Community Engagement Offices providing outreach services to homeless people is likely to provide significant benefits to people with a mental illness.

- The proposed long-term research agenda and improved data collection on homelessness will assist governments to assess the effectiveness of new initiatives, and to identify areas for further work. It is essential that research and data collection on homelessness includes investigation of the impact of mental issues on homeless populations.

Of particular note is the White Paper's the new policy of 'no exits into homelessness' from hospitals, mental health services and prisons. Currently a lack of discharge planning results in a transition to rough sleeping or unstable housing for many people with mental illness exiting these institutions. The MHCA welcomes this new no tolerance approach to discharge into unstable housing, and considers that the implementation of new strategies assisting people leaving hospitals and prisons to obtain stable housing, combined with the strengthening of current post-release services, will be one of the most significant outcomes of the White Paper process.

The MCHA's own report on housing, homelessness and mental illness, *Home Truths*, will be released on 25 February 2009. This report emphasises the significance of mental health in homelessness and housing, and provides ten '*Home Truths*' targeted at improving housing outcomes for people with a mental illness in Australia. Home Truths will contain the MHCA's detailed response to the Australian Government White Paper on homelessness.

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