

Responding to homelessness: statewide call centre for homeless people

Homelessness affects many Queenslanders, from single young people to families with children. The effects of homelessness reach much further than simply not having an affordable, safe and stable place to live. People who are homeless can often become disconnected from society and also do not enjoy the same standard of health as other people in the community.

To combat homelessness and its effects it is vital to intervene early and help people to find pathways to more stable living.

The Queensland Government has boosted its response to homelessness by providing an additional \$235.52 million over four years. This investment is detailed in *Responding to Homelessness*, which is available on the Department of Housing's website at: www.housing.qld.gov.au

The Department of Communities is one of several government departments responding to homelessness and has allocated \$56.45 million over four years for a number of new initiatives. One of these initiatives is the establishment of a statewide information and referral service. This service will take the form of a 24-hour call centre that will be supported by an online information and accommodation referral database.

The call centre will be an entry point to the homelessness service system and will assess housing and support needs, directing clients to the service that best meets their needs.

The service will enhance access to existing homelessness and housing assistance services and new services such as early intervention, crisis accommodation and integrated service hubs.

Benefits of the call centre

This new service will enhance the support coordination for people who are homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless. A central contact point will improve the consistency and timeliness of information and advice, as well as provide a coordinated response to meet the diverse and often multiple needs of homeless people.

People experiencing housing crises and those with complex needs, such as families, people with mental illness and those with drug or alcohol addictions, will be directed to the most appropriate accommodation or support service.

Callers will receive a brief initial assessment and, where required, will be referred to appropriate specialist services and safe and secure accommodation.

This will remove the need for people to ring multiple organisations and repeat their story many times to find a bed or support.

The service will also collect information about the needs of people who are homeless. This data will be used by the government, community agencies and the community to improve responses to homeless people and assist in the prevention of homelessness.

Demand for a statewide service

Research conducted in Australia and overseas shows there is demand for a centralised 24-hour referral services.

In Queensland, both the 2004 *Finding Beds for Homeless People* and the 2003 *More than Just a Roof* reports recommended the implementation of a centralised, statewide information and referral service (New Farm Neighbourhood Centre for the Brisbane City Council, *Finding Beds for Homeless People*, June 2004 and QUT Centre of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, *More than Just a Roof: A Study of Family Homelessness in Queensland*, October 2003).

A centralised telephone service has been operating in New South Wales for 20 years successfully. The service meets the needs of approximately 88.5% of callers requiring emergency accommodation. Web-based services also operate in Western Australia and Victoria, with other states considering establishing information telephone lines.

Service provider — Smart Service Queensland

The new information and referral service will be operated by Smart Service Queensland with staff from the Department of Communities providing specialist expertise. Smart Service Queensland is a statewide government initiative responsible for integrating government to facilitate faster and easier customer access to government services.

Implementation timeframes

The new service will be implemented progressively to ensure a high level of collaboration with the non-government sector. It is also vital that the service develops in a coordinated way alongside both the Department of Housing's new strategic direction for government-subsidised housing — *Paving the Way* — and the other capacity-building initiatives in *Responding to Homelessness*. *Paving the Way* is available on the Department of Housing's website at

www.housing.qld.gov.au/about/strategic/paving.htm

January to late March 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine service model, develop resources and tools. • Regional implementation planning sessions.
Phase 1: Information Service in Brisbane from late March 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call centre commences operation providing an information service to a limited geographic area (Greater Brisbane region).
Phase 2: Accommodation Referral in Brisbane from May 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commence piloting an accommodation vacancy referral function for a limited number of providers in a limited geographic area (Greater Brisbane region).
Phase 3: Expanding statewide from August 2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the service to other geographic areas within Queensland and progressively incorporate additional accommodation and support service providers.

Feedback

Feedback is sought from stakeholders to ensure the service meets the needs of homeless people and the broader community.

Initial ideas were gathered during *Responding to Homelessness* information sessions in August and September 2005.

In addition, a reference group has been established to provide advice on:

- further development of the service model
- key referral relationships and processes relevant to homelessness services
- information needs of homelessness service providers to support effective referrals
- information needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to support improved access to services
- implementation planning.

The reference group includes representatives from the following organisations:

- Blair Athol Accommodation and Support Program, Gold Coast
- Brisbane Youth Service
- Central Queensland Combined Women's Reference Group
- dvconnect
- Family Emergency Accommodation, Townsville
- HART 4000, New Farm Neighbourhood Centre
- Kalkadoon Aboriginal Sobriety House, Mt Isa
- Logan-Beaudesert Emergency Accommodation Network (LEAN)
- Micah Projects
- Migrant Women's Emergency Support Service
- Ozcare
- Queensland Disability Housing Coalition
- Salvation Army Pindari Hostel
- Tenants Union of Queensland
- The Haven Association, Toowoomba

In addition to the input of the reference group, regional implementation planning discussions will occur in early 2006 to gain feedback from service providers.

Further information

For further information, or to provide feedback, email hpiq@communities.qld.gov.au or contact the project team on (07) 3224 6701.