



Submission to:

The City of Sydney's draft *Homelessness City Strategy 2007-2012*.

February 2007

1. ACON (AIDS COUNCIL OF NSW INC)

ACON was formed in 1984 as part of the community response to the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia. Since 2000 ACON has been a health promotion organisation based in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community, with a central focus on HIV/AIDS.

ACON provides education, health promotion, care, support, and advocacy services for members of the GLBT community, including drug users and Indigenous people, to sex workers, and all people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).

ACON has offices in Sydney, Illawarra, Northern Rivers, Hunter and Mid North Coast with an extensive range of outreach services. ACON is also home to the Community Support Network (CSN), the Positive Living Centre (PLC), the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project (AVP) and the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP).

2. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness and access to safe, secure and affordable housing is one of the most important social issues for the communities of inner-city Sydney. ACON welcomes the initiative taken by the City of Sydney in attempting to address the issue of homelessness and lack of adequate housing in the City area, through the development and implementation of this strategy.

This response will outline ACON's approach to homelessness and housing for the communities we represent - people living with HIV/AIDS and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, and offer a number of comments and suggestions as to how the City of Sydney's Homelessness Strategy can better address homelessness and housing issues for PLWHA and GLBT people.

3. ACON'S APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING

In 1990 ACON produced its first policy document on housing titled 'HIV/AIDS and Homelessness: A Policy Response'. The document recognised that many PLWHA faced the risk of homelessness and outlined ACON's commitment to addressing this issue. ACON also played an important role in the establishment of Special Rental Subsidy (SRS) for PLWH/A's in 1993 which now is called Special Assistance Subsidy/Special (SAS/S). ACON remains vigilant and, is in close collaboration with other related organisations, working to keep these benefits for all HIV positive people.

The ACON Housing Project is a SAAP-funded service providing advocacy and support to people living with HIV/AIDS who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This includes:

- Short term accommodation in managed properties
- Department of Housing priority application advice
- Advocacy on issues of discrimination and harassment
- Transfer advice
- Coordinating respite care
- Brokerage of support to people escaping domestic violence, in need of financial counselling and clients with multiple needs.

In 2004/05 the housing project assisted 392 HIV positive individuals and families to identify their housing needs and navigate the application process for Department of Housing, Community Housing, SAS/S or the private rental market.

Increasingly the ACON housing project has received requests for assistance from GLBT people who are not HIV positive. The barriers to safe and affordable housing for GLBT people are related to stigma, discrimination, violence, lack of public safety or acceptance or fear of discrimination. While these social determinants are not illness related, they nevertheless form an insurmountable hurdle to safe and affordable housing and services for some

GLBT people. As an example, there are few long or short-term housing options appropriate for GLBT individuals who are at risk of homelessness.

The project is currently providing assistance to these people in the form of advice, advocacy and support in negotiating the social housing system. The project is also working on developing support agreements with other SAAP funded housing providers to ensure the development of appropriate service provision that is sensitive to the needs of GLBT people. However, it should be noted that funding for this has been limited and we are currently challenged to meet the growing demand for services within our existing resources.

Through our youth peer education programs, Fun & Esteem and Ins & Outs, ACON also has contact with young GLBT people who are experiencing either secondary or tertiary homelessness. Where a client presents as homelessness ACON works with Twenty10 to ensure that the client has access to accommodation, counselling, and peer support.

4. GENERAL COMMENTS

ACON supports the City's philosophy of recognising the right of everyone to access public spaces, while acknowledging the right of all people to have access to safe, secure and affordable housing. We also support the key principles of the strategy, and believe that a fundamental aspect in the success of the strategy will be the use of evidence-based research to inform policy and strategic decisions about homelessness and housing in the City of Sydney LGA. In particular we welcome the setting of reduction targets relating to the number of vulnerable and complex rough sleepers, and the general prioritisation of establishing target results and measuring outcomes.

Based on the vision as well as the actions listed in Part B of the strategy, it appears that one of the main aims would be to identify and address incidences of secondary and tertiary homelessness before they transition into cases of primary homelessness. It would be beneficial however for this to be explicitly stated in the document

ACON also notes the inclusion of the right to participate as one of the principles of the strategy. ACON agrees with this principle, but believes that it should be extended to include the right of people who are homeless or affected by homelessness to participate fully in the development of this strategy and all associated responses to homelessness in the Sydney LGA, where possible.

5. IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

The strategy correctly identifies the complex interrelationship between rough sleepers, mental health issues, and alcohol & other drug use. It also identifies a number of different factors such as social exclusion, poverty, abuse and lack of community connectedness as common to many homeless people. However, the strategy is notably silent on determinants of homelessness that relate to specifically disadvantaged populations within our society, as well as identifying such groups as populations that are particularly vulnerable. These groups include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI), GLBT people and people living with a disability, including PLWHA.

6. HOMELESSNESS AMONG GLBT PEOPLE

GLBT people as a group are more vulnerable to homelessness due to the discrimination and social exclusion that they experience resulting from the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in Australian society¹. The

¹Heterosexism is the assumption that all people are heterosexual and is accompanied by a construction of homosexual people as “alien” or “unacceptable”. The discrimination implicit in heterosexism can be both covert, enshrined in normative social structures and practices that do not acknowledge GLBT people, or overt, expressed through homophobic attitudes, verbal abuse and physical violence.

discrimination that they face manifests itself through higher rates of mental health issues, such as depression, higher levels of alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, domestic and street-based violence. These issues are compounded where GLBT individuals are not able to access mainstream support services due to actual or perceived discrimination.

In particular GLBT youth, are disproportionately affected by homelessness and a lack of appropriate housing. A report by the Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research, "As Long as I've Got My Doona: Homelessness among lesbian and gay youth", found that of the estimated 19,000 homeless youth each night in Australia, between 5,000 and 6,250 were same-sex attracted². The 2006 City of Sydney Youth Strategy Action Plan, and the 2000 South Sydney City Council Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues Paper both acknowledge that lesbian and gay youth have higher rates of homelessness than the general population³.

GLBT youth homelessness is largely related to the breakdown of family relationships due to a lack of acceptance of a young person's sexuality or gender identity. Other factors that are specific to GLBT youth include experiences of discrimination and isolation in rural and non-metropolitan areas. This problem is compounded by the homophobia, or perceived homophobia, of some youth service providers, which influences the ability of GLBT youth to access the necessary services and accommodation.

Some young people who are experiencing verbal or physical harassment and/or abuse at home, school, work or other community settings, seek refuge in areas with a large GLBT population such as the Sydney LGA. Accordingly, services such as Twenty10 and ACON, seek to provide assistance to young GLBT who either originate from the Sydney LGA or have migrated here, to ensure that they are able to secure appropriate housing and do not experience long term homelessness. However, it is imperative that the City of

² "As Long As I've Got My Doona" Irwin, Winter et al Australian centre for Lesbian and Gay Research, University of Sydney, 1995

³ *City of Sydney Youth Interagency Youth Strategy & Action Plan*, 1996, p32.

Sydney identifies GLBT homelessness, particularly among young GLBT people, as a priority issue to be addressed in its Homelessness Strategy.

Transgender people also face increased risk of homelessness, due to lack of employment, high rates of violence and discrimination, and estrangement from family of origin. Access to mainstream services remains a serious barrier for pre-operative transgender people limiting their capacity to solve life-disrupting crises and utilise the range of services that should be available to all NSW citizens. We note that the City has established a working group on transgender homelessness, which ACON is a part of, and we welcome this initiative.

GLBT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a complex web of discrimination issues that are a mix of racial and homophobic discrimination. They may be unable to approach Aboriginal Housing or Aboriginal Medical Services because of fear of confidentiality breaches. Access to the range of mainstream and aboriginal services remains a serious barrier for GLBT aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders and Sistagirls. This limits their capacity to solve life-disrupting crises and utilise the range of services that should be available to all NSW citizens.

Other examples of specific groups that face institutional barriers in addressing housing and housing-related issues include people who have experienced same sex domestic violence (SSDV) and ageing GLBT people.

7. HOMELESSNESS AMONG PLWHA

People living with HIV/AIDS are also a group that are vulnerable to homelessness. The advancement in treatment for HIV has meant that the disease is now considered a chronic illness. This means that while PLWHA are living longer, they are also likely to suffer from a myriad of problems such as depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol problems and/or developing

psychotic disorders. This can lead on to long term poverty and social isolation.

Diagnosis with HIV, or worse, with an AIDS-defining illness, places an individual at serious risk of homelessness due to illness and hospitalisation or traumatic psychological reaction. Research undertaken by La Trobe University, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society found that 41.6% of PLWHA in NSW had changed their accommodation as a result of having HIV/AIDS. The most common reasons given for relocating were the need for a quieter location, the imperative to find cheaper housing, proximity to essential health services and health (better health, planning for illness or actual illness). Significantly 20.2% of this group reported relocation in order to avoid harassmentⁱ. The report also found that 21.3% of respondents believed that their accommodation was unsuitable and of this group 68.8% reported that they did not have any other accommodation options for the future.

PLWHA are living with HIV for longer, living longer in poverty and isolation and increasing numbers of PLWHA are presenting to ACON homeless or at risk of homelessness.

8. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

With reference to the information above, ACON has a number of specific comments and recommendations in relation to the Actions outlined in Part B of the Strategy.

Accessing homelessness services

The Strategy must ensure that GLBT, PLWHA and other vulnerable populations are able to access the homeless services operated by the City or any other organisation in the inner-city area. Given that the City of Sydney has shown leadership both in terms of homelessness and working with the GLBT community, ACON believes that the City must take a lead role in

ensuring that all services are able to respond to the specific needs of GLBT and PLWHA clients who are either homeless or experiencing housing difficulties.

This requires that all staff have a sufficient understanding of the causes of GLBT homelessness, the particular needs of GLBT who are experiencing some form of homelessness, and general issues that effect GLBT people. Staff must have the same awareness in relation to the specific issues relating to PLWHA. Further, the City and these services must aim to challenge the perceptions held by some GLBT individuals and PLWHA about mainstream services.

Public Space Liaison Officer

ACON supports the creation of the Public Space Liaison Officer as a way to ensure that there is more effective collaboration between the City's relevant units and other homelessness services that operate in the Sydney LGA. In order to effectively work with GLBT individuals who are rough sleeping or experiencing housing difficulties, the Officer must be trained to have an understanding of GLBT issues and culturally appropriate methods to assist these individuals. The Officer must also be fully aware of the cultural significance that public space has in the inner city for the GLBT community and individuals.

Affordable Housing Policy

ACON welcomes the development of an affordable housing strategy with the aim of increasing affordable housing in the Sydney LGA. The increasing cost of housing in the inner city area will only further exacerbate current levels of homelessness in the Sydney LGA unless more affording housing is available. ACON believes that any strategy should take into account the fact that GLBT and PLWHA can be subject to discrimination in accessing accommodation services, and this should be addressed through the creation of spaces where GLBT and PLWHA can be safe from such discrimination.

Police and Transit Officer Homelessness Training

As with other personnel who will be dealing directly with people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless, the City of Sydney should ensure that Police and Transit are trained so that they have a sufficient understanding of the particular issues relating to GLBT and PLWHA homelessness
