

7th May 2021

The Hon Michelle Lensink MLC
Minister for Human Services
Level 12, 1 King William St,
Adelaide SA 5000

Dear Minister Lensink,

The Mission Development Committee at Pilgrim Uniting Church Adelaide has been discussing the new approach to the provision of homelessness services in South Australia.

We endorse any attention paid to marginalised and vulnerable members of our South Australian community and welcome reforms to the homelessness system that will enhance service provision to vulnerable and disadvantaged people. As a church in the heart of the city of Adelaide we have a particular focus on the people who are currently accessing assistance and services in the CBD.

Pilgrim Uniting Church has a long history of involvement with social justice issues through direct support for the homeless, the Aboriginal community, refugees and asylum seekers, people struggling with mental health services etc. We have built a strong advocacy component based on our broad knowledge and understanding of the needs of these particular groups of people.

We acknowledge that changes needed to be made by the Government in order to improve the system, structures and resourcing of services offered to these vulnerable people and we congratulate the agencies who collaborated to form alliances and who were successful with the tender. We also commend the decision not to decrease the overall funding allocated to the homelessness sector.

When changes to systems or structures are made to improve services, disadvantaged groups can be further disadvantaged as they need to learn to navigate a new system, placing them at risk of a lack of continuity of services which in turn compromises their safety.

We can see the value of a new system seeking greater cooperation and collaboration between service organizations. We also recognise there are service providers still requiring resources for continuity of services – for example the women who had safety in Catherine House, the people receiving assistance from Hutt Street, men at St Vinnies men's shelter in Whitmore Square, Aboriginal people served by Uniting Communities and Aboriginal Family Support services.

We commend the fact that the Government showed extra concern and found funding during the COVID Crisis to care for the homeless. We urge the Government to consider setting aside bridging funding in the 2021 budget to enable these particular services to continue until the new systems are considered to be working effectively by those who are serving and those who are being served.

We express particular concern for:

Aboriginal People

Aboriginal people who have received support through agencies like Uniting Communities and Aboriginal Family Support Services will need intentional support as they navigate their way through the new system, to lessen the risk of them becoming more disenfranchised. It will take time to build new relationships and trust with agencies in the Adelaide South Alliance.

Victims of Domestic Violence

Catherine House, a major service provider for victims of domestic violence, has lost funding through the new Alliance system. This month is Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month, held each year to raise community awareness and promote a clear message that this kind of violence will not be tolerated in our communities. We are all aware of the alarming statistics that on average one woman a week is killed by her partner or ex, and that police respond to a domestic violence situation every 2 minutes (2020). Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children. We are devastated that the outstanding services provided by Catherine House will be severely diminished, and urge the Government to consider how those services can continue through Catherine House. Women at risk need to have the assurance of a safe space and professional support in a crisis situation, with a service provider that is clearly identified for that purpose. We will look with interest at the work of the fifth Alliance that will focus specifically on domestic and family violence.

The Homeless

The number of homeless people continues to increase, including new categories like older women (Australia's fastest growing homeless group is older women aged 55+); traditional middle income families who have lost their home because of increased cost of rentals and the cessation of Commonwealth income protection measures and eviction moratoria; lack of social housing; increased unemployment/underemployment and casualisation of work; people experiencing family breakdown etc. These people have been well supported by integrated case management by the Hutt St Centre and Vinnies Men's shelter, both of whom now faced significant funding cuts.

We appreciate the good work of those service providers who will form the 5 new Alliances, and recognise that in a competitive tender system there will always be winners and losers. Our concern is that the homeless, vulnerable and disadvantaged will be amongst the 'losers' as the infrastructure keeps changing, robot-debt and job-provision continue to highlight injustice and the value of trust and experience built up by committed service-providers will have to transition again. All this in a time when the issues of the disenfranchised are more complex, the shortage of housing rentals is in crisis and the pool of professionals trying to address the challenges are suffering with increased pressures caused by the Covid19 pandemic. It should be noted that there is a signal of alarm as indicated by ambulance workers asking anyone who cares to note the lack of spaces in hospitals; specialists and doctors leaving their positions in mental health; social workers feeling overwhelmed, and a critical shortage of mental health specialists - all this in a time when many new groups are now calling for assistance for the first time.

We also recognise that the social housing crisis and homelessness is an issue that needs action at all levels of government. We will watch with interest and ongoing concern to see how this unfolds, and how the Alliances serve the identified needs in the homeless sector. We know it will take time to implement the networks of collaboration to ensure no-one 'falls through the cracks' and that people are supported as they navigate the new system. Our primary concern is what will happen in the transition process to people who are already marginalized and vulnerable - especially with winter coming, and the crisis in rental and social housing provision.

We would welcome an opportunity to engage in dialogue around these issues with politicians from all parties, hosted by people from Pilgrim Uniting Church Adelaide.

Yours sincerely

Libby Hogarth
Co-Chair, Mission DC

Dianne Watters
Co-Chair, Mission DC

Susan Miller
Chair of Church Council

Mission Development Committee members:

Dr Marelle Harisun, Ruth Lyddon, Joy Germein, Meredith Edwards, Geoff Boyce, Brian Ward, Graham Brice, Rev Sandy Boyce (Deacon), Rev Liellie McLaughlin (Community Connections)