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2015 Addressing Homelessness Conference

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Acknowledgments

Thank you Lynn (Hon Rev Dr Lynn Arnold AO) for your introduction.

[Homelessness is everyone's responsibility]

Thank you for the opportunity to address this year's conference in Homelessness Prevention Week.

It is an opportune time to shine a light on the 105,000 Australians who are right now, homeless.

I know you are all too familiar with such statistics. They are alarming. And the people behind such statistics may surprise some - there is a cohort of older women, often in the private rental market who don't have secure work. We have many young homeless people, and worryingly, significant numbers who are under 12 years of age.

Our country's homeless are someone's mum or dad, someone's child; they all have a story and they deserve a hand up.

Because the fact is - the enduring presence of homelessness in a wealthy country like ours shows that we have a lot more work to do.

This year's theme '*Step Up to End Homelessness*' couldn't be more fitting in our political climate.

There has been much dialogue about the roles and responsibilities between the various levels of government, in particular federal versus state. I know many of you are closely watching the Federation White Paper process that is now underway by the Australian Government. The Housing and Homelessness Issues Paper was released in December 2014 and we recently saw their initial proposals released in a draft Green Paper.

The tax reform white paper process, also currently underway, will have implications for the housing sector. We also expect to see an options, or green, paper for that later this year.

While there is of course good reason for undertaking such processes, I do have some concern that action on housing and homelessness will become second fiddle to the battle that will erupt between jurisdictions over roles and responsibilities, before we see any real movement on the policy front.

Not long after the current government was elected, I was worried to read - as I'm sure many of you were - the language surrounding housing and homelessness in the Commission of Audit that they had ordered.

Essentially, we saw a proposal to remove the Commonwealth's role in housing affordability and homelessness prevention, apart from providing Rent Assistance payments.

We know this would be a simplistic and savage move that would only exacerbate the challenges facing the sector and the vulnerable people they support.

While there was commentary at the time from the government about this just being a recommendation, that it was not intended to be their policy, their actions in the housing and homelessness space provided very little comfort.

In their first year alone, we saw –

- the Prime Minister's Council on Homelessness abolished;
- the highly regarded National Housing Supply Council abolished;
- the COAG Select Council on Housing and Homelessness removed;
- a \$44 million cut to homelessness services, followed by months of funding uncertainty regarding the NPAH;
- the abolition of the National Rental Affordability Scheme which boosted the supply of affordable housing;
- the axing of the Housing Help for Seniors program which delivered support for pensioners over age pension age who 'downsize' their home; and
- the scrapping of the First Owners Saver Accounts which helped Australians to save for their first home and enter the housing market.

Since then, we've also seen respected and valued organisations - National Shelter, Homelessness Australia and the Community Housing Federation Australia - have their funding slashed and contracts ripped up a year early.

To be frank, this has been anything but what you'd call leadership.

So while I respect the white paper processes, I do not want to see responsibilities shirked, or a blame shifting exercise take place – and sadly, this government's track record has set a worrying precedent.

Homelessness is everyone's responsibility. We all need to play a part and 'step up' as this year's theme of Homelessness Prevention Week suggests.

There is a desire and a need for all levels of governments and political persuasions to be firm in our commitment to end homelessness in Australia.

We need strong leadership in housing and homelessness policy and I think we'll all agree that it is critical the Commonwealth Government plays a very strong role here.

[Labor's track record]

I think there has been progress in housing and homelessness policy and investment in Australia in recent years, but the challenge right now is for this to continue.

Federal Labor took housing and homelessness seriously; we took a leadership role and invested more than ever before. This included:

- Making the largest investment in social housing in our history which delivered 21,000 new homes;
- Making a direct financial contribution to 1 in every 20 new homes built since 2008;
- Undertaking significant reforms, including establishing the widely valued National Rental Affordability Scheme which boosted the affordable housing stock for lower income people;
- Negotiating the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness which saw the Australian and state and territory governments provide \$1.1 billion for homelessness services and support.

But of course, there is a lot more work to be done if we are serious about continuing this fight and tackling homelessness.

This is not the time to take the foot off the pedal, rather, we need to push it to the floor.

In contrast to the Abbott Government, Labor is putting housing affordability and homelessness prevention front and centre of its policy development.

We want to see policies that deliver real benefits to people around the country which is why earlier this year our leader, Bill Shorten, asked the Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen and I to develop a *Housing Affordability Strategy* that we will take to the next election.

Many of you shared your views in our Senate Inquiry into Affordable Housing – which I thank you for – this work will also inform our policy work. Chris and I will continue to engage broadly with stakeholders right across the housing and homelessness spectrum as we do this.

We know that there is a lot more to this than just providing a roof over one's head. It is for this reason that both of us are involved in this process – to have the economic and tax perspectives through to the social and welfare elements considered in the development of housing and homelessness solutions.

Homelessness is very often the result of a range of complex and interrelated issues in a person's life. It could involve unemployment, mental illness, domestic violence, a shortage of affordable housing in a tight rental market.

It's more than a place to stay, and is why 'housing first' is, in my way of thinking, a good start.

[Housing first]

How can a single mother who is in precarious accommodation even begin to properly think about her career and getting her children kids to school every day?

How can a teenager whose home life is untenable even begin to think about enrolling in TAFE and buying text books, finding and maintaining a part-time job, and getting their Centrelink support in order?

Every homeless person has a different set of circumstances, and this presents a challenge for policy makers and governments - how do we respond efficiently, effectively, yet to the individual.

To have success, the issues that may have led to an individual's homelessness must be addressed. We need to have services that wrap-around the person we're trying to assist.

Let's look at the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness. Yes I acknowledge improvements can be made to the NPAH and its governance, but there are too many positive outcomes for us to abandon its principles.

Foyer Oxford in Perth is one such model which has pulled a range of services together – government, community agencies, educators, employment providers. The facility has been developed by a consortium, and provides stable, purpose-built accommodation for nearly 100 young people. The results have been excellent.

But there are some innovative solutions that don't really fit into NPAH, or any funding model for that matter.

Take Kids Undercover for example. This Melbourne based organisation's early-intervention approach to preventing youth homelessness is achieving good success.

Their 'Studio' program offers fully relocatable accommodation, which has a bedroom and bathroom, on the grounds of their family's home. This unique accommodation allows families to stay connected, giving them extra room to live and providing the young person with a safe environment.

According to Kids Undercover, as a result of their Studios -

- 74% of young people have reported improved relationships with their family;
- More than half had increased their ability to study and perform at school;
- 82% said they would be homeless had it not been for the Studio Program; and
- More than half of the carers had increased their capacity to care for the young person.

There is a lot of good work occurring on the ground that we have the NPAH to thank for. As I mentioned, of course there are some areas that we can improve upon, and I

am quite receptive to seeing such refinements to the agreement happen, but it is imperative we continue to have a strong and robust NPAH that will support you to do what you do - which is to change the lives of some of our most vulnerable citizens.

[Conclusion]

And on that note, before I finish up, I want to acknowledge the work being done day-in day-out by those in the homelessness sector.

I know you don't do it for the thanks, but it is important that you are recognised and valued.

It has no doubt been a tough couple of years as you've continued to operate in such uncertain funding circumstances.

There are thousands of vulnerable Australians whose lives you have changed. The work you do is incredibly important and is what drives me, and my colleagues, to do what we do every day – to develop meaningful policies that will help to make a difference and make our country better. We are lucky in Australia and there is no reason why we can't do better in ensuring our most vulnerable are helped.

I wish you all a productive conference.

I hope you have a good supply of business cards with you as today is undoubtedly an opportune time to forge new relationships and perhaps reignite some old ones.

I look forward to catching up with as many of you as I can today.

ENDS