



## **Beware: What you Measure is what you Get!**

### **An Outcomes Based Framework for Specialist Homelessness Services in South Australia**

The old adage, 'what you measure is what you get', is true and it couldn't be more important to get it right in South Australia's specialist homelessness service system.

The specialist homelessness system has been under resourced for many years to meet the ever increasing demand for assistance and it is critical that every dollar committed to getting people appropriately and securely housed is utilised in the most effective way possible.

Good housing outcomes obviously impact the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness with increased happiness, improved health, better access to family and other supports, as well as providing a sense of safety and security. Sometimes less obviously, housing people properly also has a significant positive impact across society including reducing the demand on other government services, hospital visits, homelessness services, and increased productivity.

The current State Government has committed to transitioning to an outcomes-based service model that invests in and rewards positive outcomes to prevent and reduce homelessness in South Australia as part of their 'Our Housing Future 2020-2030' strategy.

An outcomes-based framework in the provision of homelessness services is not a new idea; other States in Australia have and are doing this, and it has proven effective in some countries around the world. However, the outcomes framework is not developed properly the results for the clients, service providers and the State will have negative consequences.

So, getting it right is critical!

Transitioning to an outcomes-based framework is a major activity for the sector and must not be rushed. It not only requires advanced tools that can consider context and system variables alongside reliable, relevant, and accurate data, but also cultural change and embedded continuous improvement. The framework must be strong yet flexible, and it must create accountability and transparency.

We have learned from other jurisdictions that building an effective framework requires genuine collaboration between the government, service providers and people who have or are experiencing homelessness and it must be assessed regularly for effectiveness and opportunities for improvement implemented.

One size cannot fit all as services working at the crisis accommodation end of the scale need to be measured differently from those working towards longer term supports. People living with complex health and mental health issues require different levels of support. Likewise, outcomes for people experiencing homelessness cannot be measured in only one way.

When problems or failings occur, the system must not only allow room for the root causes to be identified, learnings to be considered, and effective mitigations to be implemented (including changes to the measures if required), it must insist upon it. A flexible system requires an ongoing collaborative development period over several years, not just the initial establishment time of six months or so. Otherwise we will potentially experience great upheaval, waste time and money and end up with merely a different version of the system we have now, which is claimed to be ineffective.

In Western Australia the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (WAAEH) developed a 10 Year Strategy to End Homelessness which outlines nine outcomes to be achieved by 2028, and an [Outcomes Measurement and Evaluation Framework](#) against which progress towards the goals articulated in the Strategy can be measured. The Framework was developed after an 18-month community campaign bringing together contributions of many people from homelessness services, those experiencing homelessness, funders of services and members of the community.

In Victoria, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) has developed a Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Transition Plan to run for five years (2018-2022). The Plan outlines 15 goals for the sector to be supported to work towards over time, intended to provide a roadmap for the future development of the capacity of the sector.

In the CHP report [Getting Outcome Measurement Right for the Specialist Homelessness Sector](#) at the end of 2019, it is stated that the primary purposes for outcome measurement in the SHS for the foreseeable future should be to aid participants' recovery journeys (through supporting focus and reflection on progress), and to aid system and service improvements (through providing evidence about areas of strength and weakness in outcome achievements).

It is confirmed in the CHP report that it is essential that service providers are not held accountable for outcomes over which they have little control. Useful comparison across services or regions requires high measurement validity, reliability and integrity, and a sophisticated and detailed understanding of context, cohort and system variables, which will take many years to develop. If outcome measurement is used as a punitive mechanism this will quickly undermine service provider participation and data integrity. For all of these reasons, the use of outcome measurements for accountability purposes should be excluded from consideration for quite some time.

It is also highlighted in the CHP report that there are many risks associated with outcome measurements and that unless the investment in developing and implementing them is properly resourced, it will only divert resources from service delivery, be implemented inconsistently and to a low standard, and create further stress for staff. CHP recommend a timeframe of a decade be allowed to design, introduce and refine an outcome measurement approach.

In Calgary, Canada they are moving to the next stage of outcomes measurement; a system of shared measurement that realistically considers that multiple organisations contribute to the same desired community impact. Shared measurement also recognises that tracking outcomes collectively is smarter and more economic than having every organisation prove its impact as if they existed in isolation.

There is a great deal of research that has already been undertaken and examples of successful outcomes-based measurement being implemented around the world that South Australia can learn from to ensure the transition is effective. Shelter SA encourages those involved in the development and implementation of the South Australian framework to do so.

Our goal must be to create a sustainable and ethical system that produces good person-centred outcomes that work for the individual and significantly reduce homelessness across South Australia. That will take time, commitment, and investment to achieve and we'll be watching the process with interest.