

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE INQUIRY BEGAN

The greatest resource in Australia is not something that we can grow or dig up from the soil. It is the capacity of its people, our great human resource: and above all, the resource of the future ---- the children of Australia. For our next term, we are setting achievable, new goals for Australia's future in the world. At the head of those goals is the future of all our children.

So we set ourselves this first goal: by 1990 no Australian child will be living in poverty.

(Prime Minister of Australia, 23 June 1987.)

INTRODUCTION

31 Since the Federal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission decided to conduct this Inquiry in February 1987, a number of steps have been taken or foreshadowed by the Federal and some State Governments which should be noted. Those of which we have been advised or are aware are set out in this chapter.

INCOME SUPPORT

32 As discussed in detail in Chapter 9, Family Poverty and Isolation, the Federal Government's Family Assistance Package of early 1988 is expected to lift between 100,000 and 200,000 Australian children out of poverty, still leaving 440,000 living below the Henderson poverty line. Associated measures, such as the Child Support Scheme (whereby non-custodial parents against whom maintenance orders have been made by the Family Court will have those orders enforced through the taxation system) and increases to the Family Allowance Supplement for low income families from December 1988, will further alleviate the poverty experienced by children living in families.

3.3 The Inquiry is concerned, however, that to date little attention has been focused on the plight of children detached from their families. They appear to have been largely ignored in the development of the Commonwealth's strategy to eliminate child poverty.

3.4 In late 1988, the Department of Social Security, in conjunction with the Department of Education, Employment and Training, established a Task Force to implement the recommendations of a Review of the YHA that was carried out earlier in the year. The Department's Manual was revised to improve the administration of the YHA. Most of the deficiencies in the YHA still exist, however, and are detailed in Chapter 14, Income Support for Homeless Young People.

ACCOMMODATION

Western Australia

35 As detailed in Chapter 16, Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, State housing authorities have been slow to meet the needs of young single people for access to housing in the public sector. However, since the Inquiry commenced, the Western Australian Government through Homeswest, the State housing authority, has decided to review public housing services and programs for young single people in conjunction with welfare, youth and community groups. As part of this review, the provision of public housing to under-18-year-olds on low incomes is to be considered.

Victoria

3.6 The Victorian Government has also reviewed its policy for public housing for under-18-year-olds. However, to the knowledge of the Inquiry, no decisions have been announced about the final form this policy will take.

Northern Territory

37 The Northern Territory Government also sees the possibility of addressing some of the problems of homeless youth through the public sector and is investigating the introduction of community tenancy schemes in Darwin and Alice Springs. If these schemes go ahead, funding will be drawn from the Local Government and Community Housing Program and the Mortgage and Rent Relief Scheme under the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. Local Government and Community Housing Program money is also being used for the initial development of the Juninga Centre, a project being developed by the Gwalwa Daraniki Association to provide accommodation and a range of services for homeless Aboriginal people.

INQUIRIES INTO HOMELESSNESS

South Australia

3.8 The South Australian Government announced a review following publicity about 'street kids' in the Adelaide inner-city region in late 1987. Following receipt of that report, *Inner City Kids*, the then Minister of Health and Community Welfare, Dr Cornwall, announced a \$500,000 relief package. This package included a doubling of crisis accommodation for young people in the inner-city area, the creation of an extra eight staff positions, the provision of child protection services and the development of special services for Aboriginal youth. Intellectually disabled young people will also be targeted. The South Australian review found that adolescents with intellectual disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups frequenting the inner-city area. As a result a Project Officer is expected to be funded by the Intellectually Disabled Services Council to investigate the needs of this group of young people.

3.9 In addition, a survey is planned, at a cost of \$20,000, to be conducted by the South Australian Drug and Alcohol Services Council and the Department for Community Welfare to study the extent and nature of drug usage among street youth aged between 12 and 25 years.

Queensland

310 An Inquiry was also undertaken during 1987 in Queensland. This examined the issue of youth homelessness and inadequate accommodation and included interviews with youth workers, service providers and homeless youth. Unfortunately the findings and recommendations of that Inquiry have not been made public by the Queensland Government, although Queensland's submission to this Inquiry was, we understand, drafted substantially from that research.

New South Wales

311 The New South Wales Government took the initiative to establish an inquiry into homelessness in Sydney in May 1988. It was chaired by Mr Max Raine and was directed to examine the accommodation needs of the estimated 3,000 men, women and children without shelter in Sydney each night. The terms of reference covered:

- the supply of and demand for boarding houses, hostels, refuges and other forms of low cost rental accommodation;
- the role of non-government and voluntary organisations in the provision of accommodation services;
- co-ordination of services for the homeless and inadequately housed;
- forms and levels of direct and indirect government assistance;
- the effect of regulations and legislative controls on the supply of appropriate low cost accommodation;

- models for the provision of support services to assist people unable to live independently; and
- initiatives for future shelter programs.

3A2 The findings and recommendations of the Raine inquiry were published in November 1988.' One major thrust of its recommendations was to encourage the New South Wales Department of Housing to adopt a more proactive role in providing accommodation for the homeless and those at risk of becoming homeless.' In our view, this approach has substantial validity and deserves to be supported by the New South Wales Government. Other recommendations, however for example, the call for a 'Take in a Boarder of Your Choice' campaign — involve unrealistic assumptions about the causes and nature of youth homelessness.

Northern Territory

3.13 Research into the problem has also been initiated in the Northern Territory and includes a project funded through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program which will provide more information on the situation of homeless youth, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in Alice Springs. In Alice Springs, Crisis Accommodation Program funding is being used by the Tangentyere Council to carry out a study on the need for women's crisis accommodation in Aboriginal communities. The study will have important implications for the provision of refuge accommodation for young Aboriginal women.

LEGISLATIVE RESPONSES

New South Wales

3.14 In recent months, legislation has been amended in New South Wales to deal with several issues presented by the increasing numbers and decreasing ages of homeless children and young people. The new government in that State has emphasised the legal/policing approach to youth homelessness. Amendments to the Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987 now give the police more power and discretion to apprehend homeless children and young people. Under the new amendments police can apprehend young people who live in, or appear habitually to frequent, public places and bring them before a Children's Court. The Children's Court can then, if thought desirable, place the young person into the care of the Department of Family and Community Services. The Children (Care and Protection) Act makes it possible for the Department to argue that a child or young person who has nowhere to sleep is in need of care and protection as defined by the Act.

3.15 As part of this developing philosophy, the Minister for Family and Community Services, Mrs Chadwick, has abolished the power of her Department to provide temporary accommodation and support for homeless young people without the prerequisite of court proceedings. The Minister has stated that this former power was inconsistent with any notion of the rights of parents. Mrs Chadwick was also reported to be considering the use of secure institutions for emotionally disturbed homeless children and young people.' The amendments outlined will make it possible for young homeless people to be placed into these facilities whether they have offended or not.

3.16 Also proposed in New South Wales is the tightening of the law with respect to child prostitution. New amendments will make it possible for police to apprehend prostitutes who appear to be minors and introduce severe penalties for any person who profits from the prostitution of children, including their clients.

3.17 The degree of urgency felt within New South Wales increased markedly following the abduction and murder of a 20-year-old woman in September 1988. This was shortly followed by the murder of an elderly destitute woman. In both cases it was alleged that homeless young people were responsible. As a result, the New South Wales Premier requested Cabinet's Community Services Sub-Committee to consider urgently ways of responding to the special problems and needs of homeless young people. The Sub-Committee was asked to report to Cabinet by November 1988 on ways of responding to homelessness and vagrancy, transport safety, laws and rehabilitation schemes for juveniles, community policing, early intervention programs to deter young people from becoming involved in crime and training and employment schemes for young people.

Victoria

318 The Victorian Government has introduced a new Bill into Parliament, the Children and Young Persons Bill which, whilst applying to minors in general, has a specific provision for the young homeless. In contrast to the direction that New South Wales is now taking, the Victorian Bill stipulates that no child or young person can be remanded in custody solely on the basis that he or she lacks adequate accommodation.

Queensland

319 The Queensland Minister for Family and Youth Services, Mr McKechnie, announced in September 1988 that consideration was being given in that State to the introduction of a statutory age below which children would not be able to leave home without parental consent. The aim of such legislation would be both to reinforce parental responsibilities to their children and to promote family reconciliation as a response to temporary crisis. It was acknowledged that the situation of abused children and young people would need to be addressed.'

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSES

South Australia

320 Adolescents at risk of physical and emotional harm are to be targeted by a new South Australian initiative: 'a coordinated program for adolescents at risk with particular emphasis on the development of more preventative services.' Adolescent Support Teams are to be established throughout the State comprising Group Workers and Neighbourhood Youth Workers. The Teams are to 'provide individual support for youth in crises, run groups for youth experiencing similar difficulties and develop community support networks for adolescents at risk'⁶ In this initiative, South Australia has recognised the fundamental importance of co-ordination of youth services. The teams are required to work closely with youth agencies including refuges and will support those agencies in their work and in the development of joint programs.'

New South Wales

321 The New South Wales State budget for 1987-88 also saw a significant increase in funding for specialist adolescent programs in that State, with \$2.35 million allocated to a relatively new program: the Support Program for Adolescents and their Parents. Current funding will allow for 20 additional District Officers to specialise in the field of adolescent services. The funding also provides for 10 extra Detached Family Counsellors (funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) and funding for day programs which are aimed at restoring young people to their homes through reconciliation counselling with their families. The Detached Family Counsellor program is based on the premise that youth accommodation services do not have the staff resources to provide the intensive counselling that is required if conflicts are to be resolved and reconciliation become a realistic option.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Federal

322 For reasons which are unclear to the Inquiry, the Federal Government decided late in 1987 to suspend funding to the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH), the peak federation of State and regional Youth Accommodation Coalitions which are the principal groups representing the youth housing sector and homeless young people. The amount of funding involved was relatively small: approximately \$80,000 per annum.' The Inquiry believes that NYCH fulfills a valuable role and should receive some funding from Government in its own right. In November 1988 the Government decided it would allocate NYCH \$50,000 for the period to 30 June 1989, but not before the offices had been closed and staff retrenched. That funding was a 'one-off' allocation as a grant-in-aid from the Department of Community Services and Health. Thus, NYCH's future beyond the middle of 1989 remains uncertain.

3.23 In November 1988, the Federal Government announced its offer for a new three-year Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. The Commonwealth will commit a total of \$40 million — which the States will be required to match — over the next three years. It is expected that about one-third of this amount will continue to be expended on the Youth Supported Accommodation Program although, in future, allocations will not be strictly apportioned between the three sub-programs as at present.' Instead, the Commonwealth intends that funding will be allocated to services on the basis of need.

Notes

1. Ministerial Inquiry into Homelessness and the provision of Affordable Accommodation in the Inner City of Sydney, *Report of the Committee*, (members: M. Raine, S. Ball and T. Wilton, September 1988) at 3.
2. For example, the Inquiry recommended that the Department of Housing allocate substantial funds in 1988-89 to provide medium term or graduated accommodation for homeless people and purchase suitable properties for lease to charitable agencies needing access to longer term accommodation venues: Recommendations 1.1, 1.2. The Department of Housing was also advised to continue its urban redevelopment program in the inner city with a view to acquiring properties for the accommodation of homeless people: Recommendation 5.1. Moreover, it was recommended that the Department purchase larger houses to be used as boarding houses: Recommendation 6.1.
3. 'Tough justice for violent teenagers', 18 Sept 1988 *Sun Herald*. See also 'Tough new moves to deal with teenage violence', id.
4. 'QId considers age of leaving', 20 Sept 1988 *Courier Mail*.
5. S.I20C, Department for Community Welfare (SA), at 7.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *I b i d.*
8. NYCH received administration funding of \$81,000 for the 1987-88 financial year. Average funding over the three financial years 1/7/85 to 30/6/88 was \$67,000 per annum. In addition, NYCH received some small project grants.
9. The other two sub-programs are the General Supported Accommodation Program (GSA?) and the Women's Emergency Services Program (WESP).