

Tenancy support for people at risk of eviction: Summary of the Homelessness Action Plan evaluation findings

The Homelessness Action Plan (HAP) Evaluation Strategy captured evidence of the effectiveness of different service approaches used by HAP Projects. This evidence note is a summary of the evaluation findings for projects that provided tenancy support for people at risk of eviction.

Key points

- A short-term investment in support and financial assistance for tenants can reduce the risk of eviction
- Preventing eviction and other tenancy failure had a positive impact on the mental and physical health of tenants
- Key types of support that can sustain tenancies included financial counselling and living and budgeting skills
- Specific support provided to Aboriginal tenants through culturally specific services helped sustain tenancies and increase access to housing
- Collaborative case planning through local multi-agency coordination groups strengthened service delivery
- Providing tenancy support reduced the demand on crisis services and also reduced the future risk of homelessness for vulnerable clients
- Implementing marketing strategies with real estate agents and landlords led to greater access to rental properties and facilitated the referral of private rental tenants prior to eviction
- Access to flexible brokerage funding was important for the initial engagement with clients and for working with agents and landlords to address tenancy issues.

Description of service approaches

Three HAP projects provided tenancy support services to prevent people at risk of eviction from losing their tenancy and becoming homeless. The Tenancy Support Service Mid North Coast (TSSMNC) and Tenancy Support Program Far North Coast (TSPFNC) provided case management, brokerage funding and integrated service coordination approaches.

The Coastal Sydney Aboriginal Tenancy Support Service (CSATSS), located in Sydney had a focus on Aboriginal people who were at risk of homelessness, or required support to access housing. CSATSS provided case management, brokerage, client advocacy and assistance with proof of Aboriginality.

A range of other HAP projects also provided tenancy support services.

The issues

The evaluation has shown that effective tenancy support programs can identify tenants at risk of housing instability and provide targeted intervention to prevent eviction and homelessness.

The primary cause of eviction for private tenants is rental arrears, while for public tenants it's for rental arrears, property maintenance and nuisance and annoyance issues.

There are a range of factors that contribute to the risk of eviction, many of which are often interdependent. These factors include significant life events or crises, domestic violence, low income and poor financial management skills, a lack of advice and support about tenancy rights and obligations, mental health issues and drug and alcohol dependence. People typically at risk of eviction include young people without appropriate support and people in share accommodation due to the actions of housemates or guests.

Research shows that Aboriginal tenants are more vulnerable to eviction, as the occurrence of these underlying factors is higher in the Aboriginal population. Aboriginal tenants are also more likely to face discrimination from landlords and neighbours, and to have family obligations and cultural practices that may impact on housing security.

Research suggests that the majority of people become homeless immediately after eviction, with a small proportion experiencing primary homelessness. About a third of evictees are likely to turn to friends or family for short-term accommodation while others receive assistance from emergency accommodation providers, hospitals or other institutions. The majority of people who have been evicted are likely to be accommodated in public housing at some stage.

Taking action to evict a tenant is costly in terms of both time and resources for the housing provider/ landlord and support agencies that may then need to provide crisis accommodation. Tenant support strategies can lead to savings for government through reduced demand for income support and housing assistance, reduced maintenance costs and consistent tenancy payments in social housing.

Findings

The self-evaluation reports completed by the 36 HAP-funded projects for June 2010 to March 2012 show that 3,000 clients were supported to maintain their tenancies with a success rate of 85 percent across all projects.

In addition, the three specialist tenancy support projects selected for the extended evaluation reported a success rate of 97 percent of clients sustaining tenancies at the 16-week exit point.

Data was not available on the impacts on the crisis service system, however service providers who were interviewed for the evaluation noted that there had been a reduction in eviction and homelessness, and a reduced demand on referrals to crisis services as a direct result of the projects.

The non-housing benefits for clients of the tenancy support approach included improvements in physical and mental health, and positive changes in family relationships. Some clients also reported commencing employment or study as result of the support received and increased levels of self esteem.

Success factors

The common features across the three projects which contributed to their successful outcomes included:

- flexible, client-centred, short-term support (up to 16 weeks) for tenants in private rental or social housing
- a case management model supported by brokerage funding to purchase goods or services or to assist with managing debt
- mechanisms to connect clients to services, to meet client needs as well as addressing the immediate issues that place them at risk of eviction
- the provision of support to clients to develop budgeting and financial management skills.

The North Coast services also developed:

- multi-agency coordination groups based in the primary service delivery locations that approved client support plans and expenditure of the brokerage budget
- partnerships with real estate agents so that they could be engaged with the model, actively refer private rental tenants and cooperate with rent arrears repayment plans.

Services reported that working with clients over a 16-week case management period enabled them to establish strategies to avoid rental arrears. It also meant they could develop ongoing strategies to address the underlying issues that contribute to tenancy risk, such as domestic violence or mental health, alcohol and/or drug issues.

The evaluation found that local multi-agency coordination groups strengthened service delivery and referral networks by establishing linkages between mainstream and specialist services. This meant they provided a single service access point for clients and facilitated integrated case management that was focused on tenancy outcomes. The coordination groups also enhanced the knowledge and skills of local services in identifying and responding to people at risk of homelessness.

Good outcomes were achieved for Aboriginal clients at risk of homelessness by providing culturally specific services (like those offered by Coastal Sydney Aboriginal Tenancy Support Service) and through developing effective linkages with Aboriginal organisations (like those achieved by the North Coast services). In the North Coast services, 35 percent of clients assisted were Aboriginal.

Challenges

Challenges for service providers included workforce issues, primarily relating to the supply of case managers. Service providers responded to this challenge through creating Aboriginal traineeships to increase the number of Aboriginal case workers and using brokerage funds to purchase case management hours from other established organisations.

Waiting lists for support services in some locations for family, mental health and disability services and access to social and affordable housing were also challenges. Projects developed stronger relationships with community housing providers, real estate agents and a range of Housing NSW specialist workers to increase client access to housing.

For further information on the HAP Evaluation Strategy please visit www.housing.nsw.gov.au