



# HOMELESSNESS SECTOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT IN TASMANIA

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Tasmania's deepening housing crisis has significantly increased demand for services and pressures on workers. More affordable housing is needed. It is also essential that people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are provided with appropriate support from a skilled professional workforce.

In the past year, Australian Institute for Health and Welfare data<sup>1</sup> shows that Tasmania has seen:

- ▶ 20% increase in the average number of daily unmet requests for assistance (now 25 a day).
- ▶ 20% increase in challenging behaviours (now 2,992 clients) and 27% increase in substance abuse (now 169 clients)
- ▶ 51% increase in mental health clients (now 366 clients) and 105% increase in disability clients (now 45 clients)
- ▶ 23% increase in child protection services (304 clients) 22% increase in average length of support provided (now 98 days per client) reflecting complexity of need.

Shelter Tas as the Peak Body for housing and homelessness services in Tasmania was commissioned by the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to produce and implement a strategy for Homelessness Sector Workforce Development. Shelter Tas undertook systematic state-wide consultation with the homelessness sector and reviewed research to identify best practice in other jurisdictions. Homelessness services clearly identified the need for specialised training, as they had found generic training did not address the specific skill sets and needs of the housing and homelessness sector.

During the consultation, services identified that workers are needing to:

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2018, *Specialist Homelessness Services Data Cubes, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017*, table, Tasmanian clients. 15

See: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/data-cubes>

- ▶ Carry increasingly heavy caseloads and manage clients with more complex needs (because of extended or repeated episodes of homelessness).
- ▶ Be responsive to changing client profiles as the crisis affects a widening group of people (older women, prisoners and mental health patients on release, people with disabilities, families with young children).
- ▶ Operate in a highly regulated and complex environment, often involving vulnerable people (including minors), demanding sound knowledge, informed and compliant practice, and advanced problem solving ability.
- ▶ Deliver consistency in practice, use contemporary skills and knowledge, and participate in shared learning and problem solving.
- ▶ Manage work related stress and worker self-care to underwrite workplace health and safety and workforce stability.

Taking this on board, Shelter Tas developed a project plan to deliver appropriate and responsive training. We realised that a successful program would require us to closely screen training providers for competence and relevance, and to evaluate each event so that feedback would continue to inform and improve the program over the three years of delivery. This approach ensured high quality training and continuous program improvement.

We established a Workforce Development Reference Group to guide the project with representatives selected from homelessness services in the south, north and northwest of the state, and including representation from Housing Tasmania. This reference group was complemented by our existing networks and regular structured meetings with the community housing and homelessness sector. We consulted closely with peers and stakeholders on program design, ensuring that the training aligned with current and emerging need.

The success of this approach is demonstrated in the positive evaluations received from training participants, with 96% of the total 678 registrants across the three years of the project rating their experience as good to excellent.

Before this project was implemented, sector workers could access only two types of training: legal compliance and technical reporting training and the accredited courses such as Cert IV and Diploma in Social Housing courses (delivered in partnership by Housing Tas, NSW Housing Federation, Skills Tasmania and Shelter Tas). This project delivered specialist training, in shorter sessions, delivered in regions across the state, tailored to contemporary needs identified by workers delivering frontline services in Tasmania.

Being able to utilise Shelter's established networks and the good will of community sector stakeholders, enabled us to leverage partnerships and resources to minimise expenses and deliver value to the sector.

The 4 priorities of the Project were:

- *Priority 1 – Increasing the Skills and Competencies of the SHS Workforce:* indicated by highly positive feedback from training participants,
  - *Priority 2 – Increasing the Accessibility of Training and Professional Development to the Whole of the Sector:* indicated by an inclusive, equity-based state wide approach,
  - *Priority Three – Developing an Information Sharing Network:* indicated by a dedicated 'Training' page on the Shelter Tas. website, Reference Group and networking opportunities, and
- Priority Four – Building a Future Training and Professional Development Funding Model:* Recommended an ongoing commitment to workforce development that meets the need for flexible training that focuses on the homelessness workforce needs and sector-identified challenges.

The outcomes achieved to-date include:

Increased expertise in areas affecting the homelessness workforce, including:

- Dealing with crystal methamphetamine-affected clients
- Anti-Discrimination and gender awareness, including transgender clients
- Culturally responsive work within the community
- Clients with complex needs and self-care for SHS workers
- Reforms in the Residential Tenancy Act
- Symposium and follow-up forum on consumer participation
- Trauma Informed Practice
- Consumer engagement
- Interviewing techniques and case note writing skills for the workforce
- Mental health and co-morbidity
- Improving and tracking client outcomes.

The professional development opportunities offered throughout the Workforce Development Project have delivered valuable outcomes for participants, and provided increased knowledge to Specialist Homelessness Services and community housing workers across Tasmania. Our experience shows that workforce development has improved consistency in practice, provide updated skills and knowledge, and enabled shared learning and problem solving. Housing and homelessness services, from CEO to frontline workers recognise the need for ongoing sector

training in Tasmania, and have requested the continuation of a Shelter Tas-led workforce development program.

Shelter Tas recognises the need for workforce development is a national issue. We recommend that workforce capacity funding be recognised and embedded in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for all jurisdictions. Shelter Tas will further develop and maintain a consistent and expert approach to training for the homelessness sector workforce and utilise infrastructure and knowledge gained over the last 3 years of delivering highly successful and well regarded training. Specialist workforce development supports workers and the people they help, and adds value to government investment in housing and homelessness services through the NHHA and Tasmania's *Affordable Housing Strategy 2015-25* and *Action Plans*.