

Position Statement

Homelessness and serious and persistent mental ill-health



Our vision

For all people in Australia living with mental health and wellbeing challenges to live a life that is meaningful to them.

The issue

Currently, at least 31,000 Australians living with mental health challenges experience homelessness or housing insecurity.¹ People living with serious and persistent mental health challenges are over-represented in the homelessness sector and are one of the fastest-growing cohorts accessing Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS).²

This position statement defines serious and persistent mental ill-health (SPMI) as a person's experience of mental health challenges where the impact on the person is severe, enduring, or episodic, creating barriers that prevent the person from exercising full choice and control to achieve a life of meaning, purpose and connection.³

People living with SPMI are one of the most excluded groups in our communities.⁴ They face a complex interplay of challenges to accessing safe, affordable and sustainable housing, including:

- unemployment, underemployment, financial hardship and poverty
- pervasive stigma and discrimination in both the private rental market and social housing system
- difficulties managing the practical, social and emotional aspects of daily living, affecting interpersonal relationships and effective self-advocacy
- serious or episodic distress affecting motivation, memory and functional capacity.⁵

Access to housing for people with SPMI is further limited by a lack of affordable housing,⁶ declining numbers of social housing,⁷ and income support and wages failing to keep pace with the increasing cost of living.⁸

For people living with SPMI, housing provides a foundation for economic, educational and social participation. Support to secure and sustain housing integrated with wrap-around homelessness and mental health and wellbeing support drives improved health, mental health and wellbeing outcomes. This reduces expenditure associated with inpatient treatment and other high-cost or avoidable interventions across the health,⁹ justice¹⁰ and welfare sectors.¹¹

Neami's position

Housing is a human right¹²

- Australia must meet its obligations as a party to the seven core international human rights treaties, including the right to an adequate standard of living under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, article 11).
- Australia must legislate its commitment to housing as a human right to compel government and government-funded organisations to prioritise safe, affordable, and sustainable housing in policy and practice.¹³
- Legislating housing as a human right, ideally via a federal Human Rights Act, would ensure a national commitment to housing the homeless beyond policy cycles. It would ensure that no person living with SPMI is released from an out-of-community setting, such as a hospital, custody, or residential rehabilitation, to homelessness.
- Until housing is a legislated human right, people who are most at risk of homelessness, including people with SPMI, must be prioritised for social and affordable housing.

Adopt Housing First as Australia's leading housing policy and homelessness response

- Housing First must underpin Australia's homelessness response for all people, but critically for people with SPMI.
- The Australian Government must endorse Housing First as Australia's leading housing policy in the pending 10-year *National Housing and Homelessness Plan* (NHHP).
- As an interim measure, the federal, state, and territory governments should incorporate the eight principles of Housing First in new housing and homelessness program contracts for people with SPMI.

Integration of mental health and homelessness services

- People with SPMI need a specialist homelessness response that integrates homelessness and mental health support. Services that provide a range of supports in one location, delivered by staff trained to understand and respond to the intersection of homelessness and mental health, will result in improved housing stability, sustained tenancies and better mental health, wellbeing and community connection.
- The Australian Government must commit to integrated mental health and homelessness services through the *NHHP* and the *National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement*.
- Australian federal, state and territory governments must fund proven integrated support housing models that address the relationship between mental health and homelessness. These services must be adequately resourced and funded for a minimum of five years.

About Neami National

We're big believers in everyone having the opportunity to live a full life. We support more than 30,000 people each year to achieve wellbeing and mental health outcomes that matter to them. We provide services across Australia for mental health and wellbeing, housing and homelessness, and suicide prevention.

Endnotes

¹ Productivity Commission. (2020). [Mental Health: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report: Volume 3](#), Canberra, p.1001.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23](#), AIHW, Australian Government.

³ Sane. (2023). [What is mental illness?](#) Fact sheet and guides.

⁴ Killaspy, H., Harvey, C., Brasier, C., Brophy, L., Ennals, P., Fletcher, J & Hamilton B. (2022). [Community-based social interventions for people with severe mental illness: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of recent evidence](#). World Psychiatry. February. Vol. 21. Iss. 1, pp. 96-123.

⁵ Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A & Davison. J. (2018). [Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change](#). Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

⁶ Anglicare Australia. (2024). [Rental Affordability Snapshot: National Report 2024](#) (Fifteenth Edition).

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024) [Housing assistance in Australia 2024](#), AIHW, Australian Government.

⁸ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. 2022. [Why does Australia have a rental crisis, and what can be done about it?](#) Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. 16 November 2022.

⁹ Flatau, P., Wood, L., Zaretzky, K., Foster, S., Vallesi, S & Misenko, D. (2016). [What are the economic benefits of providing public housing and support to formerly homeless people?](#) AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin. Iss. 215. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. November 2016.

¹⁰ Martin, C., Reeve, R., McCausland, R., Baldry, E., Burton, P., White, R & Thomas, S. (2021) [Exiting prison with complex support needs: the role of housing assistance](#), AHURI Final Report No. 361, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/361>, doi:10.18408/ahuri7121201.

¹¹ Carnemolla, P & Skinner, V. (2021). [Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable, and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless: An International Scoping Review](#). Journal of Planning Literature, 36(4), pp. 508-525.

¹² Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). [Homelessness is a human rights issue](#).

¹³ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2022). [A Human Rights Act for Australia: Summary report](#).