People’s lives change by being housed. Having a roof over one’s head, a key to your own door, and stable tenure is more than just housing; it is a home. It provides a foundation for opportunity and stability, and enables people to establish and rebuild their lives. Without housing, people cannot find safety, privacy and dignity.

Being homeless or even being under enormous tenancy stress is not a choice and is extremely stressful — it takes a significant toll on the health and wellbeing of individuals and families. Living in poverty and in crisis without a home or at risk of losing that home and at the intersection of complex health systems, domestic and family violence, and discrimination has devastating physical and psychological consequences that can last a lifetime. Only by housing someone in a space they can afford, do people dream of changing the things that might prevent them from living a more meaningful and fulfilling life. But how do we ensure housing for all? The experience of homelessness as a child leaves lifetime memories and can often have lifetime consequences.

Housing needs to be affordable for low-income earners and supportive for those who need services and resources to sustain a tenancy and quality of life. Purchase price growth, rental growth and wage stagnation is at historically high rates and represents a major barrier for low and even moderate-income earners. People on Newstart Allowance, Disability Support Pension and low-skill jobs are paying over 40 per cent of their wage or their benefit, even including the rental assistance scheme, to sure up anything in the private market. This is not sustainable.

A new report by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has found:

‘…the extent of housing need in Australia, with 1.3 million households in housing need in 2017 — either unable to access market housing (around 525,000) or able to access the private rental market, but requiring support to avoid rental stress (800,000). The greatest need is in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and the results reveal the extent of the affordable housing shortfall, providing evidence to support an increase in resources for the delivery of affordable housing, be it direct through government, in partnership with the private sector, via planning requirements, or by the community housing sector’

With the exception of the period 1945–1956 when public housing burgeoned to meet the needs of returned soldiers and their new families after World War Two, and periods after this in the sixties and seventies, we are now in a period of record low social housing constructions.

Currently in Queensland, 26,000 people are on the waitlist for social housing. Encouragingly, the Queensland Government has recently committed to the construction of 5,000 social housing homes over the next decade. Yet, despite this commitment, the above facts elucidate the sheer magnitude of the issues that low-income earners face, and the number of people on the waitlist shows that the government is still showing signs of being extremely reluctant landlords. The policy position that views public or social housing as being temporary and as a stepping stone to private rental, is misguided and out of step with the realities of the market.

There are three critical issues, issues that if fully embraced, could create the solutions that would end homelessness and create the stability that people achieve when housed.

Firstly, for those of us working in this sector, there is no dispute that the provision of social housing is the appropriate solution to the key issue of housing affordability. While low-income earners can only afford to pay 30 per cent of their income on their housing, the market simply prevents this from being possible. We need to stop the stigma associated with public and social housing and respect the diversity of tenants and their circumstances.

Secondly, there needs to be a targeted and coordinated entry into housing where funded programs and interventions cut across the multiple domains that affect people’s lives. This enables organisations to guide and match the right housing response and when needed, the right service response. Governments cannot go it alone, nor can individual non-government organisations. Homelessness is solvable.

Thirdly, ending homelessness involves prevention of first-time or episodic homelessness, interim housing to respond to crisis, and permanent housing with secure tenancy and appropriate support when it is needed. A coordinated system creates efficiencies and prevents further stigma and isolation. Most people who are homeless, or at-risk of homelessness, can be assessed and prioritised according to their need for either affordable housing or affordable housing and appropriate support services. It is possible to respond
quickly to these situations and it is possible to prevent new entries into homelessness by channelling these people into homelessness prevention services.

The use of the Vulnerability Index Service Prioritisation Decision Assistant Tool (VI-SPDAT) connects deeply with the Queensland Housing Strategy 2017–2027 and the goal of the Action Plan’s for the sector to customise packages of support and assistance appropriate to the needs and circumstances individuals. The VI-SPDAT fulfils this very function by allowing services to match appropriate support and assistance based on level of acuity and need. This aligns with the Action Plan as individuals can then be diverted into affordable housing before homelessness takes root and further crisis points emerge. At the other end of the spectrum, those with multiple needs requiring support should be provided with more intense and wrap around support. These supports may be short-term or ongoing depending on whether people require supportive housing due to high, prolonged and ongoing needs.

Rather than assuming that the whole of public and social housing is for people with high support needs, supportive housing should be allocated to those who need it most. Queensland needs to develop a plan that matches housing with the services provided by all government human services departments — a plan that determines what percentage of new housing stock should be allocated to supportive housing. Such a plan would need to identify which departments are interested in providing the investment for funding for services and what outcomes, alongside sustaining tenancies, is the investment focused on achieving. For example, do housing providers require a rental subsidy for the provision of supportive housing?

Supportive housing is appropriate and applicable to the needs of multiple population groups as it is grounded in strong partnerships that enable coordination between tenancy managers and community services workers. To be successful, supportive housing needs to be grounded in policy, programs and practice and provided on scale that is needed to meet demand in Queensland.

The discourse on housing needs to become one where housing is considered the ‘right’ of all people is Queensland, a right either provided by, or funded by the State. Likewise, we need to channel our collective effort towards developing the partnerships and collaborations needed to provide the planning and investment required if we are to have any chance of creating the opportunities and the stability that is essential for the individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

For too long, stigma and isolation are the hallmarks of the experience of homelessness. What people need is simply a place to call home. While Australia has a history of creating safety nets, these are fast being taken away as increasingly the individual or family is being asked to bear the responsibility for costs and consequences of structural poverty and inequality.

Endnotes
