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Bold Thinking and Bold Ideas for South Australia

Some people who find themselves without anywhere to call home require intensive support combined with affordable housing to fully participate in society, enjoy good health and reach their potential.

Others who experience homelessness are simply lacking an affordable place to live and it is critical that all conversations about homelessness start from a point that acknowledges that homelessness is directly underpinned by a shortage of social and affordable housing. There is an urgent need for re-investment in social housing and a rapid increase in the supply of affordable housing alternatives for people living on low incomes to address the pervasive and growing issue of homelessness.

I believe that South Australia (SA), which has the highest unemployment rate in the nation, increasing levels of homelessness, an ineffective child protection system and regular

domestic violence murders, needs some big thinking and leadership at the highest level to bring about positive change. While labour market studies show us that an evidence-based approach to income support measures must be accompanied by education and employment strategies and systems, there does not appear to be a strategy at either the national or state level.

The South Australian Personal Support Program is a good start, but alone it will not address systemic issues that cause poor literacy, inequitable access to educational opportunities or entrenched poverty.

Unfortunately our child protection agency has been in the news for all of the wrong reasons, with children falling through the gaps, dying and being abused. Although I recognise that we must screen workers thoroughly, a system that is not funded adequately means that workers who are not supported properly cannot effectively protect our children.

We welcome recent announcements about funding to address domestic violence however; the spending seems to be about protecting women from violent partners after families are already known to the police and sector workers. Where is the funding for domestic violence prevention, for working with perpetrators and addressing gender inequity? These issues are pressing and frustrating for workers who deal with the consequences of inaction.

Late last year, Shelter SA wrote to Premier Jay Weatherill, to address the issue of the future of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and the funding of specialist homelessness services by the Commonwealth

and South Australian Governments. Shelter SA was pleased that a number of workshops were initiated by the Honourable Zoe Bettison, Minister for Social Housing to draw upon the knowledge of the homelessness sector workers and to create a new Road Map beyond 2014 in response to homelessness. As a result of these workshops, Shelter SA was able to provide the Premier with a number of key ideas, suggestions and advice regarding the future response to homelessness in SA.

The strongest message Shelter SA delivered to the Premier was that we believe it is imperative for homelessness to be led by him and elevated to his Department of Premier and Cabinet. Statistics recently released by the Department of Communities and Social Inclusion (Homeless 2 Home Specialist Homelessness Services Agency Contract Management Report) demonstrate that there is an unacceptable lack of resources available to enable state government agencies to meet their responsibilities to their clients.

I am deeply concerned about the safety of our children — more than 7,000 children were in receipt of specialist homelessness services assistance in 2013–14 and there were approximately 6,000 clients with mental health issues.

It appears that the homelessness system has become the system of last resort for the clients who fall through the gaps of other state government agencies. Alarming, our nation's first peoples continue to be overrepresented in all systems with more than 6,000 accessing homelessness services. Without the Premier's authority and direction of all Ministers, their portfolios and departments, it is unlikely that the situation will change and will only get worse if it is not addressed.

Shelter SA would like to highlight the pressing need for the Commonwealth and State Government involvement in housing and homelessness policy and funding. Again, leadership and authority are required at the highest levels to ensure that all policies, funding decisions, ministers and their

portfolios are working towards an increase in the supply of social and affordable housing that would bring about a significant reduction in the level of homelessness.

If there is to be an improvement in the supply of affordable housing to meet demand and reduce the number of people living in housing stress, the housing system must be addressed as a whole using all the levers available to government.

If the Commonwealth Government is serious about achieving a well educated population who have the capacity to join the workforce, housing must be the basis upon which individuals and families can achieve their potential. South Australia must continue to develop the effective and efficient service system created four years ago, without taking a step backwards in this important area.

In SA we need big thinking to address the systemic social issues of poverty, gender and racial inequality and the failure of the housing market to provide affordable homes for all citizens — the issues that we know are not going to go away on their own.