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Federal Government must act on youth homeless report: Anglicare Australia

If it is serious about helping create a fair and decent society, the Commonwealth Government must act immediately to address the alarming rise in youth homelessness uncovered in the *Homeless Youth* report, according to Anglicare Australia.

The report from the National Youth Commission paints a harrowing picture of the conditions under which an unacceptably large proportion of the country's young people — some 22,000 — have been forced to live.

'The Commission quite rightly points out that homelessness goes well beyond only not having a roof over your head,' said Executive Director Kasy Chambers.

'It also rightly focuses on the economic as well as social cost of *not* addressing the problem.

'But this is not primarily an economic issue. It is moral. We have to deal with youth homelessness because it undermines our claim to be a fair and civilised society. Financial cost is a secondary consideration. No matter who, individually, is responsible for their current situation, homeless youth deserve to be treated as we would all have others treated ourselves — decently.'

Anglicare Australia endorses the report's recommendations, especially those on early intervention — the Reconnect and Home Advice programs — increased support for those leaving State Care, and the development of a significant stock of Foyer-type housing for at-risk and homeless young people, with links to education, training and employment programs to prevent a return to homelessness.

'As Anglicare agencies who deal with the problem across the country are only too well aware: not only do homeless young people become detached from friends and the mainstream community; they are also at risk of joining fringe sub-cultures which cause or exacerbate problems like drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health difficulties,' Ms Chambers said.

The same patterns occur in Anglicare agencies across Australia, from Tasmania to the Northern Territory, the Eastern states to WA. The demand on services is overwhelming.

Anglicare North Queensland, for example, was forced to turn away 280 young people in 2006.

The CEO of St John's Youth Services in Adelaide, Wendy Malycha, has noted that the young people who come to her service were excluded from most other services and that over the past decade their needs had become much higher and more complex.

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'Ten years ago you might have had one in 20 young people who presented with issues such as a history of violence, abuse and neglect; drug and alcohol problems; serious mental health conditions and exclusion from other services. Now it is about one third of all young people we see and their homelessness is already entrenched.'

Homeless Youth notes 49 per cent of those approaching the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program were homeless because of a breakdown in relations with parents or step-parents.

'While we need to do more thorough analysis of the problem, we believe that early intervention is the key to building stronger families and avoiding breakdown.

'The report provides an occasion for the new administration to demonstrate how seriously it believes in social justice and genuinely equal opportunity. We look forward to the Government's response,' said Ms Chambers.

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