AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Improving housing and support service co-ordination for people living with mental illness.

*This report, by **Astrid Reynolds, Susan Inglis** and **Anne O'Brien** of **Ecumenical Housing Inc.**, is the outcome of one of a number of AHURI projects examining more effective linkages between housing and support services for groups in the community with particular needs. This project looks at the issue from the perspective of people with mental illnesses. For these people, having stable accommodation and being able to sustain their tenancies (including through episodes of acute illness) is a major challenge. Some of these people have considerable difficulty accessing or maintaining stable housing without effective co-ordination between housing and other support services; for others the ability to live independently depends on being able to get affordable, secure and appropriate housing. The research was conducted in Victoria, but the conclusions apply to other Australian jurisdictions.*

KEY POINTS

- The foundations for developing effective approaches that will help this group of people to sustain their housing are:
    - the need to understand the impact a mental illness can have on achieving housing stability;
    - recognising the importance of addressing housing needs and preferences; and
    - the need to understand the key elements of effective service responses.

- It is important to have a diversity of approaches to link housing and support so that people have choices and there is an ability to respond to people's varied needs and circumstances.

- The diversity of such linkages should be co-ordinated across government programmes, so that an appropriate balance of models is available within local areas.

- Working to support more effective linkages is a responsibility across the service system.

- The capacity of generic services to assist people living with a mental illness should be enhanced; at the same time, we need to continue developing more formally integrated and specialist housing and support models for those with the most complex needs.

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BACKGROUND

The study first examined relevant literature. Key information for the project was gathered through interviews and discussion with a cross section of people involved with providing housing and/or support services to people with a mental illness. Discussions with the project's reference group (made up of government officers and practitioners working with people with a mental illness) have been central to identifying and clarifying key issues. Unfortunately, the study scope did not allow for discussion with people with a mental illness or their family and friends who often provide key support. (AHURI has since funded a follow-on study, which will involve interviewing 50 people who experience psychiatric disabilities about what they see as the factors that support their ability to maintain stable housing.)

FINDINGS

FOUNDATIONS

Three essential foundations emerged for developing effective approaches to help people whose complex needs arise from their mental illness to sustain their housing. Each has implications for the development of ways to link housing and support.

1. The need to understand the impact a mental illness can have on achieving housing stability.

Those designing or funding programmes or delivering services need a sound understanding of the characteristics of people with a mental illness, and how the illness can manifest and affect their abilities to live independently. Key features of particular importance are:

- the mental illness and/or resultant psychiatric disability can affect basic abilities required to access and sustain tenancies, such as completing an application form;

- a person's capacities for independent living and needs for support can fluctuate and be unpredictable;

- people may need support with diverse areas of their life and assistance to co-ordinate many services may be required; and

- when a person is unwell they are usually heavily reliant on others to ensure required support is available and co-ordinated.

2. Recognising the importance of addressing housing needs and preferences.

Stable and appropriate housing is an important foundation for increasing the capacity of many people with a mental illness to live independently.

Housing stability may well be undermined when housing is not appropriate to a person's needs and preferences. Therefore, a range of different types of housing and housing and support models is required to meet diversity in needs and preferences.

3. Understanding key elements of effective service responses.

The particular disabilities and resultant support needs associated with living with a mental illness require services that incorporate the following:

- the capacity for assertive outreach due to the reluctance of many people to seek support and engage with services;

- time to nurture and build a working relationship with the person;

- the ability to accommodate unpredictable fluctuations in needs and capacities without jeopardising housing and critical support;

- consistency in service providers providing support;

- undertaking cross service co-ordination/case management where the person has no one to assist with this;

- the development of crisis management plans in collaboration with the person; and

- effective approaches to address and balance the issues associated with the release of client information to other services and rights to confidentiality.

DIVERSE APPROACHES

There is a diversity of approaches for linking housing and support services, some specifically developed for people with a mental illness, while others are generic approaches which include people with a mental illness among those being assisted. Different approaches identified include:

- housing formally linked to off-site support services;

- interdepartmental agreements/protocols;

- support packages or programmes targeted to tenants of particular low cost housing;

- rights to nominate tenants to particular housing in return for giving guaranteed support to help sustain their tenancy;

- co-ordination through general case management/care coordination programmes;

- provision of on-site support – this can be at various levels of intensity; and

- service co-ordination in local service networks where services work together to increase the level of co-ordination of different services provided to individual clients.

The effectiveness of particular approaches depends in part on how they are implemented, the level of commitment by the parties involved to achieving good outcomes for clients, the capacities of the staff involved and the level of resources available.

It is important to have a diversity of approaches, so that people have choices and there is an ability to respond to people's varied needs and circumstances. However, the current diversity is often not planned, but the result of decisions made in many different programme areas or

services, without necessarily any reference to what is happening in other areas. More co-ordinated planning across government programmes could provide an appropriate balance of models within local areas.

EXAMPLES FROM VICTORIA

In Victoria, the **Victorian Housing and Support Programme** (HASP) is an example of an effective approach to achieving sustainable tenancies for people with a mental illness. Key features important to its success include co-operative cross-department/division planning, sufficient and reliable support services, protocols outlining working relationships between the housing and support services and effective ways to obtain client permission for release of information. Good working relationships between local housing officers and psychiatric disability support service staff are central to its successful operation.

The general **public housing programme** achieves effective links between housing and support for some individuals – but not all. The knowledge and skills of housing officers, processes to address issues related to the release of client information, diversity in housing stock and the timely availability of both housing and support are identified as factors that achieve better outcomes for clients.

The smaller scale, scope and often more specialised knowledge of tenant needs in **community housing**, as well as the capacity to develop locally tailored processes, enhances their ability to achieve effective co-ordination between housing and support. In contrast, there are considerable difficulties in achieving effective linkages to support housing stability in **private rental** housing, which is often both unaffordable and inappropriate.

REDUCING COMPLEXITY

Reducing the complexity of the current array of programmes and services would help to achieve more effective co-ordination between the services. It should remain a long-term goal.

Working to support more effective linkages between housing and support for individuals is a responsibility across the service system, as people with a mental illness are found amongst the client groups of many services. Specialist services and formally integrated housing and support services are very important but can usually only partially address the level of need in the community.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Strong leadership and the development of more collaborative and co-ordinated approaches are required from both Commonwealth and State Governments to tackle the factors that currently inhibit the ability to achieve effective co-ordination for people living with a mental illness who require linkages between housing and support.

- Different approaches to co-ordination are possible at five different levels of the service system. These levels are:
  – **Arrangements between Commonwealth and State Governments.** There is considerable potential in the framing and negotiation of Commonwealth/State agreements for different programme areas to acknowledge the inter-connection of different programmes and to formally set out expectations about how co-ordination with other programme areas should occur.
  – **Government handling its own business.** Governments can contribute to better co-ordination for individuals. They can, for example, develop broad policies supporting enhanced co-ordination in government activities, co-locate linked programmes or services in particular departments and establish inter-departmental tasks groups.
  – **Government as a designer of programmes and funder of services provided by others.** Government departments and programme areas can influence coordinated service delivery for individuals through programme design, guidelines for programme delivery, establishing performance measures and accountability requirements.
  – **Local service networks.** How services in a local service network work together can have a major impact on the achievement of co-ordinated support approaches for common clients. Regular service network meetings, co-location of services and the development of formal interagency protocols are just some examples of approaches that can influence the degree of service co-ordination provided to individuals.
  – **Individual services.** Examples include seeking funding to provide a range of related services, the development of operating policies and practices that require co-operative approaches with other agencies, and a housing provider developing support protocols for tenants with local agencies.

- Identifying different options for improving linkages at each level of the service system will apply equally to people with mental illnesses and to other groups.

- At all levels of the service system, it is **people** who can make important contributions by taking whatever opportunities are available to contribute to more co-ordinated individual responses. To support this, there is a need for those who work in these areas to have an improved understanding about how each sector works to support people living with a mental illness and the strategies possible to enhance current approaches.

- In designing and funding housing and support services for people with a mental illness, attention needs to be given to the incorporation of the particular features that are outlined in this report, under the heading *Understanding key elements of effective service responses*.

- It is important to develop strategies to improve the ability of generic services to effectively support people with a mental illness. Generic services provide support to people with mental illnesses, among other clients. Service staff should have information and training on mental illness and its impacts, and programme and service development support should be available, as well as opportunities for agencies or individuals with specialist knowledge of mental illness to consult to generic services.

- Current approaches tend to be the result of ad hoc and unco-ordinated decision making by various levels of government and different government programmes. There appears to be considerable variation between geographic areas in the range of options available. More co-ordinated approaches to planning across spheres of government and different programme areas is required to ensure each local area has a balanced range of service models/approaches available for linking housing and support.

In addition, there is a need to address several underlying issues. They are:

- **Inadequate levels of housing and support.** The capacity to achieve effective co-ordination requires sufficient supply of the services that need to be co-ordinated. The severe shortage of secure, affordable and appropriate housing in many areas creates major problems in this regard, as does the inability to provide support in a timely way and at an appropriate level.

- **A lack of recognition of the potential costs of NOT providing more, and more effectively co-ordinated, housing and support.** Many people with a mental illness are revolving through the justice, health and/or SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme) system, presumably at a very high cost to government and at a major cost to the person's own

wellbeing and future life options. The cost-effectiveness of linked housing and support for these people should be examined in an Australian context.

- **Strengthening the focus of social housing on achieving sustainable tenancies.** This would make it more likely that they would develop policies and practices that supported people with complex needs to maintain their tenancies. Housing managers are likely to give greater priority to both planning how their housing service works with support services, and to ensuring sufficient knowledge and resources are available to support tenants to maintain their tenancies, when achieving stable tenancies is an explicit aim of the service.

- **Addressing the discrimination that affects the options open to people with a mental illness.** Community prejudice and discrimination can have major impacts on the ability of some people with a mental illness to access and sustain stable housing. Broad community development and information strategies about mental illness are an important adjunct to support initiatives to achieve better integration between housing and support and stable tenancies

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about this project, the following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Work in Progress Report
- Final Report

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