

LAWWEEK
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W+K on COVID-19 and homelessness

In acknowledgement of Law Week 2020, Wotton + Kearney is highlighting the important work that our pro bono and community partners are doing to support people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in some of our key areas of focus.

On the most recent census night in 2016, over 116,000 Australians were homeless. This figure is likely to significantly increase with the impact of COVID-19. More people than ever before are at risk of homelessness due to job losses, especially those not eligible for government financial assistance. Even with the generous government coronavirus support measures in place, Anglicare's recent Rental Affordability Snapshot has shown that only 1.5% of available rental properties are affordable to those on JobSeeker Payment despite the COVID-19 supplement.

With only 7% of people who are homeless sleeping rough on the streets, the vast majority of people who are homeless are in supported accommodation, staying temporarily with other households, in boarding houses or other temporary lodgings. A significant 44% or over 51,000 people are in severely overcrowded dwellings. People experiencing homelessness in insecure and overcrowded living situations are at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 as they cannot self-isolate.

For those sleeping rough, being in cold, damp environments, particularly for those with existing health conditions, makes them especially vulnerable to the health impacts of COVID-19.

Domestic and family violence, which has reportedly increased during the pandemic, is a leading cause of homelessness in Australia with over 120,000 people experiencing domestic violence seeking help from specialist homelessness services each year. At the same time, the risk of becoming a rough sleeper has increased as COVID-19 restrictions have limited the numbers of people able to be housed in shelters and people who may have previously offered a couch to someone at risk have now closed their doors to non-family members in order to maintain social distancing.

As face-to-face services close, many homeless people will have no way to access services if they are not reliably connected to the internet. As housing is a state responsibility there has been no uniform Australian approach to address this issue. Many state governments are increasing funding to move people experiencing homelessness into vacant hotels, but this is a short-term solution for a limited number of people. Particularly as colder weather approaches it becomes even more critical to find a durable longer-term solution.

On 29 March 2020, the Federal Government announced a 6-month moratorium on evictions to ease the burden faced by renters during the peak of COVID-19. However, the implementation of the moratorium differs from state to state. For example, the Northern Territory has not yet implemented the national cabinet agreement, instead opting for changes to notice periods. This decision puts their residents at a greater risk of homelessness which is particularly alarming as their homelessness rate is approximately 12 times the national average and approximately half the population of the Northern Territory are renters.

Everybody's Home is a nationwide campaign aimed to address inequalities in Australia's housing system and ensure that COVID-19 does not exacerbate homelessness or the difficulties already faced by renters. Everybody's Home is calling for a bipartisan approach to fixing the problems in the housing system and proposes that the government invests in 500,000 affordable houses and creates a national plan to end homelessness in 10 years. Their three priorities during the COVID-19 outbreak are to house rough sleepers in hotels, ensure renters do not become homeless, and provide opportunities for those living in shared accommodation to self-isolate if needed.

SUPPORT FROM W+K

Wotton + Kearney's Melbourne office has a close and longstanding relationship with Launch Housing, an organisation that aims to end homelessness and provides crisis accommodation, as well as support to those experiencing homelessness. Launch Housing has created a COVID-19 taskforce that aims to address issues that have arisen or been heightened by the virus.

As well as keeping its crisis centres open and operating the only 7-day a week outreach service to rough sleepers, Launch Housing is currently supporting about 1,000 people in emergency motel and hotel accommodation who have been temporarily housed due to the virus. Of this group, 72 per cent had been sleeping rough, living on trains, in cars or squatting and had high housing needs prior to the outbreak. Women who left a family violence situation with an immediate risk of injury to themselves or their children, are also among this group. Launch Housing CEO Bevan Warner is now advocating for more permanent housing solutions in an attempt to stop this highly vulnerable group from exiting back into street homelessness.

Launch Housing also offer a Private Rental Assistance program which gives those at risk of homelessness financial assistance to help them secure and maintain their rental accommodation.

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W+K is proud to partner with Launch Housing and contribute to ensuring that COVID-19 does not affect Launch Housing's ability provide their invaluable services, providing support though donations to the crisis centre.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Now more than ever you have an ability to make a difference! Below are some tips on how you can support those who are currently experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness in our community during COVID-19:

- **Donate** – Launch Housing's Southbank Centre is currently requesting donations of personal protective equipment, non-perishable foods, grocery/retail vouchers and more. Launch Housing as a whole is also running a fundraising appeal to raise funds for their Coronavirus Homeless Crisis Fund. See <https://www.launchhousing.org.au/donate-now/> or email supporters@launchhousing.org.au.
- **Sign a petition** – Everybody's Home have created a new online petition to virtually sign which asks PM Scott Morrison and opposition leader Anthony Albanese to ensure that COVID-19 does not lead to homelessness or evictions, and you are also able to sign their ongoing petition to fix Australia's housing system at <https://everybodyshome.com.au/>.

Contact us

For more information please contact us.



Heidi Nash-Smith

Partner – Pro Bono and Community

T: +61 2 8273 9975

E: heidi.nash-smith@wottonkearney.com.au