

17 March 2017

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Proposed Activities (Public Amenity and Security) Local Law 2017

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Proposed Activities (Public Amenity and Security) Local Law 2017.

The APS believes that access to adequate, safe, affordable housing is a fundamental right that forms the basis for achieving individual and community wellbeing, which are central tenets of psychology.

Australian psychologists are concerned about the growing number of people who on any given night are homeless, and the increasing number of people who lack stable accommodation. In 2009 the APS convened a Homelessness Roundtable to inform the Society's response to what the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, identified as a nationwide crisis. The outcomes of the Roundtable were subsequently published in a special issue of *InPsych* (October 2009).

Homelessness: a psychological perspective

Key pathways to homelessness include poverty, experiencing homelessness as a child, social exclusion (e.g., racial discrimination), individual factors like substance use, transitions (e.g., from jail, from inpatient psychiatric services, birth of first child, relationship breakdown, redundancy/retirement), climate change, colonisation and structural issues (e.g., insufficient housing stock).

As well as being a fundamental human right, adequate, safe and secure housing provides a foundation for individuals and families to develop a sense of identity and belonging, and is broadly recognised as essential to individual and community wellbeing.

By contrast, homelessness involves not having a stable 'base' from which to anchor one's life, one's sense of self of identity, and sense of community.

Homelessness denies people the right to shelter and safety, disrupts the connections they have with their family and communities, and is also associated with a sense of not 'belonging', not being valued and being excluded from social and community life (Shinn, 2009).

The sense of marginalisation and alienation from mainstream society that inevitably arises from homelessness also has profound effects upon the physical and mental health of those experiencing such homelessness (Frankish et al., 2005). The psychological effects of homelessness over prolonged periods of time are extremely detrimental to a person's mental health, sense of worth, ability to form and maintain healthy relationships, and ability to deal effectively with stress and utilise helpful coping strategies that might otherwise help them to break the cycle of homelessness.

There are particularly detrimental outcomes for marginalised individuals and groups who are likely to experience homelessness and who have complex support and housing needs, such as those living with a mental illness, single-parent families facing homelessness, Indigenous people and young people. In addition, individuals facing important transitions are at specific risk of homelessness, and therefore require support if secure housing is to be achieved.

Responding to the proposed amendment

The APS is concerned that the Proposed Activities (Public Amenity and Security) Local Law 2017 will negatively impact on those experiencing homelessness, making an already vulnerable group less safe and more at risk.

Broadening the ban on camping and providing for confiscation and disposal of unattended items, along with fines for leaving items unattended and increased powers to 'move people on' if they fail to comply, mean that people experiencing homelessness in the CBD will be forced to relocate to less safe (more hidden) areas within the city, or to the outskirts of, or outside the city. This may result in a higher risk of them being physically and psychologically unsafe, feeling more isolated and less connected to their community, and less able to access services and supports that are essential for their survival and necessary for them to exit homelessness. For example, the Council's own survey 'StreetCount 2016' found that 72% of those surveyed intended to seek assistance or a meal at a homelessness service later that day. Most such services nominated were located within the City of Melbourne.

The APS recognises the important and challenging dual role that the Council has in protecting safety and public amenity, while working to support those who are homeless, and we acknowledge the City of Melbourne's role in positively working with homelessness services and police in the past. However, the APS strongly believes that tackling the drivers of homelessness, along with increased access to services and secure housing, will be more effective in addressing the problem in the longer term than these proposed measures. For example, research undertaken by community psychologist Professor Shinn, who has more than 30 years' experience as a researcher of homelessness prevention, policy and services, has found that 'housing first' approaches, which focus on housing people in long-term housing with support, and providing housing subsidies (which could include help to find housing and an ongoing subsidy to make rent

30 per cent of the household's income), delivered the best results when it came to stabilising families and ending homelessness.

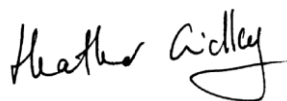
While the proposed amendment is cited as further support for the Council's disability action plan, it is important to note that a significant proportion of homeless people also have a physical disability or mental health condition. For example, people with disabilities make up about 18% of the general population but about 25% of the clients of specialist homeless services. These amendments will disproportionately impact on these extremely vulnerable groups, and therefore are not in keeping with the aims of the Council's disability plan. Should full support and inclusion of people with a disability be a priority, other actions arguably are more likely to achieve these aims.

Finally, Local Government can play a strong role in providing community leadership and in shaping and changing community perceptions and attitudes around housing, homelessness and poverty. The proposed amendments have victim-blaming undertones and send a message that homeless people have less right than others to be on our streets, and that they have other choices (to move elsewhere, to be safe etc.). Such negative attitudes inevitably lead to hardened views and treatment of people who are homeless and less support for them in the wider community.

The APS does not support this proposed amendment, and urges Council instead to work collaboratively with the city's homeless campers and their peak advocacy groups to lobby other levels of government that may be best placed to address the causes of homelessness and provide access to adequate, safe and affordable housing. Working alongside homelessness services and people who have experienced homelessness to provide the most sustainable solutions and supports that are within the Council's purview should be prioritised in this process.

For further information about our submission please contact me on 03 8662 3327.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Gridley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'G' at the end.

Heather Gridley
Manager, Public Interest
Australian Psychological Society

About the APS

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the national professional organisation for psychologists with over 22,000 members across Australia. Psychologists are experts in human behaviour and bring experience in understanding crucial components necessary to support people to optimise their function in the community.

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. Psychology in the Public Interest is the section of the APS dedicated to the communication and application of psychological knowledge to enhance community wellbeing and promote equitable and just treatment of all segments of society.

Psychologists regard people as intrinsically valuable and respect their rights, including the right to autonomy and justice. Psychologists engage in conduct which promotes equity and the protection of people's human rights, legal rights, and moral rights (APS, 2007). Underpinning this contribution is the strong evidence linking human rights, material circumstances and psychological health.

APS activities addressing homelessness

The APS has been [active in addressing homelessness](#) from a psychological perspective, identifying specific vulnerable groups with complex needs who are particularly affected by homelessness. Since the Australian Government prioritised homelessness in 2008, we have hosted a roundtable on homelessness for 30 psychologists and other professionals working with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in 2009 and prepared a number of submissions to the Australian Government's papers and inquiries into homelessness, as well as submitting to some state-based inquiries.

While the role of psychologists in the homelessness field is not as visible as that of some other professions, psychology does have much to offer, both around the provision of psychological services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and also in program design and evaluation, research, and influencing attitudes towards homelessness in general. Our consultations have identified a need for researchers and practitioners to form cross-disciplinary partnerships, to be informed by and build on past research, and to identify and contribute to those areas that are yet to be investigated.

The APS commitment to addressing homelessness includes educating our own members on the ways in which mental health, family violence, poverty and life transition crises can amplify the risk of homelessness and exacerbate its effects.

Further information

For more information on psychological perspectives on homelessness, including research and references cited above, please visit -

<http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/highlights2009/#s2>