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MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF A
MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

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This paper analyses a State government response to homelessness that included improving the coordination of services by nine State agencies. There are many complexities involved in successfully addressing homelessness. In addition to the number of State agencies involved, there is a significant role performed by the Commonwealth government and non-government organisations. The agencies responsible for a large number of initiatives that operate at different levels and in different ways. More generally, there is a complex web of factors contributing to homelessness.

The government's response to a Task Force report required the development of an overarching performance indicator framework, regular public reporting of progress of initiatives and performance indicator trends and the conduct of evaluations. The evaluations recognised the complexity of the system being reviewed and adopted specific strategies to address these. They built on the reported performance indicators and this is a further distinctive feature of this case study. This approach appears to have met the needs of stakeholder groups to gain insights into the progress of the government's initiatives and has provided insights into the contribution of these initiatives to addressing homelessness.

ORIGINS

This initiative commenced with the creation of a Task Force by the Western Australian State government. This was an election commitment in recognition of the increasing problem that homelessness represented to the State.

The State Homelessness Taskforce was established in July 2001 with members appointed on the basis of their individual expertise and commitment to people who are homeless, in addition to their ability to access networks. It included regional, metropolitan, government, non-government and aboriginal representation.

The Terms of Reference included developing a plan of action for the whole-of-government and community, incorporating practical responses to issues such as the prevention of homelessness, the provision of effective support for those who are homeless and those attempting to maintain accommodation after an instance of homelessness.

The Taskforce was also to "Provide advice on the development of benchmarks and social indicators relating to homelessness" and recommend a "Plan to monitor the progress of the implementation strategy".

It undertook extensive consultation and analysis and developed a "model of operation" that identified the essential nature of affordable housing and a continuum of support. Key elements included Pathways to opportunity, Long term housing/home, Support to access and maintaining housing, and Emergency supported accommodation.

The Taskforce reported to the Government in January 2002. "Addressing Homelessness in Western Australia" contained 68 recommendations relating primarily to nine State agencies (WA State Homelessness Taskforce 2002).

In terms of monitoring progress, it recommended that implementation include tracking the extent to which the Actions have been implemented. It also called for Independent Review:

"The non-government sector is keen to see an independent review undertaken after a two-year period to assess the outcomes for people who are homeless. This is viewed as part of open government and the commitment to work in partnership with the community. The Taskforce recommends that an independent review of the implementation be conducted through a relevant government agency such as Treasury after a two-year period."

In May 2002 the State government responded to the Taskforce report accepting the majority of recommendations. (WA Government 2002). This report has become known as the State Homelessness Strategy. It identified that the government has committed around $20 million over 4 years to address homelessness issues since the Taskforce commence in July 2001, and committed to a further $32 million over the four years 2001-02 to 2005-06 for a set of initiatives including an immediate injection of $10.5 million into public housing and $7 million to assist public and private sector tenants to keep their housing.

The report recognised the complex environment and circumstances surrounding homelessness. For instance, it noted that people who are homeless have typically experienced difficulties in their lives and that often homelessness arises because of these difficulties including family conflict, mental illness, interruptions to stability through imprisonment, long term care or institutional living, family violence, and problematic alcohol and other drug use. It noted that these issues must be well understood to develop effective responses to complex social issues such as homelessness, and that "for the first time, the combined resources of the community sector are to be drawn into a concerted and holistic response."

The three themes of the Government's response to the Taskforce's recommendations were identified as: Better options for housing; Vulnerability and transition and Stability in housing.

In response to the Taskforce recommendation of establishing an Implementation Committee, the government undertook to establish "a community and Government Committee to monitor the implementation of these initiatives". The Committee was also to be responsible for developing indicators to measure the Government's performance in responding to the Taskforce's recommendations and alleviating homelessness. It was to report on progress to a Cabinet Standing Committee and send copies of progress reports to the Western Australian Council of Social Service. An Evaluation Report on the implementation of the recommendations was to be submitted to Cabinet by the end of 2003.

One of the recommendations that was acted on almost immediately was the establishment of the monitoring committee to oversee and report on the implementation of the State Homelessness Strategy. The terms of reference were

To monitor the implementation of the Government response to the Report of the State Homelessness Taskforce.

To develop performance indicators to measure Government performance in responding to the Taskforce recommendations.

To prepare an annual report to Cabinet Standing Committee on Social Policy, against these performance indicators, with the first report due in May 2003.

To prepare an evaluation report on the implementation of the recommendations for submission to Cabinet in December 2003.

The Monitoring Committee membership included representatives of five key departments: the Department for Community Development, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Housing and Works, the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, Mental Health Division. The then President of the WA Council of Social Services (WACOSS) and Chairperson of the State Homelessness Taskforce was appointed as a member and other members were drawn from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the Office of the Auditor General[2]. It met regularly and its major outputs were: twelve Quarterly Implementation Progress Reports between October 2002 and December 2005; three Performance Indicator Reports in June 2000 and 3, 2004 and 2005; two Evaluation Reports in 2003 and 2006, and a Committee response to the 2003 evaluation released in March 2004.

THE EVALUATION APPROACH
Evaluations were conducted of the WA State Homelessness Strategy in 2003 and 2006, both reports making both positive comments and identifying significant areas for improvement (Cummings and Moir 2003, Estill & Associates 2006). .

First Evaluation
This "Evaluation Study" described itself as focusing "primarily on formative issues, that is on improving processes rather than evaluating success". It sought to address six key questions:
1. Implementation - were the initiatives outlined in the Government Response implemented as planned?
2. Timeliness - has the implementation of the initiatives being timely?
3. Short-falls - have there been any short-falls in the implementation?
4. Impacts - have there been any unintended consequences (positive or negative) of the implementation process?
5. Program logic - what is the program logic underpinning the implementation?
6. Performance indicators - are the performance indicators useful and sufficient?

It concluded that initiatives requiring the development of strategies or the forging of agreements had generally made satisfactory progress but that progress on initiatives involving legislation, policies or systems has been a little more mixed. Two notable exceptions were the lack of progress on the development of the system to monitor evictions due to antisocial behaviour and a funding shortfall reported to be leading to a delay in the promotion and implementation of responsible discharge planning for people leaving hospital care. Furthermore, it found that overall, both government and non-government stakeholders interviewed reported that progress on the initiatives was satisfactory.

With regard to performance indicators, it was found that nearly all those developed by the Monitoring Committee were useful to the extent that they can be measured using reliable data and that nearly all the stakeholders interviewed found indicators to be useful for monitoring the overall strategy. It also found that indicators met a sufficiency test in that they covered the important areas of the Government's response and provided good coverage at the strategic level.

Areas which were identified as warranting further consideration were:
- "there is no mechanism for showing what other initiatives might be beneficial;
- there is no formal mechanism to systematically identify new initiatives which have been undertaken outside the strategy;
- these are developmental performance indicators so need to improve as more is learned; and
- there is no single measure of the level of homelessness although developments in this area by the Australian Bureau of Statistics are being monitored."

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[2] For much of its life the OAG member who participated as an observer basis was the author of this paper.

The evaluation discussed a draft Program Logic Model that had been developed on behalf of the Monitoring Committee with a range of key stakeholders. Based on this feedback and analysis the evaluators presented a final Model (Figure 1). The report noted that "This program logic is an attempt to capture the internal rationale within the Government's response", and as such is an after the event explanation of the theory of change associated with the Strategy.

The evaluation reviewed the performance indicators associated with a Hierarchy of Outcomes as developed by the Monitoring Committee. The Hierarchy had three priority outcomes, 10 Headline Indicators and 24 Strategic Change Indicators (Figure 2). The framework for reporting performance indicators built on an approach developed in Australia for the reporting of indigenous disadvantage that includes headline indicators and strategic areas of action.

Four main recommendations related to continuing efforts to ensure that agency and community support and engagement continue; strong support for cross-government strategies to further breakdown the "silo" effect and encourage practical linkages between agency systems and procedures; review of two of the performance indicators with the aim of ensuring that they could be measured adequately; and a further review of the Strategy be undertaken by the Monitoring Committee to ensure that the scope and priorities of the strategy are still appropriate.

The Monitoring Committee prepared a response to the evaluation report (2004) and this was considered by the Cabinet Standing Committee. It was agreed that the Monitoring Committee would continue until December 2005 to establish a mechanism for an evaluation of the impact of the Strategy to be completed in the second half of 2005. It was also given roles to continue monitoring the implementation of the Strategy, with a particular focus on the areas requiring further work as identified in the evaluation.

Second Evaluation
The second evaluation sought to assess the impact and effectiveness of the initiatives in the strategy. It addressed the following issues:
1. the extent to which commitments had been implemented
2. the effects of the initiatives on other major service deliverers
3. the outcomes for clients and other affected groups
4. whether funded initiatives should be continued, ceased or changed
5. whether the service system's response had improved
6. the effectiveness of the strategy and addressing the priority outcomes
7. whether the strategy had been implemented in the context of the Government's social policy agenda and how well it had been coordinated across Government.

The main elements of the evaluation methodology were a critical examination of official documentation and structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with key stakeholders.

The report identified that the evaluation was "atypical in that it is reviewing outcomes at those individual initiative and strategic levels. Given the breadth of the study and a large number of initiatives the focus has been on how the initiatives contribute to the overall Strategy, with particular emphasis on the initiatives receiving Strategy funding."

It also noted that the evaluation has components of a *monitoring evaluation* and an *impact evaluation*. The distinction drawn between the two was as follows:

Monitoring Evaluation is carried out to ensure that a project remains on track and to guide continuous improvement. In this case, this evaluation provides the opportunity for a one-off look at the project asking questions such as how can we fine-tune this project to make it more effective?

Impact Evaluation is used to assess the impact of a settled project. They focus on the extent of attainment of specified objectives, determination of the level of performance on simple outcome indicators or examining both intended and unintended outcomes. This information assists with decisions about whether to terminate the program, extended or adopt another in its place.

The main findings of the evaluation were generally positive with the majority of initiatives being assessed as having been successfully implemented or underway, and good outcomes being achieved for clients. The extracts below indicate the robustness of the evaluation and how the conclusions of the evaluation intertwined with the monitoring information through the indicator set.

Extracts of the 2006 Evaluation Report

MAJOR FINDINGS

Key Evaluation Question 1: To what extent were the commitments made in the Government Response to the State Homelessness Taskforce (Putting People First) implemented?
Work on thirty of the initiatives is completed which demonstrates a progression when compared to the 25 initiatives completed in 2003. Overall, 58 of the 67 are reported to be progressing or completed satisfactorily. The results of the evaluation reflect a general satisfaction with the Strategy as a whole amongst stakeholders.

Key Evaluation Question 6: How effective has the Strategy been in addressing the Priority Outcomes?
A program logic analysis conducted on the Hierarchy of Indicators developed at the commencement of the Strategy to measure the effectiveness of the Strategy confirmed that the initiatives are consistent with the priority outcomes. The data collected in the study, as well as client feedback and stakeholder views reported here also support this conclusion…………...

Key Evaluation Question 7: How has the Strategy been Implemented in the context of the Government's Social Policy Agenda and how well has it been coordinated across Government?
There is widespread agreement among stakeholders that the Strategy fits within the Government's social policy agenda…... While the initiatives have had some success there is still a long way to go. There are still clients who are missing out on services, there are clients who are waiting too long for services and there are clients who are still being passed from department to department.

CONCLUSION
…The evidence suggests that the service coordination and the provision of appropriate supplementary services that deal with underlying issues are beginning to break the cycle of homelessness although it is not possible at present to assess their cost effectiveness. Where current funding or policies do not provide for effective servicing, a cycle of homelessness remains as clients reappear in the service system.

Overall, the Strategy is beginning to show some positive measurable outcomes in the headline indicators….The improvements so far, however, are modest. This is to be expected because of the magnitude of the issue being addressed: the current Strategy is attempting to make changes to existing interventions and add new interventions throughout the complex social problem that is homelessness…Perhaps the biggest weakness in the implementation of the Strategy is that of improving accommodation services for individuals suffering from mental illness…..While there has been a small improvement in indicators such as Homeswest waiting lists per head of population, the absolute level of homelessness is still high and more needs to be done if it is to be substantially improved….

<div align="right">Estill & Associates (2006).</div>

The evaluation indicated that while much was achieved, much remained to be done.

As the Strategy was coming towards an end, it also became apparent that there were significant pressures on the availability of affordable housing including public housing stock linked to a natural resources driven economic boom in the State. The Government has acknowledged these pressures and indicated that it is seeking to address them. As the website for the 2006 evaluation notes:

In 2006, the booming economy is placing more people in work. More people are able to move into their own place, either rented or purchased. More people want housing. There is real pressure on the housing sector. Materials and skilled labour are in short supply. Costs are increasing to buy and build properties and rents are rising. People with minimal resources, both financial and personal are being squeezed out at the bottom end of the housing market. This places an added strain on the safety net services.

EVALUATION LINKED TO MONITORING

An important and distinctive feature of the implementation process for the State Homelessness Strategy has been the intertwining of monitoring and evaluation. The World Bank has been a prominent proponent of the complementarity between monitoring and evaluation (Kusek and Rist 2004), and the WA homelessness implementation exercise warrants detailed consideration because it illustrates the benefits of a synergistic relationship between the two. A section of the 2006 evaluation specifically addresses the Evaluation Question "How effective has the Strategy been in addressing the Priority Outcomes?" by reviewing performance indicator information collected and reported as the "Hierarchy of Indicators" that were developed at the commencement of the Strategy (Estill & Associates 2006).

The conclusions section of the second evaluation indicates how it is intertwined with the monitoring information through the indicator set:

> Overall, the Strategy is beginning to show some positive measurable outcomes in the headline indicators….The improvements so far, however, are modest. This is to be expected because of the magnitude of the issue being addressed: the current Strategy is attempting to make changes to existing interventions and add new interventions throughout the complex social problem that is homelessness….While there has been a small improvement in indicators such as Homeswest waiting lists per head of population, the absolute level of homelessness is still high and more needs to be done if it is to be substantially improved….

The relative sophistication of the approach can be identified from the findings of a recent report of the Auditor-General of New South Wales (2007) who found that "… we were unable to determine how well the government is responding to homelessness statewide. This is because there are no statewide performance measures or targets on homelessness. Also there is limited benchmarking, and no formal means of spreading information on homelessness initiatives and projects."

The approach does however entail risks of over-simplifying a complex situation and creating a view that attribution has been resolved.

Other analytical frameworks can also make an important contribution. For instance, the framework used to assist in the development of a housing strategy shown in Figure 3 identifies the main Demand Drivers and Supply Drivers and the main Interventions available (WA Department of Housing and Works 2005). The report notes that

> "The diagram recognises the multifaceted nature of housing. That is, its role in providing shelter, its wealth implications, the focus of social life, and as a major economic driver. This is all set within a market characterised by supply and demand factors and numerous government interventions. Any assessment of the capacity of the States housing system to meet the requirements of its citizens over the next 25 years requires an examination of the two major factors which determine the state of the system-demand and supply."

EVALUATION AND ATTRIBUTION

Attribution in simple terms is about causality, about answering the question "are observed results the consequence of the intervention rather than other programs or external factors?". Mayne (2001) talks about "the problem of attribution" and notes that more difficult than measuring outcomes is determining just what contribution a specific program made to the outcome, and how much of the success (or failure) can be attributed to the program. He notes that this is an issue that cannot be ignored, because without an answer little can be said about the worth of a program, nor can advice be provided about future directions. Pinpointing causality between individual interventions and outcomes is in most cases problematic, and doing so for a multiplicity of interventions is nigh on impossible.

The State Homelessness Strategy is typical of many interventions in the social arena in being complex as a result of multiple interventions operating at different levels in different ways, and having multiple stakeholders. It was also problematic in this case as the Strategy was at a relatively early stage being in

its fourth year. A further challenge for the second evaluation was the absence of direct measures of homelessness itself. Obtaining information about those who are at risk of becoming homeless added to this challenge.

The second evaluation sought to assess the impact and effectiveness of the initiatives in the strategy. It sought to address "whether funded initiatives should be continued, ceased or changed" which implies a need for some understanding of causality. With regard to assessing the effectiveness of the Strategy in addressing the priority outcomes, the report notes that these are long-term and that it is unlikely that the initiatives will have had a measurable impact yet. The report also noted that "Overall, the Strategy is beginning to show some positive measurable outcomes in the headline indicators….The improvements so far, however, are modest. This is to be expected because of the magnitude of the issue being addressed: the current Strategy is attempting to make changes to existing interventions and add new interventions throughout the complex social problem that is homelessness…"

The conclusions section of the evaluation indicates the level of assurance provided:
"…The evidence is that the service coordination and the provision of appropriate supplementary services that deal with underlying issues are beginning to break the cycle of homelessness although it is not possible at present to assess their cost effectiveness. Where current funding or policies do not provide for effective servicing, a cycle of homelessness remains as clients reappear in the service system."

The evaluation report observes that the evaluation is more challenging than that of a single program as many factors are at play in the same arena as the strategy.
"Political, cultural, social and economic trends act on service delivery agencies at a macro level. In addition, there are a multitude of different projects and programs at work, a multitude of organisations at work independently of any particular initiative. Should changes in social outcomes occur, the challenge is to be able to distinguish between at least three possibilities:
    1. the change is occurring because of the Strategy;
    2. the change is occurring for another reason apart from the Strategy; or
    3. the changes occurring partly due to or inspite of the Strategy."

It further notes that "while positive change in social indicators may indicate a successful strategy, it is generally impossible to map such a one-to-one relationship between activity and result. The use of professional judgment of stakeholders can be useful to help interpret data."

It can be seen that the report clearly identifies the challenges of complexity and the limitations of the evaluation. It could however have been a little clearer in articulating the approach to attribution embedded in its methodology. The approach to the attribution issue can readily be aligned with key aspects of "contribution analysis" which is based on a theory of change for the program being examined (Mayne 2001). The analysis tests this theory against logic and the evidence available on the various assumptions behind the theory of change, and examines other influencing factors. The overall aim is to reduce the uncertainty about the contribution the program is making to the observed results. The approach in the second evaluation makes a contribution to understanding causality without establishing it. Based on all the evidence it was reasonable to conclude that the program was an important contributing factor to the changes observed.

The report noted that the evaluation "has attempted to identify measurable impact where possible, and where this is not possible, it has used the program logic analysis and Hierarchy of Indicators to demonstrate changes in headline indicators which in turn that are expected to impact on the priority outcome". On this basis the report analysed each of the headline and strategic indicators and considered this analysis in conjunction with stakeholder views to formulate its findings.

The approach adopted in the second evaluation of using a logic model in conjunction with a hierarchy of performance indicators was a sound approach in the circumstances. It enabled reflection by the evaluator and stakeholders on the question of causality without making purity of approach a barrier to forward movement of the Strategy.

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Figure 1: Program Logic for Government Response to Homelessness
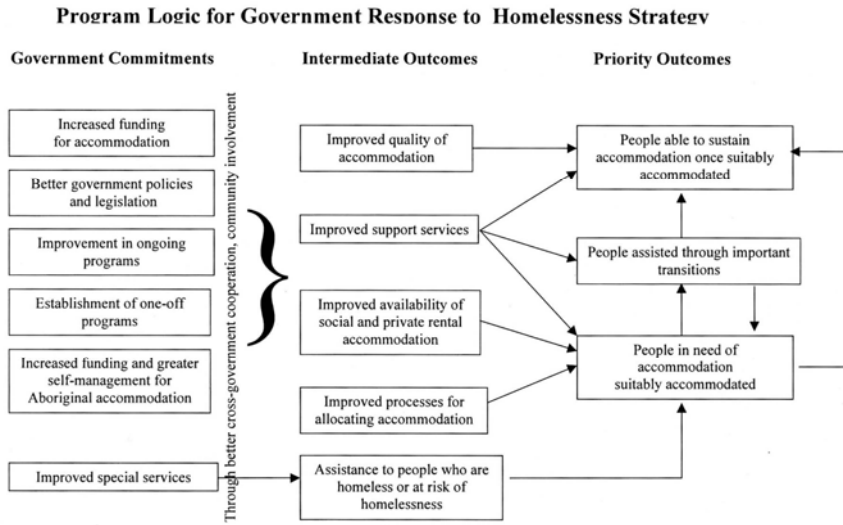
Source: Cummings, R and Moir, S (2003).

Figure 2: The Hierarchy of Indicators

Source: WA State Homelessness Strategy - Report Against Performance Indicators - As at 30 June 2005.

Figure 3 Housing Analytical Framework for Planning
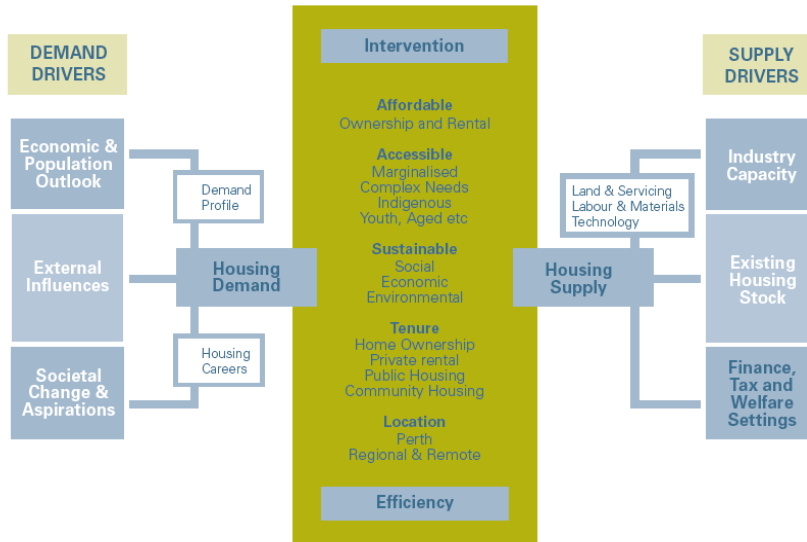
Source: WA Department of Housing and Works (2005).

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