

System under strain: new analysis from ACT Shelter shows Canberrans stuck longer in homelessness as governments urged to act now

As National Homelessness Week begins today, ACT Shelter is warning that homelessness in Canberra is becoming more entrenched as the housing crisis deepens. New analysis released by ACT Shelter shows people are spending longer in homelessness services, fewer are moving into permanent housing, and the ACT continues to record the highest rate of persistent homelessness in Australia.

The peak body for housing justice in the ACT is calling on all levels of government to act on this year's national theme, *Homelessness Action Now*, warning that without urgent investment in social housing supply and homelessness prevention, the territory's already-strained system will come under further pressure.

"Homelessness is not a personal failure – it is a policy failure," said ACT Shelter CEO, Corinne Dobson. "Most people don't become homeless overnight. It often begins with a rent increase, a lost job, family violence, illness or relationship breakdown. Without the right support at the right time, a temporary crisis can quickly become homelessness."

ACT Shelter's new briefing, drawing on the latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data, finds that homelessness services are supporting fewer people each year, not because community need has fallen, but primarily because people are remaining in the system much longer as they struggle to secure affordable or social housing.

Key findings with direct implications for government action:

- **People are stuck in the system for longer.** ACT clients now receive a median of 117 days of support – more than double the national median of 58 days – and spend a median of 150 nights in supported accommodation, compared with 34 nights nationally.
- **The ACT has the highest rate of persistent homelessness in Australia** – 37.7% of clients, against 27.4% nationally.
- **Prevention is going backwards.** Most people presenting to services are already homeless, while the share of at-risk Canberrans successfully helped to avoid homelessness has fallen, from 77.9% to 69.2% since 2021–22, while returning to homelessness after being housed has climbed from 10.6% to 13.2% – both trends moving the wrong way compared to the rest of the country.
- **The housing pathway is blocked at the top.** More than half of ACT clients (51.9%) need long-term housing, but only 9.3% actually get it – leaving the majority of that need unmet.
- **Housing affordability is now the number one reason people seek help** – 61% of ACT clients, against 36% nationally – overtaking every other reason since 2023 in the clearest structural shift in eight years of data.
- **Working Canberrans are being pushed into the system.** Around one in five people seeking help are in paid employment when they first present – the highest rate of any state or territory – showing housing costs alone are enough to tip people into crisis.

- **Real investment is going backwards even as need intensifies.** ACT government recurrent expenditure on homelessness services has fallen 6.7% in real terms since peaking in 2021–22.

"Frontline homelessness services in the ACT do an extraordinary job, but they are being asked to do the impossible – help more people with more complex needs, for longer, with a shrinking supply of housing to move people into," Ms Dobson said.

"You cannot end homelessness without the homes to put people into. Increasing the supply of social and affordable housing at scale has to be the first-order priority for both the ACT and Commonwealth governments.

"Our homelessness services are increasingly occupied by people who have nowhere affordable to move on to. That creates bottlenecks throughout the system, leaving fewer places for people newly facing homelessness. Crisis services are carrying the weight of a housing system that isn't delivering enough affordable homes.

"But we also need to do more to catch people earlier. With the right support at the right time, we can stop a crisis becoming a homelessness episode. Right now, our system is set up almost entirely to respond after the fact, not to prevent it happening at all."

ACT Shelter is calling on the ACT and Commonwealth Governments to work together to:

- significantly increase the supply of social and affordable housing;
- increase investment in homelessness prevention and early intervention, so people receive help before losing their home;
- strengthen tenancy sustainment and rental support;
- expand access to integrated mental health, family violence and other wraparound supports; and
- ensure homelessness services are adequately resourced to meet growing demand.

"Every person deserves a safe, secure and affordable home," Ms Dobson said.

"The solutions to homelessness are well understood. What has been missing is the political urgency to deliver them at the scale required. This National Homelessness Week, ACT Shelter is calling on governments to move beyond managing homelessness and start ending it."

To view the factsheet: https://actshelter.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/Homelessness-in-the-ACT_Briefing_August2026.pdf

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ACT Shelter is a not-for-profit peak body providing an informed and independent voice on housing policy issues affecting the ability of Canberrans on low, moderate or no incomes to have an affordable, safe and secure home.