

Section 2: Access to support for people experiencing homelessness

Standard 2.1 **Access to the homelessness service system**

Standard 2.2 **Initial assessment**

Standard 2.3 **Effective referrals**

Overview and issues in this section

People accessing the homelessness service system are generally considered to be in crisis, or at risk of experiencing homelessness or family violence. The homelessness assistance sector operates as a safety net—thus, access and service responsiveness are key issues.

The standards in this section seek to cover the diverse approaches that may exist at this time. At a minimum, there is an expectation that a person approaching any funded organisation will be offered a service. People, who approach an organisation for assistance, will at a minimum be offered a screening service that provides them with information and/or active referral/s. In instances where people initially approach the most appropriate organisation, a full initial assessment will be conducted. Responses should not be limited to what a single agency can provide, but should consider what other support might be available within the broader homelessness service system and from other agencies that might assist them. The Domestic Violence Victoria, Code of Practice (June 2006) further supports the standards by articulating a model for consistent and transparent practice to enhance the safety of women and children.

Consultation with people accessing the service system has found that the current homelessness system can be confusing and difficult to navigate. Some people may approach numerous organisations before gaining entry to a service that can meet their needs, having told their story repeatedly in the process. To address these issues, the Office of Housing has implemented a number of sector development initiatives designed to strengthen the service system. A stronger service system for the future will feature enhanced access and coordination across all housing support services through designated entry points. In addition, the implementation of common homelessness assessment and referral practices and a common risk assessment framework for family violence services will greatly enhance service provision.

Documents that further support this standard include:

Code of Practice for Specialist Family Violence Services for Women and Children
(Domestic Violence Victoria 2006)

Common Risk Assessment Framework for Family Violence Services in Victoria
(Department of Human Services, under development 2006)

Statewide Homelessness Assessment and Referral Framework (Department of Human Services, under development 2006)

The Protocol for the Case management of Unsupported Young People (Commonwealth and States)

Standard 2.1: Access to the homelessness service system

People are actively assisted to access the most appropriate service within the homelessness service system.

People experiencing or are at risk of homelessness or family violence, need quick access to appropriate services.

The following features and examples are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive, but rather give some guidance to services in how to achieve this standard.

Documentation that can support good practice

Signposts of good practice

2.1.1

The organisation has documented its commitment to proactively assisting people at risk of or experiencing homelessness or family violence to access the services they need.

2.1.2

The organisation provides people with appropriate documentation about the service system and how to access services.

2.1.3

The organisation has documented systems that provide adequate guidance to staff in providing housing information, advice and referral.

Further explanation and examples

Commitment to improving access

Organisations should demonstrate this commitment through a range of documents including; mission and value statements, policies, procedures and business plans. This commitment would need to encompass both internal work and work in collaboration with other parts of the service system.

Information for people on how to access the system

Written information needs to be presented in a form to suit the target group, such as in appropriate community languages. Documentation should include:

- details of local housing, homelessness and family violence services
- details of appropriate state-wide services,
- emergency after-hours contact arrangements
- an overview of services offered by the funded organisation
- any fees attached to services
- hours of operation.

Documentation to guide staff in providing housing information, referral and advice

Documentation could detail:

- standard response times
- risk management processes
- guidelines for distribution of financial assistance
- resource and service directories
- privacy procedures
- eligibility guidelines for other services
- housing and bond application forms
- referral forms
- written protocols with other agencies (where appropriate).

Signposts of good practice

2.1.4

The organisation helps all people seeking assistance to gain access to the service system.

2.1.5

The organisation provides up-to-date and accurate information about its own services and how to access them, to other parts of the homelessness services system.

2.1.6

The organisation actively participates in service networks to create coordinated pathways for people accessing services.

2.1.7

Relevant organisational staff demonstrate extensive knowledge of local and statewide funded organisations, including organisations that deliver secondary service responses.

Further explanation and examples

Helping people to access the system

Where an organisation operates within 'catchment' or geographical boundaries or for specific target groups and is approached by someone outside these criteria, each person should at least be screened and assisted with an active referral. The overarching principles contained in the Statewide Homelessness Assessment and Referral Framework (underdevelopment 2006) and the development of Local Area Service Networks further guide and strengthen this coordinated approach.

A coordinated approach would mean funded organisations in a defined area or that work with specific population groups, will offer an assessment which includes information about relevant services and an active referral to access other services where appropriate. The initial assessment process may be offered through telephone contact with the person seeking assistance or as a face-to-face interview.

The organisations strong participation in local networks will be a critical factor to ensuring consumers receive appropriate information and access to services.

Informing the service system about the organisation

Organisations should distribute timely information to other key stakeholders detailing any changes to program or service provision including crisis accommodation or housing vacancies, support vacancies and brokerage resources.

Participating in service networks

Organisational and service system capacity can be enhanced through participation in local service and community networks. Organisations who share information and resources provide greater equity, access and transparency of services for people in need.

Staff knowledge of the service system

To provide effective services, relevant staff will need a sound knowledge of affordable housing, homelessness, family violence and other relevant Government and community based program responses. This would include developing relationships with:

- private sector accommodation providers including real estate agents, caravan parks and motels
- Public Housing Area Office's long term and transitional community housing providers including Housing Associations and other Registered Housing providers
- funded homelessness and family violence crisis accommodation and support services

- and
- other income, education, employment, training and health programs.

Staff must be able to demonstrate well developed knowledge of assessment processes, including risk assessment, resource allocation and prioritisation methods, and:

- knowledge of the information people will need to provide to gain housing or support
- a detailed understanding of housing eligibility, application and allocation procedures (if providing a Housing Information and Referral and Transitional Housing Management function)
- an up-to-date database or information file on services.

Small agencies with fewer resources might need to be more creative in how they build their data or knowledge base. This could involve working in partnership with other larger agencies or providers or using regional resource staff.

2.1.8

The organisation has operating systems that ensure people have timely access to assistance.

Ensuring timely access to assistance

For organisations with a formal initial assessment and planning role (such as, front door services or HIR services), operating systems that impact on the timeliness of access could include:

- effective telephone systems that queue callers and provide information while waiting or help after hours
- hours of operation that are linked to peak usage periods and fulfil funding requirements
- a spread of staff hours to ensure maximum coverage for peak periods
- various means of accessing the service, including by telephone, appointment and drop-in
- set and monitored maximum waiting times for access on a regular basis
- using brokerage funds to provide access to outlying areas or outside usual hours of service.

For organisations whose primary role is to provide a support service, operating systems might include:

- a message machine referring people to help outside operating hours
- access to brokerage funds for the provision of crisis accommodation
- follow-up procedures for people who have asked for assistance out-of-hours (where people request this).

Signposts of good practice

Further explanation and examples

2.1.9

The organisation monitors its ability to find suitable responses to people's needs.

Monitoring assistance

Monitoring could include:

- periodic audits of the appropriateness of referrals made to and received from other organisations
- feedback from people about the adequacy and appropriateness of information provided by the organisation
- periodic checking that information held on the services provided by other organisations, including eligibility and referral criteria, is up to date.

Organisations should monitor their own service responses and also collaborate with other organisations, through local networks, to develop sub regional or regional strategies to improve system responses.

2.1.10

The organisation monitors the level of access people have to its programs and services.

Monitoring accessibility

Monitoring could include:

- periodic surveys of people seeking assistance
- analysis of data collected, including met and unmet needs
- analysis of waiting times or wait lists for services
- comparing consumer characteristics with those of the community being served and setting targets for inclusion
- analysis of referral feedback from other key stakeholders

Standard 2.2 Initial assessment

Each person approaching the organisation is provided with a timely, quality response in which his or her immediate needs are addressed and an appropriate service is identified.

A responsive organisation will make sure a person's immediate safety and shelter needs are addressed, while promptly identifying the right service to assist them.

The following features and examples are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive, but rather give some guidance to services in how to achieve this standard.

Documentation that can support good practice

Signposts of good practice

2.2.1

The organisation has a documented system for responding to requests for assistance and for matching people's needs with service capacity in a timely manner.

2.2.2

The organisation has a documented approach to dealing with unaccompanied young people less than 15 years of age.

Further explanation and examples

Systems for initially responding to requests for assistance

In developing an appropriate response, staff should consider the person's needs, rather than limiting assistance to what the organisation itself can provide. In attempting to meet the needs of individuals, staff should be trained in a strengths based approach that encourages people to identify goals and mobilise strengths and resources. This approach will include staff providing information about all services or resources that may be available to assist the person.

Staff will be familiar with and utilise the guidelines and tools applicable to the Statewide Common Assessment and Referral Framework and the Common Risk Assessment Framework for Specialist Family Violence Services for Women and Children (as developed 2006).

Responding to need also means not denying access to services because of a person's housing or support history. Where a person has been previously excluded from services due to outstanding debt, violence or other challenging behaviours that require a specialist response, the organisation needs to assist the person gain access to a more appropriate service.

Approaches for assisting unaccompanied young people under 15 years of age

The approach should be guided by the Protocol for the Case Management of Unsupported Young People ('the Youth Protocol'). This protocol between the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments spells out the respective expectations and responsibilities of the child protection agency and Centrelink in responding to the needs of young people presenting for the Youth Allowance at the young homeless rate. It applies to any young person under the school-leaving age and to young people over that age and under 18 years of age who are deemed at risk.

The protocol requires that the Victorian child protection agency will conduct a risk assessment for all Youth Protocol referrals and provide appropriate support during the assessment period. Community agencies, such as homelessness assistance service providers are also likely to be involved in considering the most appropriate options for supporting these young people. Refer to Standard 4.2.

2.2.3

Organisations with Housing Establishment Funds have written guidelines about how funds can be used and how to access the funds.

Housing Establishment Funds

Organisation should demonstrate allocation processes consistent with funding criteria detailed in the Office of Housing's Homelessness Assistance Program Guidelines. Funding allocations should reflect policy intent and be provided in a transparent manner that seeks to provide meaningful assistance to people.

Processes that can support good practice

Signposts of good practice

2.2.4

The organisation treats people with respect and dignity and in a non-judgemental manner at initial and subsequent contact.

Further explanation and examples

Respectful treatment of people seeking assistance

Consultation with people who have experienced homelessness identified that consumer confidence increases when people are treated respectfully. Increased consumer confidence will occur if:

- the first approach by organisational staff includes an appropriate welcome or greeting
- the staff member introducing him or herself by name
- staff personalising interaction with the person by using their title or first name
- staff using common courtesies such as 'please' and 'thank you'
- staff assuming people have a range of life strengths and knowledge about what has worked or failed in the past in solving their housing problems.

Wherever possible, people who might have previously left a service on negative terms should be considered for vacancies and support services. This will require an open discussion and appraisal of past interactions and difficulties. Many people in homelessness services will require more than one opportunity to address their needs.

Organisations should demonstrate a commitment to providing non-discriminatory services. Services must be provided within a framework that acknowledges duty of care whilst ensuring all people, and particularly people with complex or multiple needs, receive appropriate interventions and support.

2.2.5

The organisation ensures that a staff member with appropriate skills undertakes the initial assessment.

Skills for assessment

Organisations should demonstrate that staff who undertake initial assessments have the required skills, competencies and experience to deliver high quality service responses. Entry point services should have mechanisms in place to ensure availability of skilled intake and assessment staff members at all times.

Smaller organisations, with less staffing resources, may choose to locate staff close to or in the reception area in addition to having a receptionist who is trained in screening for immediate needs. All intake staff should have access to back-up assistance from a qualified and experienced supervisor.

2.2.6

Initial assessment seeks to understand the *immediate* needs of the person seeking assistance and what level of risk they face.

Initial assessment to understand immediate needs

Best practice initial assessment covers:

- who needs the service (presenting person, other people, accompanying children)
- the person's most immediate needs (food, shower, shelter, medical treatment etc)
- risks, injuries or specialist support requirements
- accommodation options, including purchased accommodation
- outreach support
- material aid or emergency relief requirements

This initial assessment allows the staff member to decide the urgency of response and outcomes required. For example:

- is assistance needed immediately or at a later time or date,
- does the organization have the resources required to provide assistance, or
- should an active referral be made.

People seeking assistance should be given information about the initial and more comprehensive assessment process, how this will occur, and over what time period. An initial assessment should assess the safety concerns for the person seeking assistance, including children. Risk assessment should not deny service to a person, but rather ensure safety planning can occur and the right service can be provided.

2.2.7

Where the initial assessment indicates the need for *immediate* assistance, the organisation supports the person to have those needs met.

Providing assistance to address immediate needs

Where the initial assessment indicates the need for immediate assistance, the organisation should ensure the person has safe shelter for that night. This might be by using brokerage funds to pay for motel accommodation, by immediately referring them to a safe shelter or hospital if necessary, or by having the person accepted into an appropriate service once a more comprehensive assessment is done.

The organisation's key responsibility is to address immediate safety and shelter needs as part of the initial assessment process. In this process, the organisation will need to identify the assistance the person might need to take up the shelter, such as transport and directions, an interpreter or advocacy. Immediate needs might also include showering, food or basic care.

2.2.8

The organisation has effective assessment systems in place to determine what resources or services are required to meet the needs of the individual or family.

Effective assessment for determining most appropriate service

In addition to assessing the immediate safety, food and shelter requirements of the individual or family, the initial assessment should also plan to identify and match resource responses so that other important needs are met. This broader assessment may occur immediately or might be scheduled to another more suitable time (for instance, the day after).

Systems to support effective assessment of housing and support needs might include:

- checklists and flowcharts to assist staff gain an understanding of the person's situation
- risk assessment and prioritisation matrixes
- client record and file systems that allow information to be recorded and easily accessed on future contact
- up to date resource information including referral proforma's
- supervision and staff training to assist staff to effectively assess needs, including those of people who have more complex needs and of people subjected to family/domestic violence.

Organizations should utilize the common assessment tools, practice guidelines and risk assessment frameworks as developed for family violence and homelessness service provision.

2.2.9

The organisation seeks information and the involvement of other key parties, as appropriate, in order to better assess or understand the person's situation.

Collaboration for effective assessment

Some people may feel more comfortable if an advocate supports them during the assessment process. An advocate can be a friend, family member, staff member from another agency or a person from an advocacy service.

In some instances, the assessing staff member may also wish to seek consent to access additional information about the person's situation from a third party. This may be relevant if the person seeking assistance:

- has recently accessed other services
- requires cultural or language services
- exhibits behaviour or injuries which require specialist risk assessment, medical treatment, supporting intervention or advice
- identifies other specific requirements

Organisations should demonstrate compliance with relevant privacy legislation when seeking supporting information or involving a third party in assessment processes.

2.2.10

The assessment process encourages and supports people to be actively involved in identifying their needs, risk factors and preference for service responses.

Involving people in collaboratively assessing needs

Sustainable outcomes are more likely to be achieved if people feel they are actively supported through the assessment process. Involving and supporting people to identify their needs and plan for solutions is fundamental to good practice. Assessing staff should use observation and skilled listening and communication techniques to engage with people.

Signposts of good practice

2.2.11

The organisation regularly monitors client outcomes by reviewing its screening and initial assessment processes.

Further explanation and examples

Monitoring assessment

Monitoring of initial assessment will assist the organisation understand and better respond to the needs of individuals and the community. Monitoring tools can include data collection, client feedback surveys, auditing of files, staff supervision feedback, review of risk management systems and internal and external referral processes. The organisation should seek to continually monitor:

- who is requesting assistance (client profiles)
- the effectiveness of assistance provided (outcomes)
- external referrals made or received
- waiting periods for services
- limitations of existing support or resources
- complaints or suggestions
- frequency of re entry
- cultural appropriateness of service responses.
- staff rostering and training needs

Cross references:

Rights-based approach (Standard 1.1)

Complaints and appeals (Standard 1.3)

Standard 2.3 Effective referrals

People seeking assistance are effectively referred to the most appropriate service that can meet their needs.

People need to receive appropriate services. Organisations can contribute to successful consumer outcomes by ensuring referrals are timely and appropriate.

The following features and examples are not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive, but rather give some guidance to services in how to achieve this standard.

Documentation that can support good practice

Signposts of good practice

2.3.1

The organisation has a documented process for making referrals to ensure people have smooth access to appropriate support.

2.3.2

The organisation has documented protocols and agreements for cross-referral with a range of key agencies that can assist people.

Further explanation and examples

Documented referral process

The documented process might include:

- timeframes for referrals
- referral forms
- information consent forms
- guidelines for the electronic transfer of information
- the types of information that can be shared between agencies (with and without a person's consent).

Protocols with other agencies

Written protocols are most effective when supported by active networking and relationship building between key agencies. Before entering into an agreement, organisations should consider their underlying values for service delivery. Where a formal agreement is developed it will need to be consistent with privacy legislation and include:

- contact protocols, including after hours responses
- resolution method for disputes
- time period for the support
- each agency's roles and responsibilities
- confidentiality
- cost and payment periods (if any)
- services to be provided
- review processes
- method for dealing with breakdowns in the agreed procedures.

Processes that can support good practice

Signposts of good practice

2.3.3

People who are not offered an immediate service are fully informed about alternative options and offered an active referral as appropriate.

2.3.4

People seeking assistance are encouraged to act independently and to advocate on their own behalf wherever possible, but staff will advocate for them when requested and appropriate.

2.3.5

The organisation always assists unaccompanied young people less than 18 years of age and other more vulnerable people to access services from agencies to which the organisation refers them.

2.3.6

The organisation has effective systems to guide use of financial assistance to people seeking assistance.

Further explanation and examples

Assistance to gain other services

The organisation may be unable to offer services due to limited capacity, ineligibility or because people's requirements can be better met by other service systems. In these instances, the organisation should assist the person to access and secure the most appropriate resource or service to meet their need. This may mean exploring local and statewide service referral options. Where capacity is full and no immediately appropriate service is available, the organisation should assist the person to gain safe shelter or support in the interim.

Active referral/s would involve directly linking people to the referral service and arranging transport or other assistance in order to facilitate the process. People who have experienced homelessness for extended periods can often be disempowered by the experiences. The level of assistance provided will need to be proportional to the person's immediate needs and take into account the level of risk or harm the person may be exposed to.

Assistance with advocacy

All people should be encouraged and supported to become independent, however some people may lack confidence or the skills required to negotiate and find appropriate services. Some people may want a staff member to advocate on their behalf, until they are more comfortable or confident in their own ability.

Prioritising assistance to more vulnerable people

Good assessment processes will incorporate assessment of personal risk and vulnerability. Young people can be particularly vulnerable due to their age. Organisations should have protocols with key agencies to ensure young people are supported through active referral and follow up processes.

Systems to guide use of financial assistance

Effective systems would include:

- guidelines for staff on funds allocation
- not allocating funds to people directly
- financial systems to track allocated funds
- guidelines on repeat usage
- Protocols or Memorandums of Understanding with other local agencies for access to or prioritisation of funding resources.

Systems should aim to maximise flexibility within a financial risk management framework. Guidelines will alert staff when budget allocations are overspent. The organisation should seek to provide people with prompt, meaningful assistance, and minimise barriers for those re-accessing brokerage funds where possible.

Signposts of good practice

2.3.7

The organisation monitors its referral systems to ensure it offers people an appropriate range of support and people can easily access what they need.

Further explanation and examples

Monitoring referrals

Monitoring could include analysis of:

- number of referrals accepted and outcomes by client group and service type
- number of referrals not accepted by client group and service type
- waiting periods for service
- incidence of advocacy required by people seeking assistance
- people's satisfaction levels
- feedback from referral agencies
- adherence to documented systems and review of system appropriateness.

Organisations can use information gained in this process to identify and respond to gaps or inconsistencies in the service system,.

2.3.8

The organisation monitors allocations of financial assistance to people.

Monitoring financial assistance

Financial assistance provided should be linked to the overall budget and monitored on an ongoing basis. Financial risk management guidelines would alert staff when monthly budget allocations are overspent. During periods of peak demand, organisations may consider prioritising allocations to ensure access for those most in need.

Cross references:

Access to the homelessness service system (Standard 2.1)

Initial Assessment (Standard 2.2)

Supporting parents and accompanying children (Standard 4.1)