

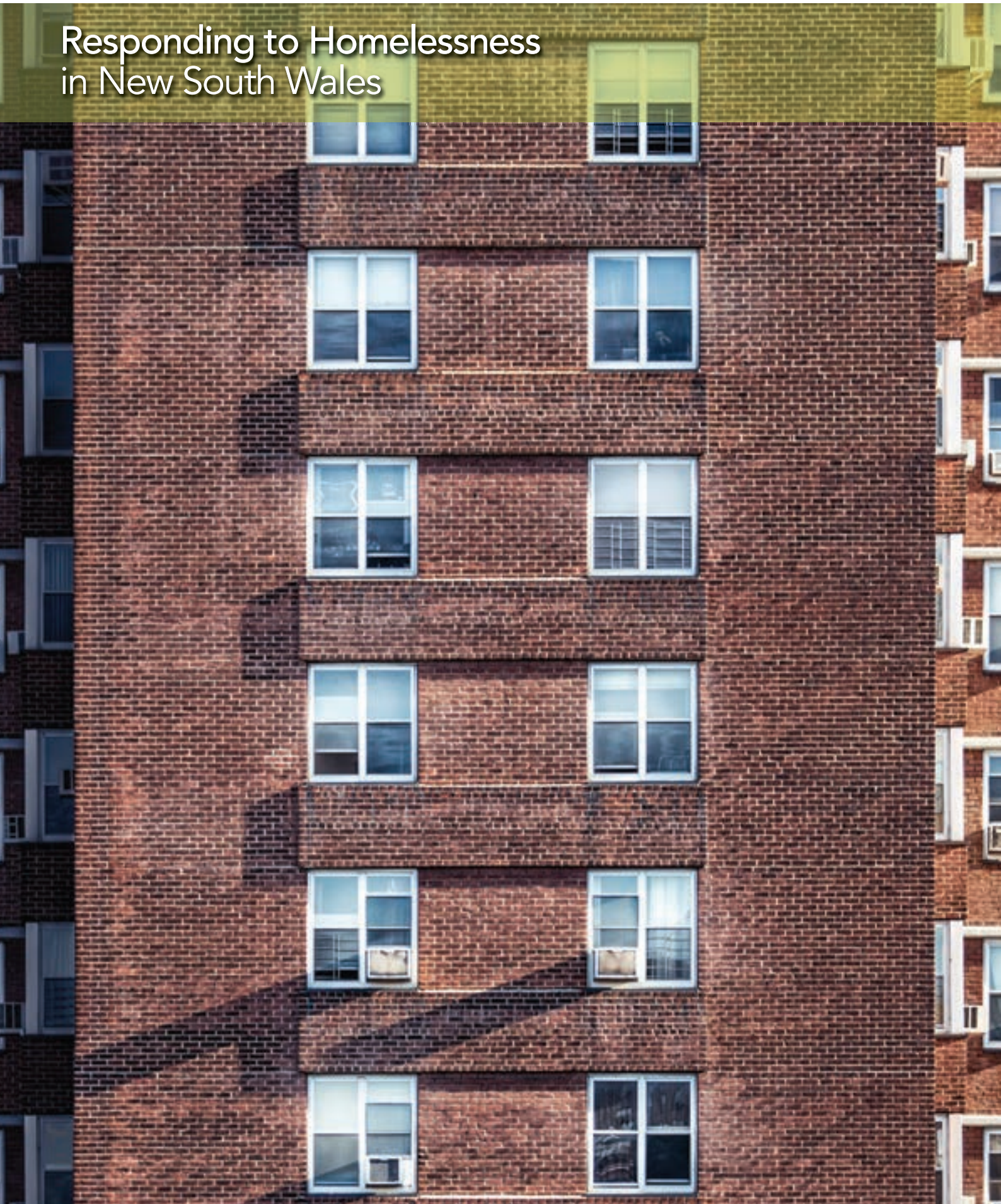
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Responding to Homelessness in New South Wales



It's About Systems Not Programs

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Introduction

It is difficult to question the intention of a 'no wrong door' approach to homelessness. It is also difficult for service providers not to cringe at the term when looking at the persistently high level of demand, under-resourcing and the consequences of improving access to a system already under pressure. Following the New South Wales reform of Specialist Homelessness Service's (SHS) YES initiated a local systems change process in the Albury area that saw the transition to a Centralised Intake, Assessment and Brief Intervention Model (CIAB). In conjunction with four partner agencies this model aims to simplify access, prevent people from bouncing between services, manage the mismatch of demand/resources through brief intervention and provide a structure for services to work as a system rather than the program based responses that had resulted from historical funding arrangements.

Setting the Scene

In many cases these funding arrangements have inadvertently created services that started with the question 'is this person eligible for our service?' This complex maze of homelessness services saw services matching clients to their programs rather than a system with the agility to bend around the client. Take the following example:

Jill became homeless after a serious incident of family violence. Jill first presented to the Albury youth refuge after a friend had suggested it, and was informed that the age limit was 18. The youth refuge provided details of another SHS, which Jill presented to only to be told the program had a waiting list at the moment for

transitional housing and did not provide crisis accommodation.

Next was the women's refuge where Jill was accepted for accommodation, stayed six weeks and began working with a case manager. During this time Jill was re-referred back to the service that provided transitional housing as an exit option from the refuge. The case manager from the women's refuge handed case management over to this service who completed a new assessment and goal plan. As Jill had no furniture for the property the new case

manager applied to another service that provided brokerage funds.

While local SHS's had a strong history of collaboration, what was missing was a mechanism that reliably ensured clients who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, were able to access the full options that homelessness services had to offer and did not fall through eligibility gaps relating to age, gender, presenting issues, service capacity etc. Local examples of these gaps included the lack of accommodation for women not escaping family violence, clients requiring transitional housing would have to be referred to a separate organisation and no specific SHS response for Aboriginal people. Essentially clients would only receive what each organisation had to offer, rather than what the system as a whole could provide if it was structured as a system. The CIAB model aimed to provide this structure.

The Model

The concept of CIAB is not new and there are a multitude of variations of how these sorts of models look in different service contexts.¹ Large scale versus small scale, telephone based vs. face to face site based, single site versus multiple sites, are just a few of the variations YES initially explored. Considering the local context YES settled on a small scale, single site model with outreach and telephone based components when required. This new approach brought YES into some unfamiliar territory in regards to triaging, managing bottlenecks, and progressive engagement where the intensity of support is escalated based on presenting needs.²

YES wanted the new question that framed access to be 'what would it



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take for the service system to meet the needs of this person and remove the responsibility of service navigation from the client?' Drawing on relevant research and local experience the CIAB model incorporates a triaging process, brief intervention to manage the high demand/under resourcing, and one phone number or one location access point to start the service response. The initial screening process that occurs on presentation initiates one of three services responses: prevention, diversion or admission. Underpinning these three responses is a triaging process based on the urgency/complexity guiding service activation and ensuring resources are maximised.

The inclusion of brief intervention in the CIAB model has been a critical part of ensuring that clients are not just put into a holding pattern through the triage process. Without this component the model does pose the risk of becoming a simplistic demand management framework or glorified waiting list and potentially delaying peoples access to services.³ With approximately 40 per cent of clients presenting only receiving brief intervention rather than continuing through to intensive case management, YES is seeing a clear role for brief intervention in the homelessness space. A future question to explore is how likely are people to re-refer in the future, and gauging the effectiveness of short, sharp interventions at this early point of presentation, against longer-term service engagements.

Benefits

Simpler messaging around access

The pitch regarding our service was quickly simplified with the 'one number — one location' message compared to the previous; if you are a young person go here, if you are a male over 18 go here, etc. This has been especially useful with the wider community, and real estate agents who are now regularly referring into the service.

More options and choices

The CIAB screening tool is aimed at identifying which parts of the system need to be activated to meet presenting issues; are brokerage dollars needed for practical items,

would the person prefer an Aboriginal worker, is crisis accommodation needed, or is a specialist response around domestic/family violence needed. Previously these options were dispersed across multiple services, where now the CIAB model pulls all of these around the client at the first point of entry.

Increased service accountability

This is where the new model goes beyond improving access, with the CIAB team beginning to have a role in identifying gaps and pathways that have not worked, and tracking clients journey throughout the system.

Tracking trends and demand

One of the first things YES was able to establish in the early stages of the transition was a real sense of the actual demand that previously was scattered between the multiple services, which immediately enhanced planning and resource allocation.

Challenges

Recovering from reform

Ideally a systems change process such as this would focus on building a commitment from partner organisations over time and collaboratively shaping how the new system would operate. Instead this change emerged in the context of competitive tendering, the loss and merger of local services and generally the change was obligatory rather than mutually agreed.

Maintaining specialisations

This is a core challenge for the CIAB model ensuring that as systems are centralised and processes standardised, that adequate responses to the diversity of need is not lost. In order to mitigate this YES kept the system small scale, re-structured organisationally to have a youth arm and an adult/family arm with a family violence focus and introduced an Aboriginal organisation as an SHS partner.

Access points that meet diverse needs

Given the new approach relies on limited entry points this a critical feature of the CIAB model. YES is remodelling our main office with the current reception set up shifting to more of a resource/ drop-in centre with a trained 'Welcome Worker'

being the first point of contact for clients. The CIAB team has also broadened its outreach capacity, particularly in responding to Aboriginal clients, family violence and people who are sleeping rough.

Managing side doors

During the transition phase it has been particularly important to manage the 'side doors' for entry into the system as this can undermine many of the benefits mentioned by inadvertently setting up duplicate or inconsistent service responses.⁴

Conclusion

While inherently difficult to evaluate, due to the lack of comparative data and an inability to establish causality between the new system and outcomes, initial evaluations of the CIAB approach have been promising.⁵ A snapshot evaluation with 50 clients who had used the service showed 94 per cent reporting as being in safe and stable housing, and staff reporting increased options for clients with reduced 'service bouncing'.

The triaging/demand management component has allowed us to maintain a commitment to a no turn away/no waiting list system, which in itself has been a significant improvement to the previous service structure. While primarily established to improve access, the 'umbrella' framework of the CIAB has laid a foundation for future service collaboration and systemic improvements that go beyond a simple program based response.

Endnotes

1. Institute of Child Protection Studies 2011, *A Review into the use of Centralised Intake Services in the Homelessness Sector*, Australian Catholic University.
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3. Council to Homeless Persons 2009, *Opening Doors, Framework and Implementation Sector Survey*, Council to Homeless Persons, Collingwood.
4. <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/webinar-implementing-coordinated-assessment-under-the-new-coc-regulations>
5. Black C, Gronda H 2011, *Evidence for improving access to homelessness services*, AHURI Research Paper No. Syn 059, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.