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Housing for people with a mental illness

NSW Ombudsman Bruce Barbour tabled a special report to Parliament today about his investigation into the *Joint Guarantee of Service for People with Mental Health Problems and Disorders Living in Aboriginal, Community and Public Housing* (the JGOS), an interagency agreement that aims to prevent people with mental illness from becoming homeless by helping them to access and sustain social housing.

The investigation found that the implementation of the JGOS has been ineffective and has failed to achieve systemic improvements.

The report details the reasons for this failure and outlines three key areas where reform is urgently needed:

- discharge planning for mentally ill people leaving hospital
- the ability of government and non-government service providers to exchange information about clients when their safety, welfare or wellbeing is at risk
- the availability of supported accommodation for people with a mental illness and other complex needs.

“People with a mental illness are particularly vulnerable after being discharged from hospital”, said the Ombudsman. **“Poor communication and planning can result in individuals becoming homeless when they are entitled to support.”**

Confusion on the part of workers about when they can share information about clients may lead to a failure to do so, inadvertently placing the wellbeing of individuals at risk. **“There needs to be a simple and practical system in place that enables agencies to exchange information about vulnerable people when necessary for their safety or welfare”,** the Ombudsman said.

While a recent injection of state and federal government funding has seen an increase in the amount of social housing, there is still a shortage of supported accommodation for people with a mental illness who need extra help to live independently. **“While the evidence shows that programs like HASI (Housing Accommodation Support Initiative) work”,** said the Ombudsman, **“there are simply not enough places to accommodate the level of need.”**

The Ombudsman said the recommendations contained in his report are designed to ensure that people with a mental illness receive the support they need to secure safe housing. **“It is critical that policies and programs aimed at assisting vulnerable people are effective. Otherwise, individuals can – and too often do – fall through the cracks”.**