

Advance to Zero (AtoZ), Australia

Advance to Zero is a nationwide initiative supporting homelessness/housing organisations to use proven solutions to end homelessness. Modelling itself from the World Habitat Award-winning Community Solutions framework, this project has adapted a well-regarded evidence-based approach to the Australian context, specifically focusing on social housing and First Nations People. In four years, it has scaled from four to 29 partners and secured funding.



What inspires us ...

This is an excellent example of transfer and adaptation that if done well, can expand rapidly and deliver on an urgent housing need. Now that the Australian Government is developing a National Housing and Homelessness Plan in collaboration with state and territory governments, this project is well positioned to showcase evidence-based approaches that reduce homelessness and ensure localisation of services, specifically for First Nations communities.

Submitting organisation: Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH)

Type of organisation: Network

Key elements of the project:

- **Evidence-Based Approach to End Homelessness**

Organisations build local collective teams, commit to reaching functional zero, collect data and expand housing resources.

- **Measurable Reduction in Homelessness**

Three cities have achieved a measurable reduction (20%-40%) in street homelessness. Ato Z has housed 3,689 people since 2020 and secured \$6 million per year in investment in homeless care.

- **Rough Sleepers, primarily First Nations People**

Despite making up 3.8% of population, First Nations represent 1/5 people experiencing homelessness. AtoZ works closely with First Nations organisations to localise the model and tune its practice.

Introduction

Australia is facing a homelessness crisis: The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated there were 122,494 people experiencing homelessness in the country on Census night in 2021. Despite this, the nation has no homelessness strategy, nor does it record the number of homeless deaths each year, setting it apart from other western countries. Advance to Zero is a nationwide initiative aiming to change perspectives and approaches to homelessness. It supports local homelessness/housing organisations to put proven methods into practice with the goal of ending homelessness in Australia.

Modelled on the World Habitat Award-winning Community Solutions framework, this project has adapted a well-regarded evidence-based approach to the Australian context and achieved measurable reductions in homelessness in three partner communities since 2020. In four years, it has scaled from four to 29 partner communities and secured significant government funding and support. This project showcases the impact of evidence-based approaches and how they can be tailored and localised to certain communities.

Context

More than a third of Australians who have experienced homelessness have slept rough. First Nations peoples represent one in five (20.4%) of those experiencing homelessness in Australia despite only making up 3.8% of the total population. Three in every four people using homelessness services are women and children; 50% of whom have experienced domestic and family violence.¹

Experiences of rough sleeping are catastrophic for people's health and can lead to individuals dying up to 30 years younger than those who have stable housing – three decades below the national average, making it the worst life expectancy of any disadvantaged group in Australia. Frontline workers say the chronic underfunding of specialised homelessness health services means easily treatable injuries and illnesses are being missed in early stages. This is compounding the significant toll homelessness causes on physical and mental health.²

The homelessness crisis in Australia is primarily attributed to a lack of affordable housing, but it is made worse by rising rental costs, lack of resources, and the neglect of government policy. Australia has a decentralised policy framework on homelessness. While the Commonwealth Government - through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) - requires states and territories to have their own strategy, these have struggled to address the rising demand for services.³ The Productivity Commission, in its 2022 report 'In need of repair: the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement,' recognised that the causes of homelessness are mainly structural in nature and described Australia's growing levels of homelessness as clear and concerning evidence of national policy failure. The combination of poverty and tight housing markets has had the most significant structural impact on the overall level of homelessness.⁴ There is more homelessness in places with high unemployment and median rents. Housing First⁵ has had varied uptake by organisations in Australia, mainly because of lack of investment from governments and because there is not enough housing available.

Australia is only now developing a national housing and homelessness strategy.

Project Description

Advance to Zero (AtoZ) is a national initiative of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) that supports local collaborative efforts to end homelessness, starting with rough sleeping – one community at a time. It aims to prevent, reduce and end all homelessness in Australia by reaching what is known as functional zero. [Functional zero](#) measures whether a community has ended homelessness for a population, by showing that their system is routinely housing more people than are coming into it i.e., fewer people are experiencing homelessness than those that are routinely accessing safe and stable permanent housing. This must have been sustained over a period, thereby ensuring that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring.

AtoZ is based on Built for Zero, the Community Solutions model developed in the United States but tailored to Australia's context.

The campaign works with 'communities,' defined as collaborations of different organisations / government agencies, and with a defined geographic scope, generally a local government area or a cluster of local government areas. It supports these communities to set up local 'Zero' projects and deliver activities through a series of improvement cycles, as follows:

1. **Action Planning:** A starting point where communities develop a collaborative plan to get key stakeholders on the same page, set targets, agree to next steps and build an improvement team that is responsible for getting to zero. These plans set out how communities will establish a 'collective impact initiative' or Zero Project.
2. **Quality By-Name List:** Communities work to build a comprehensive real-time, by-name list of people experiencing rough sleeping homelessness in their community.
3. **Improve to Zero:** Communities use a range of solutions, tools and approaches, including triage, improvement and data-driven advocacy, to drive monthly reductions in homelessness.
4. **Sustaining Zero:** This occurs once communities have achieved functional zero and are seeking to sustain it. Communities continue to set goals and undertake improvement projects to ensure their system can maintain zero.
5. **Zero for All:** Communities expand to new target populations and greater geographical areas to further the campaign to end all homelessness.

The Advance to Zero initiative began in 2018 and is ongoing. Since the campaign started more than 3,916 people have been housed in total. The organisers estimate it is helping to secure homes for approximately 900 people every year. Three locations – Port Philip, Geraldton, and Mandurah - have achieved a measurable reduction in street homelessness.

Organisation implementing the project

The AAEH is an independent champion for systems change to end homelessness in Australia. Since 2013, it has supported individuals, organisations, governments and local communities across Australia to work collaboratively across sectors to end homelessness – not just at an individual level, but systemically. It launched Advance to Zero (AtoZ) in 2018.

AAEH's founding partners include Launch Housing, Mercy Foundation, Micah Projects, RUAH Community Services.

Other AtoZ partners include Adelaide Zero Project, Brisbane Alliance to End Homelessness, Brisbane Zero, End Street Sleeping Collaboration, Geelong Zero, Gold Coast Zero, Logan Zero, Melbourne Zero, MinterEllison, Mission Australia, Neami National, WA Alliance to End Homelessness, and Zero Project. International partners include the [Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness](#), [Community Solutions](#), [OrgCode](#), and [George and Tanya Ruff Institute of Global Homelessness](#).

Aims and Objectives

In a country with no national homelessness strategy or national systems in place to measure homelessness rates, the Advance to Zero (AtoZ) initiative:

- introduces a measurable framework for communities to work towards to prevent, reduce and end homelessness.
- cultivates a shared vision and ownership among communities in reaching and sustaining functional zero.
- advocates to key decision makers for dedicated resources to improve homelessness support services.

The strategy is based on what has worked to end homelessness overseas (through the Community Solutions model), which is to break the problem up into smaller, more manageable parts. AtoZ does this by focusing on ending a particular type of homelessness, like rough sleeping, and concentrating on specific groups of people experiencing that type of homelessness, like veterans, First Nations people, or families.

The target beneficiaries are rough sleepers.⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people (also known as First Nations), people with a disability and other particularly vulnerable populations within this group are overrepresented in this category of homelessness. Beyond immediate homelessness service support, AtoZ seeks to include and amplify First Nations' voices in efforts to end homelessness across the country. Through consultations with First Nations leaders and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), AtoZ works to prioritise data sovereignty with First Nations communities wherever possible.

Partner communities also benefit directly from their involvement. The project's [clear, measurable framework](#) supports them to understand the current state of their homelessness systems, the individuals they are supporting and the resources/training they may need. Communities become part of a national movement working towards a shared vision of ending homelessness.

Indirectly, it benefits governments by addressing an urgent and costly issue. If left unaddressed, chronic rough sleeping can cost the government an added \$13,100 AUD (\$8,714 USD) per person per year. Moreover, rough sleeping is the most prominent form of inequality in society. When increasingly larger groups of people start sleeping rough, it creates conflict in local communities that often leads to a ‘hardening’ of community attitudes and counterproductive policy responses.

By the end of 2025, AtoZ hopes that two communities will have ended rough sleeping altogether and that four communities will have achieved at least one subpopulation proof point (when functional zero is achieved for a subset of a population experiencing homelessness in a community, such as First Nations people, people chronically sleeping rough, or people over 55).

Key Features

Housing First Systems Change. This involves a commitment to change the entire system of support for people experiencing homelessness, away from individual services and programmes. It implements the principles of a Housing First approach at a system level – specifically, to provide immediate access to housing with no housing readiness requirements, while working with people to promote recovery and wellbeing.

Person-centred and Strengths Based. AtoZ members commit to placing the person experiencing homelessness at the centre of the service system, to build on their strengths to support and end their homelessness. It listens to those with a lived experience of homelessness and prioritises being culturally sensitive in its responses, recognising that people are the experts in their own lives. In terms of First Nations peoples, this manifests through AtoZ’s partnership with the [Constellation Project](#), an organisation specialising in cultural competency and First Nations engagement.

Data-Driven Improvement. This is about building problem-solving capability through ongoing learning, testing and adopting new approaches, building on successful work to reduce homelessness. Informed by quality by-name data, these improvements can help change systems to better meet the needs of the people they seek to support. This is inspired by the Community Solutions method. Beneficiaries and their needs are identified through real-time data collection, which decides their housing support.

Collective Impact and Place-based collaboration. AtoZ takes a [collective impact](#) approach, where organisations in specific localities work together in a coordinated and collectively accountable way to reach a shared goal of ending homelessness. This approach then factors in the specific circumstances of each place (community) involved in the campaign. The AAEH also directly supports some communities and organisations where needed.

Locally Driven Inclusion. This is particularly relevant to locally driven work with First Nations peoples to foster greater ownership over housing solutions. For example, in Western Australia, AAEH supported an Aboriginal Controlled Community Housing and Homelessness Organisation to develop Aboriginal Housing First principles for one of the cultural groups there. There are a relatively large number of these organisations in Australia, but they are generally small and have limited funding.

Allied Networks. These networks unite practitioners, policymakers, academics, people with lived experience of homelessness and leaders from both corporate and community sectors, spanning all industries. They aim to foster collaboration, develop good practice and advocate for change, and include the Australian Health, Housing & Homelessness Network, the International Supportive Housing Community of Practice, the South Australian Alliance to End Homelessness, and the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness.

International intersections. There are strong intersections between the Community Solutions (US) and Built for Zero movement and the AtoZ framework. Because of this AtoZ has had access to case studies, tools and banks of work from the US and has taken part in Community Solutions training events. They have also taken an interest in and collaborated with the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness and Built for Zero Canada. As a Vanguard City for an international campaign ran by the Institute for Global Homelessness, they can also access key research and evaluation tools.

Innovation

The Advance to Zero (AtoZ) initiative is inspired and informed by the American Built for Zero movement, which has also since been implemented in Canada, the UK and Europe. The AAEH works closely with Community Solutions, a not-for-profit agency that supports Built for Zero, to apply best practices and learnings internationally to the initiative. For example, AtoZ focuses on rough sleeping because the Built for Zero Campaign in the USA demonstrated that it is possible to end rough sleeping. While AtoZ is inspired and informed by Community Solutions' Built for Zero movement, the AAEH has tailored the initiative specifically to the Australian context, by:

- Building an Australian-specific database to store by-name list data for communities collecting it across Australia. By building upon an updated version of the Canadian and US database, AAEH aims to improve the user experience and develop a national data hub to better aggregate data for policy, research and advocacy activities.
- Developing an Australian-specific assessment tool (the AHVTT) to help practitioners better understand the housing and support needs of individuals or families who are experiencing homelessness. The tool has been co-designed by AAEH and [OrgCode](#) in close consultation with service delivery and frontline staff, participants with lived experience and First Nations peoples and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. This was achieved through a series of workshops and feedback sessions with these key groups. Additionally, frontline workers tested the tool templates within their communities to gather feedback.
- Implementing a Cultural Engagement project in the AAEH to continually improve how AtoZ meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experiencing homelessness.

Funding

The main operating costs are employee benefits and consultancy charges for coordinating the campaign, delivering training and supporting improvement cycles for communities. The AAEH receives funding from some governments but is funded by local partner communities contributing funds raised through philanthropy and redirecting existing resources.

Local partner communities are charged the following for Advance to Zero (AtoZ) improvement cycle services:

- Action Planning and/or improvement cycle support – \$7,194.96 AUD (\$4,786 USD)
- Improvement cycle coaching - \$16,191.36 AUD (\$10,771 USD)
- Data support: Small project: \$2,201.08 AUD (\$1,465 USD); medium project: \$4,752.00 AUD (\$3,162 USD); and large project: \$9,504.00 AUD (\$6,323.58 USD)

There is no financial aid programme set up yet for local partner communities.

The total cost of the AtoZ campaign is \$1,746,000 AUD (\$1,166,363 USD). The annual budget has increased over the last 5 years. Financial Year 2019: \$17,000 AUD (\$11,317 USD); Financial Year 2020: \$4,100 AUD (\$2,730 USD); Financial Year 2021: \$216,400 AUD (\$144,065 USD); Financial Year 2022: \$395,900 AUD (\$263,564 USD); Financial Year 2023: \$1,112,000 AUD (\$740,297 USD).

Funding has been secured from both the South Australian and Western Australian governments to support Zero projects in their states, along with funding and significant in-kind support from key partner organisations including End Street Sleeping Collaboration, Launch Housing, Micah Projects, Neami National and Ruah Community Services.

Ongoing project costs will be met through AAEH income, which has increased almost 200% from previous years because of growing interest and following the management takeover of two key government contracts previously run by partner organisations.

Impact

Financial

- Tailored housing services and accommodation are now more accessible to homeless populations across Australia.
- Each year, Advance to Zero helps approximately 900 people. The total number of people housed through Advance to Zero efforts since the initiative started in 2018 is 3,916.
- The enhanced ability of local community partners to prevent and reduce homelessness lowers added costs for state governments, estimated to be \$13,100 AUD (\$8,721 USD) per person per year.

- Secured South and Western Australian government funding for the campaign through contracts.

Social

- This project has supported 29 local community partners to deliver improved housing services (at different scales).
- AAEH has grown a national network from four partner communities in 2020 to 29 partner communities in 2024.
- Three partner communities achieved a measurable reduction in homelessness because of the AtoZ initiative: Port Philip, Geraldton, and Mandurah.
- Geraldton has reached functional zero for its over 55s cohort.
- AtoZ has shifted the narrative about homelessness in Australia. This is reflected by a shared call from homelessness organisations for the Commonwealth Government's new National Housing and Homelessness Plan to focus on ending homelessness.
- In 2023, 1,573 people attended AtoZ events aimed at developing skills, sharing knowledge and building solidarity among organisations working towards functional zero.
- AAEH released two influential position papers (in 2018 and 2023), outlining key recommendations for the Commonwealth Government on improving health equity for people experiencing homelessness. It facilitated roundtable discussions bringing together experts from the health, housing and homelessness sector. This led to AAEH's Allied Network, the Australian Health, Housing & Homelessness Network (A3HN), securing a dedicated \$6,000,000 AUD (\$3,992,880 USD) from the Commonwealth Government for primary health services, dedicated to people experiencing homelessness.

Learning, evaluation, and recognition

Evaluation & Learning

AtoZ supports local partner communities to develop monitoring and evaluation plans specifically for their areas and project. A good example of these plans is the Adelaide Zero Project (AZP) [here](#).

AtoZ can measure whether their strategies are reducing homelessness through the by-name list data.

- Local by-name list data shows the monthly flow of people entering and exiting homelessness and feeds into a national database developed for the AtoZ initiative that aggregates data.
 - Inflow: Includes -Newly identified, or new to homelessness; Returned from housing, or people who have experienced homelessness before; returned from inactive, or people who experienced homelessness before and exited to unknown destinations.

- Actively homeless: People who are currently experiencing homelessness are categorised as being actively homeless.
- Outflow: Includes - Housing placements, or people who have been connected to permanent housing and moved to inactive, or people who exit homelessness without support from a homeless response system, such as finding their own housing.

In general, the local community partners answer the following four questions:

- How much did we do? i.e. quantity of service delivery: number of people housed, number of people linked with appropriate support services, number of referrals among partners and to other agencies.
- How well did we do it? i.e. quality of service delivery: outcomes from interventions; connections to other social, health and economic services; quality of culturally responsive service delivery approaches.
- Are people better off? i.e. impact of service delivery: goals achieved, sustainment of housing, improved wellbeing and quality of life.
- What is different because of our activities? i.e. impact of service delivery: system changes, changes in service delivery/practice.

At a higher level, AtoZ applies an action research process where learnings, data collection and analysis are actively incorporated into the development of working practice and the delivery of the programme.

Through this work, AtoZ has learned in the importance of data and collaboration; to not wait for government action but to bring them along; to anticipate those who are not yet homeless by focusing on prevention and system-wide improvements; and to focus on providing opportunities for empowerment and dignity among those with a lived experience of homelessness.

Recognition

Media Coverage:

- [‘To get out is an absolute struggle’: landmark study sheds light on Australians sleeping rough](#), The Guardian February 2022
- Contributed to Guardian Australia [investigative series about homelessness](#), February 2024
- [Australia needs more housing but that alone won’t stop homelessness deaths](#), The Guardian, February 2024
- [Homelessness support groups warn Census data 'underrepresents' situation in South Australia](#), ABC Australia March 2024
- [Members appointed to new Advisory Group on homelessness](#), Western Australia Government press release, March 2023

Transfer and future plans

As AtoZ is based on the World Habitat Award-winning Built for Zero model by Community Solutions, it is already a successful example of a transferrable project.

Moreover, like Built for Zero, the AtoZ Framework was developed to be transferable to reach the initiative's goal of ending homelessness, incrementally one community at a time. The Framework is intentionally 'descriptive, not prescriptive' to acknowledge that its application will look different across each community's unique context and operating environment – there is no 'one size fits all' solution for ending homelessness.

AtoZ continues to be adopted by more communities in Australia, with further plans to scale up from the current total standing of 29.

The future focus of AtoZ is to support communities to reach milestones where certain population groups within those sleeping rough (e.g. First Nations people, over 55s) reach functional zero. AtoZ also plans to deliver 90-day change projects where they work directly with local partner communities to improve the intersection of their homelessness systems with others such as housing, health and justice. They also plan to improve the national AtoZ database to further to increase functionality and respond to the growing scale of the campaign.

AtoZ would like to work with World Habitat to promote and raise awareness of the initiative's work, while also participating in knowledge exchange activities on systems change and Housing First efforts.

World Habitat Reflections

In a brief period, the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH) has delivered a functional, adapted, evidence-based model that is achieving measurable reductions in homelessness within local partner communities across the country. Not only is it building cohesion and capacity to deliver homelessness support at the local level, but it is also connecting localities across the country through a shared vision of ending homelessness. It has already accomplished considerable impact at the national level with increased funding for homelessness health services. Moreover, the national dialogue has shifted towards ending homelessness.

A World Habitat Award would strengthen AAEH's platform to engage more state governments in Australia, scale its campaign and influence the current National Housing and Homelessness Strategy currently in development. It is also a good opportunity to recognise what effective transfer of award-winning solutions can look like.