

# Council Of Social Services shines light on disadvantaged

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Jeanie Barbagiovanni, a mother of seven who relies on charity and government handouts. Credit: Daniel Wilkins/The West Australian

A WA-first study of families living in poverty has found many are only just being kept afloat by support services, and some are struggling to access the “basics” of affordable and appropriate support.

The 100 Families WA project, a collaboration between the WA Council of Social Services, the University of WA and seven WA charities, followed 100 families over 12 months to find out how the welfare and charity system could be improved.

It heard how families felt stuck in poverty and were reliant on services, which enabled them to survive but failed to lift them out of disadvantage.

The study also uncovered issues with accessing support, and heard of families in need being turned away because they did not meet criteria set by government-funded agencies.

WACOSS chief executive Louise Giolitto said WA was facing a growing problem of entrenched poverty and support services, from women’s refuges to food charities and housing agencies, were swamped with demand.

This demand had surged in the past few weeks after increased government financial support in the wake of COVID-19 was switched off.

“Even prior to COVID-19, the community services sector for a long time has been facing extraordinary challenges in keeping up with demand from people experiencing hardship and disadvantage in their lives, and needing our support, just to get by,” she said.

“Services and providers are so inundated they don’t have the time or the resources to lift people out of poverty,” she said.

Ms Giolitto hoped the 100 Families report would lead to a “re-shaping” of the system, to provide “appropriate social housing, appropriate support services and more support for mental health”.

“(The report) has affirmed: it’s a full-time job being poor and seeking support. Whether it’s repeatedly applying for assistance, long commutes via public transport to access support, and having to engage with multiple providers to get the appropriate service.”

“Being in entrenched poverty has huge impacts on mental health and wellbeing.”

UWA director of social policy practice and research consortium Dr Susan Young said the families found support services disjointed and difficult to navigate.

“Families were very, very grateful, and some say they wouldn’t be alive now if it weren’t for the services they receive, but they don’t want to be dependant on these services,” she said.

*We just want to live a normal life.*

Single mother of seven Jeanie Barbagiovanni, 42, is striving to get to the point in her life where she doesn’t have to rely on government payments and help from charities.

Five years ago she and her children fled to Perth from regional WA to escape her abusive husband, a move she describes as “the best decision she ever made”.

As she rebuilds her life, she is reliant on parenting payments and help from charities.

“Centrelink money doesn’t go far by the time I pay rent, bills, and then buy food and credit on my food, and medication for the kids,” she said.

Ms Barbagiovanni started a hospitality course at TAFE this week and hoped it would lead to a brighter future for her family.

“We just want to live a normal life, and have enough money to live day-to-day, and not to struggle.”