

Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria



Monash Council Submission - 31 January 2020

Monash Council Submission

Monash Council's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness seeks to address the two priority areas of Council's homelessness agenda. These are:

- Service provision improvements based on Monash Council's assertive social outreach to Monash community members experiencing homelessness.
- Championing a local government regional agenda to advocate for systemic change at a state level to prevent homelessness and to generate greater social housing in Victoria. This regional agenda currently comprises 14 Eastern and South-Eastern Councils, representing over 2 million residents.

Council's submission is organised according to these two priority areas.

Monash Council requests to appear before the Legal and Social Issues Committee of Parliament to speak to this submission.

1. Assertive Social Outreach to Monash Community Members Experiencing Homelessness

At the time of the 2016 census, Monash had 755 people recorded as homeless. This is the third highest number of people experiencing homelessness in the Southern and Eastern metropolitan SLA3 regions, after Dandenong and Casey, and the highest in the Eastern Metropolitan Region.

For the last three years, Monash Council has employed a senior Council officer whose role is dedicated to providing assertive social outreach to residents experiencing homelessness in Monash.

Under the frameworks of social justice, human rights and community development, Council's assertive social outreach officer works intensively with individuals and families to build the trust of residents experiencing homelessness, and to work towards achieving identified goals. Generally, residents Monash Council has worked with have had a history of navigating the housing and support services system, but feel that they have not received adequate and appropriate support.

Through its assertive social outreach homelessness work, Council has identified the service provision improvements (detailed below) required to assist the most vulnerable members of our community. Council has also compiled seven case studies of people experiencing homelessness in Monash, and the difficulties they have faced in receiving adequate housing and timely and appropriate service sector support.

1.1 Service Provision Improvements

Council's assertive social outreach role has identified a number of fundamental **service provision** improvements to achieve better outcomes for the most vulnerable members of the Monash community, and more broadly across Victoria. These are:

a) Homelessness Outreach Model to all Victorian local government areas

An appropriately funded homelessness outreach model with specialised mental health workers, Alcohol & Other Drugs (AOD) workers, professional nurses and links to referral pathways, is required as a uniform program available to all areas across Victoria, rather than a model limited to selected geographies only. This model would greatly improve the ability to support those in the community who are extremely vulnerable and require effective and immediate coordinated response.

Bolton Clarke's Melbourne-based Homeless Persons Program is an example of a program that could be implemented across all local government areas. Its program works with people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are experiencing physical, mental and psychological health issues. The program provides a primary healthcare response, and offers professional nursing care as well as supporting individuals and families to locate the organisations that can assist with housing and meals, or legal and financial aid.

The Bolton Clarke program currently provides service to selected Council areas only across the Melbourne region. A coordinated outreach program for people experiencing homelessness, such as Bolton Clarke's, would greatly improve the ability to support those in our community experiencing extreme vulnerability associated with homelessness.

b) Safe, affordable and timely housing for people with complex issues

Through Council's social outreach work with people experiencing homelessness, it is apparent there is a significant lack of appropriate housing for people with complex issues. Most clients do not consider private rooming houses as safe and affordable options.

Increased social housing supply, and options across all Victorian local government areas that can be made available quickly to vulnerable people, to provide stability, safety and wrap-around services with ongoing support, is critical to improving the lives and futures of people at-risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness.

c) Prioritisation of individuals who are homeless by the service sector

There is a fundamental need for the service system to meet vulnerable clients exactly where they are at their time of need. The navigation of a complex system and inexplicably long wait times can significantly perpetuate the cycle of homelessness and exacerbate the vulnerability of people who are already in extremely perilous circumstances.

Residents experiencing homelessness supported by Monash Council have common experiences of being placed on long waiting lists from a few months to up to 12+ months for services they urgently require.

The experience of being forced to wait for critical support services has often proven dire to the person's circumstances, and has exacerbated their acute safety, health or housing needs. The delays in receiving support has compounded their ongoing cycle of vulnerability and homelessness.

Long waiting times have also compromised the trust individuals and families have placed in Council's assertive social outreach provision. When the services Council has referred the client to have not been able

to deliver, individuals have felt extremely let down by the system. This frustration has often been directed back to Council.

Services that have had short to long-term waiting lists include, but are not limited to, urgent family violence support, Centrelink payment assistance, dental care, specialist healthcare including dermatology, mental health support and appropriate and stable accommodation options.

1.2 Case Studies of People with Lived Experience of Homelessness in Monash

Monash Council's assertive homelessness social outreach officer has compiled the following seven case studies of individuals and families with whom Council has been working. Council provides homelessness outreach to a broad range of people beyond these seven cases. These case studies have been chosen to demonstrate the diverse experiences of homelessness in Monash and, due to a completely inadequate service system, these at-risk and vulnerable people have been left with minimum support.

Each person detailed below (excluding *Jed*) has genuinely wanted to break their cycle of homelessness, but have been let down by an under-resourced service system that is not always client-centred. *Each person's name has been changed to protect their privacy.*

Amy - Chronic Homelessness and Mental Health

Amy is a woman in her 50s who has been homeless for approximately five years. Monash Council officers have regularly made contact with her to check on her wellbeing and to see if she needs assistance with housing, but she generally refuses any assistance. Council respects this person's rights, but is also concerned about her physical and mental health. She frequently does not remember past conversations and she a large volume of belongings in several garbage bags. There are also issues associated with her anti-social behaviour of aggression, public urinating and defecating.

Amy has a history of poor mental health, and has told Council officers that she has not seen a doctor for more than five years. Council officers have offered to take her to a general practitioner, but each time she refuses. Whilst local housing services have been supportive in providing assertive outreach to her, she has not been open to receiving housing support and this housing outreach has subsequently broken down.

Despite intensive outreach, and a great deal of Council resourcing dedicated to *Amy*, Monash Council has been unable to effectively assist her. Her anti-social behaviour continues to upset both traders and community members. There have been complaints about *Amy's* behaviour, but also community members who have genuinely sought to help her by advocating for support and services for her.

Amy is extremely vulnerable and Council is concerned that if her circumstances do not change soon, she might die on the streets.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Amy

A dedicated primary health and mental health outreach service that could outreach to *Amy* alongside affordable housing options available in the immediate-term would have been effective measures that may have broken *Amy's* chronic homelessness. Council is now forced to engage law enforcement to try to achieve an effective outcome for *Amy*.

Sally - Fleeing Family Violence

Sally is a woman with a six-year-old daughter who was in a relationship with a controlling and abusive man. *Sally* had chosen not to act on her partner's abuse, as she was concerned that both her and her daughter would become homeless if she left the relationship, as they had no access to money. Things changed early

in 2019 when *Sally's* partner became the subject of an historical sexual abuse investigation. *Sally* realised they had to leave to ensure their safety.

As *Sally* did not have access to money, she was required to apply for a single person pension through Centrelink (Separated Under the Same Roof application). Applicants are required to wait six weeks before their first payment. *Sally* and her daughter were forced to remain in an unsafe home environment for six weeks before fleeing, which was extremely frightening for both of them and could have proved detrimental to their lives.

After six weeks, *Sally* received the single person pension, and had the means to exit the relationship. *Sally*, however, was then faced with no safe place to go. For her young daughter's protection, *Sally* was not willing to be placed in a boarding house or hotel due to the likely exposure to people with complex issues that are often housed in these environments.

Sally had seen Victorian Government campaigning that family violence should not be tolerated. This messaging had given her the confidence to take the huge step of fleeing her violent partner, as she felt she would be adequately supported. *Sally* was shocked that in practice, there was not the appropriate support available. It seemed that all services were stretched and at capacity. *Sally* experienced very little support during this stressful time.

Sally received assistance from a volunteer worker from the Public Tenants Association who called every service she knew to try to find suitable accommodation for her and her daughter, but to no success.

Because of the allegations against her ex-partner of historical sexual abuse, Victoria Police requested Child Protection fast-track her case for housing and support, as she was deemed a protective mother.

Sally's case was prioritised and a housing worker from Uniting Harrison's was immediately allocated to support her, but there was no transitional housing available. *Sally*, therefore, had to seek an alternative option herself.

As a last resort, *Sally* and her daughter stayed in a small guest room at a friend's house for a month while she actively searched for a rental property daily. The rental market is so competitive that it appeared she would never find a small two bedroom rental for her and her daughter.

Sally feels that it is only through extraordinary luck that she was able to find stable accommodation as there are very few private rental options that are affordable to a parent on a single pension. After weeks of daily searching, *Sally* visited an open for inspection for a place where there were no other people in attendance and she applied immediately and secured the private rental. Her housing worker assisted in this process, writing a letter to the real estate agent stating they would pay the first month's rent and the bond.

Sally has been placed on the immediate public housing list and has provided detailed evidence about her circumstances, but has not heard anything since May 2019.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Sally

Sally requires permanent public housing as a long-term arrangement for her daughter. She still remains on a waiting list.

Sally's circumstances also highlight that large-scale government campaigns that promote support for the most vulnerable in our community can be extremely irresponsible if there is not the services and resources available on-the-ground to provide immediate safety, housing and essential needs for women and children fleeing family violence. *Sally* was profoundly let down and placed in an extremely at-risk situation by the promise of a government marketing campaign.

***Jed* - Chronic homelessness, Alcohol and Other Drugs [AOD] and Mental Health**

Jed is a man in his 40s who appears to have significant issues with alcohol addiction. On several occasions, Monash Council has attempted to engage with him and offer support, but he has refused assistance. Council is concerned for *Jed's* mental health. He presents as very withdrawn when Council officers have approached him to offer support.

It has proved extremely difficult for Council to support *Jed* as he will not engage, however he frequently chooses to locate himself in very public places. This has been a challenge, as the public spaces he chooses to frequent are areas where children and families attend. Council has had to navigate the challenging scenario of protecting *Jed's* human rights whilst also ensuring the Monash community feel safe.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Jed

After years of living on the streets, the complexity of *Jed's* presenting issues are increasing, which has resulted in police involvement in recent months. This escalation might have been prevented if there were appropriate mental health and AOD support services and interventions available to *Jed*.

***Laura* - Chronic Homelessness and Mental Health**

Laura, who is in her late 20s, has a history of homelessness and mental health issues, and is extremely vulnerable. She spent over a month in Dandenong Hospital due to depression early in 2018. Not long after being discharged, a housing service placed her in a rooming house where she was very unhappy, as she did not feel safe in the environment.

Laura moved to a hotel with the support of a housing service and, after much persuasion, she agreed to receive Council's assistance to apply on her behalf for the Towards Home Property in Chadstone.

Laura was interviewed for the Towards Home Property in Chadstone and tried her best to put herself forward as a positive candidate for the property. She wanted to address her mental health and work towards future study; however, she was not accepted as she was considered too complex. This was extremely disappointing, as what she required was wrap-around support and stable accommodation. Instead, *Laura* remained in the hotel with the limited support that Council's assertive homelessness outreach role could provide.

Council's next attempt to find support for *Laura* was through the Stepped Care program, which focuses on assisting people with mental health conditions who are at risk of falling through the cracks. The program provides outreach to people who are homeless to ensure that vulnerable people receive the mental health support they need. *Laura* was accepted into the program but was not contacted for three months by the Stepped Care worker in Glen Waverley. Once eventually contacted, *Laura* refused assistance, as she was extremely angry the process took so long. This failure in the system also negatively impacted on Council's relationship with the young woman, as it was perceived by *Laura* that Council had not been able to effectively help her.

Laura remains living in the hotel room in Chadstone at a reduced rate. The landlord does not allow *Laura* a key to her room, so they are able to lock her out when she falls behind in payments. Her room, therefore, often remains open, which has resulted in valuables being stolen. In addition, *Laura* lives with constant fear associated with the prospect of anyone being able to enter her room.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Laura

It is extremely difficult to support marginalised members of the community when the support services employed to provide a safety-net are unable to fulfil their roles effectively. *Laura* is now reluctant to accept assistance from any services that could assist her with her mental health and housing.

Dennis - Chronic Homelessness and Physical Health

Dennis, a man in his 60s, has been living in his car in Monash for multiple years after a marriage break up. Chronic back issues and multiple bouts of pneumonia has seen *Dennis* regularly in and out of hospital, only to be discharged without stable accommodation, so returns to living in his car.

It has been difficult for Council to assist with providing housing options, as *Dennis* would not consider living in a rooming house or a share-house, so he has had no other option but to live in his car. *Dennis* was eventually accepted into a Towards Home property, but never moved in as he became chronically ill and spent the ensuing 10 months in hospital.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Dennis

Dennis' health issues significantly escalated because he was regularly discharged from hospital without a suitable accommodation arrangement, leaving him no choice but to return to living in his car. A greater duty of care, and coordinated response for *Dennis'* welfare and exceptional circumstances, is required.

Richards Family - Chronic Homelessness

In 2018, a family of three was squatting in a factory in Monash when Council officers became aware of their living arrangements. The *Richards Family* had been living in the factory for 12 months. Previously, they had rented a property, but were forced to move when their lease was not extended. They tried to re-enter the housing market, but were unable to find an affordable property. The mother was on a disability pension and the father was receiving NewStart Allowance. The family wished to ensure their daughter could remain attending her current school, therefore did not want to move from the area.

Council could not allow the family to live in the factory, and worked closely with them to try to find suitable affordable housing that would be relatively close to their daughter's school. Housing First were able to offer an apartment to the family at approximately 30% below market rate, but the family felt the cost was beyond what they could afford, with both parents relying on government benefits. They felt that if they accepted the property they would be placed under extreme financial stress, and if they received an unexpected expense or bill, they would become susceptible to homelessness again. As a result, the family declined the accommodation.

The family's circumstances at this time are unknown.

Service Provision improvements that would assist the Richards family

Housing affordability and the significant increase in costs of utilities continues to prove a huge challenge for individuals and families reliant on welfare payments. The *Richards family* genuinely felt they could not afford community housing. It is a significant concern if community members are feeling they are being priced out of affordable housing options.

Gwen - Chronic Homelessness and Physical Health

Gwen is a 29-year-old woman who has been living in her car in Monash for multiple years. *Gwen* has a dermatological condition that prevents her from being exposed to direct sunlight. This condition poses a significant barrier to her being able to source stable accommodation during daylight hours. *Gwen* is forced to remain in her car during the day, and at night she eats and showers at a local gym.

Gwen is motivated to change her circumstances, and organised a referral through an afterhours GP to a dermatologist at Monash Health. She received a letter from Monash Health notifying her that she has been placed on a waiting list where the expected waiting time is more than 12 months. A specialist appointment with a dermatologist is critical to assist with her moving away from her cycle of rough sleeping. Council's homelessness social outreach officer contacted Monash Health to advocate for *Gwen* to be prioritised on the waiting list, but was informed that the hospital treats conditions and not circumstances, and that *Gwen* will need to get another referral.

Despite Council's assistance, there are ongoing complications in *Gwen* trying to access Centrelink payments. Because of these compounding obstacles, *Gwen* has stopped responding to contact from Council and has expressed that she feels like giving up.

Service Provision improvements that would assist Gwen

There needs to be greater flexibility and prioritisation of service provision by all health services when working with the most marginalised members of our community.

2. Monash Council championing a unified local government Regional Response to Homelessness Charter

Monash Council is currently leading a coalition of 14 Eastern and South-Eastern Councils* to develop a regional local government Charter to respond to homelessness and advocate for more social housing in 2020.

On November 26 2019, Monash Council hosted a *CEO Forum: Local Government Regional Response to Homelessness*. CEOs and executive staff from 14 Eastern and South-Eastern Councils were invited to explore a regional Local Government response to homelessness, with a specific focus on generating more social housing. The emphasis on social housing was informed by the research Monash Council had commissioned through the Council to Homeless Persons. Council to Homeless Persons recommends that the most impactful activity that local governments can undertake to reduce homelessness, is to support the delivery of homes people can afford. For the lowest income households most vulnerable to homelessness, this means the provision of social housing.

The explicit objective of this forum, initiated by Monash Council, was to bring regional Councils together to form a consolidated view on:

- The extent of the homelessness issues experienced by Councils.
- The levers available to local government for advocacy and collective action.
- A coherent plan moving forward to work together to respond to homelessness, and to generate social housing for the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Presenter experts from the Council to Homeless Persons, Launch Housing and Homes for Homes guided the forum attendees in identifying where action needs to occur and, specifically, local government's role.

With over 70 representatives in the room, including six Local Government CEOs, Department of Health & Human Services, MAV and The Agenda Group, the coalition of Councils shaped a united regional Local Government response to homelessness and endorsed for the combined Council group to advocate to the state government for more social housing.

As a result of the forum in late 2019, a regional advocacy Charter will now be developed by the City of Monash in consultation with the coalition of 14 Eastern and South-Eastern Councils, which represent more than two million Victorians.

The Regional Local Government Charter to Respond to Homelessness will seek to prioritise the following three areas:

1. A regional strategic land utilisation project which will seek to scope and map available state and local government land for the purpose of social housing.
2. Advocacy for mandatory inclusionary zoning state-wide planning controls.
3. A Regional Housing Strategy including targets.

The Charter is in the very early stages of development at the time of this submission (Jan 2020). Monash Council can be contacted for progress updates about this regional piece of work throughout the year. For all enquiries, please contact, Dr Andi Diamond, Chief Executive Officer, City of Monash, Andi.Diamond@monash.vic.gov.au or (03) 9518 3504.

Highlights Video of CEO Forum: Local Government Regional Response to Homelessness

To view a short highlights video of this regional forum hosted by Monash Council, please visit the link:

<https://vimeo.com/albaprime/review/378681509/469bfaa1e0>

** CEO Forum: Local Government Regional Response to Homelessness - 14 Participating Eastern and South-Eastern Councils*

Bayside City Council, City of Boroondara, City of Casey, City of Cardinia, Frankston City Council, City of Greater Dandenong, Knox City Council, City of Kingston, Manningham City Council, City of Monash, Maroondah City Council, Mornington Peninsula Shire, City of Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges Council.