



Victorian Council of Churches

Homelessness Week, 1st – 7th August 2022 MEDIA STATEMENT

Homelessness Week is held annually in the first week of August. It aims to raise awareness of the issues homeless people face and the action needed to achieve long term solutions. The experience of homelessness, even for short periods, can have serious, long-term effects on a person's mental and physical well-being. It can contribute to premature ageing through earlier onset of health problems and robs people of dignity and self-worth.

There are about 25,000 people living with homelessness across Victoria, with a reported 43% increase in homelessness over the last ten years. Crisis and emergency housing is stretched, and inadequate to meet the demand. The vast majority of homeless people are not usually 'rough sleeping' on the street, but may be living in a car or tent, or temporary accommodation, or 'couch surfing' with friends. It largely renders their plight invisible from public view. Even working people can find themselves homeless when they are unable to access accommodation because of the housing crisis and must come up with temporary solutions.

The COVID pandemic has pushed more people into poverty and homelessness, many for the first time. At the same time, escalating rents, limited rental vacancies, the housing affordability crisis, job uncertainty, and family and domestic violence have all contributed to a rise in homelessness. Older people are also at greater risk of homelessness, with women over 45 the fastest growing group at risk of homelessness due to family and domestic violence, lower retirement savings and superannuation and cost of living expenses.

The 2022 Homelessness Week theme is: **To end homelessness we need a plan.**

Years of inadequate investment has left Australia facing a shortfall of social housing dwellings. In March 2022, the number of households on Victoria's social housing waitlist grew to 54,945. The Victorian government has pledged to build 12,000 social housing homes by the end of 2025, but is not enough to keep up with demand. Homelessness Australia released data showing that cuts to social housing funding and homelessness services over the last ten years will soon exceed \$1 billion. At the same time house prices have gone up by 50% and rents by 31%.

Census data has revealed a million houses are sitting empty in towns where, just metres away, working families are being forced to live in tents. Government policies and the taxation system has led to housing being treated more as an investment rather than a basic human need. More needs to be done so all have access to safe housing.

Dr John Falzon, in a 2021 article in Eureka Street, said, "Homelessness is caused, not by poverty, but by wealth, especially speculative wealth, concentrated in the hands of the few, to the detriment of the many. It is one effect of a disastrously structured housing market that makes of housing a speculative sport rather than a human right. If we want to address homelessness, we need to begin to carve out a space for social and economic security in the midst of the current uncertainty. This, of course, means a massive boost to social housing, but it also means a reimagining of what really matters in our lives".

There are many community-based initiatives to support homeless people including the **Wang Night Shelter** and the **Maroondah Winter Shelter**. These are ecumenical activities, where churches in an area partner with volunteers, community groups and local businesses. They use empty buildings like community halls and churches as temporary overnight accommodation for the less fortunate.

The Wang Night Shelter began as a pilot project in 2019. It was named 'Project of the Year' at the 2022 Australia Day awards by the Rural City of Wangaratta. It provides shelter and food for those experiencing homelessness in winter. Project coordinator Di Duursma reports that there is an increasing need for the night shelter as more people lose their jobs and struggle with their finances. "We've seen lives changed – our own and also those who come and stay with us. We see that we can make a difference by providing a place that is safe for people to sleep, providing them with a warm meal, and providing them with a place they feel like they can belong. Together with the local churches, Zac's Place (drop in centre), Wangaratta Inter-Church Council, Victorian Council of Churches, Stable One, local businesses and groups and individuals, we are a collective response to homelessness, loneliness and heartache."

The Maroondah Winter Shelter is another community-based project that began in 2018 in the Ringwood/Croydon area to support homeless men. In 2022, churches in the area will open their doors for 4 nights a week, from July to September, to provide shelter, food, and support. This project was awarded the 2020 Maroondah Australia Day Community Event of the Year. Noting that some of the guests return from year to year, an Advocacy Group has been established, to advocate for permanent housing for the homeless in the Maroondah area. The Advocacy Group has met with both elected and non-elected representatives of the three levels of government, made submissions to both the State and Federal government inquiries into homelessness and housing affordability, organised a housing forum and has taken all occasions that have presented to increase the understanding of why people become homeless.

The welfare of people living with homelessness is an issue that should concern us all, as is the more critical question about why homelessness exists at all.

Christian faith holds up service as an inescapable response to the Gospel, compassion as the response to the vulnerable, and advocacy to seek justice for the disadvantaged.

Matthew 25: 35, 36, 39: *"I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me. Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me - you did it to me."*

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