General Homelessness

Hanover believes every person deserves a home, an income, good health and to be part of a community. For a country as rich as Australia, no-one should be homeless.

Key statistics:

- On any given night 105,000 Australians are homeless, including 20,511 Victorians
- A quarter of those who are homeless are families with children and just under a half (43%) are under the age of 25
- 62% of people are turned away from homelessness services because there is no room for them
- Families are most likely to be turned away as they are the most difficult to accommodate

What are the causes?

People of many ages and backgrounds experience homelessness. The main causes of homelessness include the critical shortage of affordable housing for those on a low income; unemployment and financial hardship.

“For a single parent with one child on a Centrelink income, the proportion of affordable 2 bedroom dwellings across Melbourne was 3%.” (Page 8, March 2010 rental report).

Family violence is the most common reason for women accessing a homelessness service. Two thirds of children who access these services accompany their mothers escaping family violence.

“I left in the middle of the night, packed a bag in 10 minutes and just took the littlies. I thought this time for sure I was going to get murdered” (Sally, draft Intensive Care Management Initiative (ICMI) review report).

The risk of homelessness is increased when people experience a sudden change in their circumstances. Perhaps they lose a job, have a sudden health crisis, a family member dies, they retire, a relationships ends or a baby is born.

People with a mental health issue or problematic drug or alcohol use are more at risk of becoming homeless, as are those leaving an institution, including hospital, prison, child protection or a psychiatric service.

What are the consequences?

Homelessness is a traumatic experience. It puts extra strain on people’s relationships and on their mental and emotional health. Many who find themselves homeless have already endured significant stress apart from their housing – be it long running financial hardship, domestic violence, the loss of a job or the breakdown of a relationship.

For many people the first point of call is family or friends. They move in with a family member who wants to help but may in fact be struggling themselves. Over crowding and relationship breakdowns can often result, leading to further trauma and heart ache.

Homelessness makes it much harder for people to:

- find or keep a job;
- keep in contact with friends and family;
- eat well and generally look after themselves;
- save money and resolve financial difficulties.
“We lost every possession we ever owned; we had 24 addresses in 3 years...I had a nervous breakdown, I couldn't cope, I lost my kids, I had no home, no nothing”  
(Jay, draft ICMI review report).

“I am cancer patient. I want to die in my bed, with my wife, friends near, not on the street. I worked all my life I deserve to die in respect”  
(David, Hanover 2008, Client Survey).

“My husband and I are such old people. It is very humiliating at the end of our days after we survived war, worked all our lives, to be on the street and treated as dogs”  
(Elizabeth, Hanover 2008 Client Survey).

For families, keeping their children at school during a period of homelessness becomes extremely difficult. Moving house often means moving schools which can lead to children falling behind their peers and dropping out early. This in turn can lead to further homelessness later in life.

Homelessness can also cause mental illness for those who never experienced it in the past. Research suggests that of the 30% of people who are homeless and have mental health problems, at least half developed these problems after becoming homeless1.

What are the solutions?
The best solution to homelessness is to address the causes and prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. This involves ensuring sufficient affordable housing, providing people with access to education, training and employment, preventing ill health and ensuring everyone has someone they can turn to at times of need.

Hanover has been providing housing and support to people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne for over 45 years including short, medium and long term accommodation, support to rebuild people’s lives and assistance into employment. However, more can be done.

Hanover would like to be able to provide:

- More long term housing for those with a high level of need;
- Education and training support for people who need help to get back into study and work;
- Assistance to prevent people from becoming mentally ill as a result of homelessness.

References:

1 Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G., and Theobald, J. Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the Challenge. Melbourne, RMIT University, 2008
6 Hanover Welfare Services, Annual Client Survey, 2008
8 Intensive Case Management Initiative Project, unpublished data.