

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Janet Graham

Organisation Name:
Your position or role:

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Public housing,Rough sleeping,Housing affordability,Mental health,Employment,Indigenous people,Family violence,Services

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Concerned citizen

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

See submission

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 24,000 people are currently homeless in Victoria. Increasing lack of affordability of private housing while wages stagnate is one reason for the mounting number of people under housing stress.

Public housing

The best way to address homelessness is to provide an adequate supply of well-maintained public housing. Run by the government, public housing provides stable, reliable accommodation. It guarantees that tenants pay no more than 25% of their income and cannot be evicted in times of hardship, ill health or unemployment. Secure housing is a human right, and our taxes should be directed to resourcing it.

Community or 'social' housing, on the other hand, run by private housing organisations, does not provide the same level of security. Rent may be higher and in some cases tenants are required to pay additional charges for services that are free in public housing.

Public Housing Renewal Program (PHRP)

Victoria's PHRP has now been acknowledged as a 'social housing' program. It fails in its duty of care to citizens by handing over responsibility for housing to private organisations. Further, this new social housing is being funded by private developments that will consume large parts of what should remain public land.

The program will provide very little public housing across the 11 estates involved. As well, the real increase in social housing on some estates will be negligible, as larger flats are being replaced with one- and two-bedroom units.

I believe the PHRP should be scrapped. The DHHS should renovate the viable estates (maintenance has been neglected for too long) and those estates that need buildings to be replaced should be devoted entirely to public housing. Tenants should be returned to their homes as quickly as possible to avoid further disruption to their lives.

The government should take advantage of the current low interest rates to invest in schemes that massively increase public housing stock, using other land that it already owns.

Affordable housing

Councils should be allowed to require developers to include a 20% component of affordable units in suitable housing projects. This requirement should be mandatory, not discretionary. The City of Melbourne has found that 'voluntary' inclusionary zoning does not work.

Some developers have complained about planning applications taking too long and want approvals to be fast-tracked. Caution should be exercised here. We do not want quality to be sacrificed in the (developers') interests of rapid development. Affordable housing that is sustainable both financially and environmentally should be possible with creative thinking.

Utilise empty apartments for crisis accommodation

Councils should be able to take possession of apartments that have been unoccupied for six months or more and convert them to temporary crisis accommodation. While only a stop-gap, it would help get homeless people out of a precarious life on the streets. The fear around the COVID-19 pandemic has made life even harder for homeless people.

Raise Centrelink Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance

The current amounts are grossly inadequate and have not even kept pace with the cost of living. Amounts should be at least doubled. Increasing Newstart and Youth Allowance would have the added benefit of recipients spending more money in the ailing retail sector.

Raise the age of out-of-home care

Teenagers suddenly finding themselves on their own are extremely vulnerable. Unsupported, often with their basic education incomplete and with limited income, they can easily fall into homelessness. Raising the age of leaving foster care or residential care (statutory care of the state) from 18 to 21 would help.

Other strategies to address underlying causes

It is clear that addressing homelessness and reducing the disgraceful housing waiting list (about 84,000 people on the Victorian Housing Register) will require a number of strategies and creative ideas. With the best intentions (not yet evident) it will take many years for the government to build up the necessary public housing stock.

It is well documented that anxiety about insecure housing, or the lack of permanent housing, often leads to mental ill-health. This renders a person less capable of applying for and holding down a job, and so the cycle of disadvantage continues. Even for healthy homeless people it is almost impossible to present for interviews looking clean, well rested and suitably attired.

Housing First

A Housing First approach should be trialled. Adopted by Finland in 2008, Housing First has proven success in reducing long-term homelessness in that country. Working on the theory that accommodating people safely first and then attending to any health issues or substance addictions on-site, it has resulted in such an improvement in wellbeing that many participants have regained their independence and been able to re-enter the workforce.

VincentCare's redeveloped Ozanam House in North Melbourne is a good example of a charitable institution designing innovative solutions for people with various levels of disadvantage, including some housing for older women on low incomes.

A number of other successful projects have come to my attention.

Kids Under Cover

This program provides demountable studio or one- or two-bedroom apartments for 12–25-year-olds in their families' backyards. Why not extend the scheme to the back gardens of anyone willing to provide modest independent accommodation to vulnerable older people, especially women, not necessarily related to the house owners?

Tiny Houses and Compact Houses

There are two types of Tiny Houses — movable (on wheels) and fixed. Similar to Kids Under Cover, the main purpose of some is to allow teenagers and young adults to live on their parents' property independently but without a kitchen so they have to eat with the family. Why not make this option available to single older people too (without the dining conditions!)? Some are already living comfortably in Tiny or Compact Houses in rural areas.

Collaborative living for older people

This includes co-housing, cooperatives and building groups. Offering varied types of private living conditions coupled with shared resources, cooperative living provides a more affordable, more sustainable lifestyle with the possibility of building a supportive community. Nightingale's The Commons in Brunswick is a prime example of this model.

Programs that do on-the-job training

One example of this is HoMie, a clothing label, street store and social enterprise producing custom-made tee-shirts and other apparel. It offers paid internships for 16–25-year-olds. HoMie provides training in the textile industry and retail, building the self-confidence that comes with acquiring employable skills and experience interacting with customers.

Janet Graham
16 March 2020

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

No

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1:

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Janet C. Graham