

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria Community Comments

Shepparton—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

#### MEMBERS

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Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

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Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Ms Suzanna Sheed, Independent Member for Shepparton, Legislative Assembly, and

Mr Myles Peterson, Adviser to Suzanna Sheed.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you to everyone who is here and to the people who have been here throughout the day. We really appreciate it, and I think it really shows that this issue is something that the community as a whole is so interested in and wants to help in finding the solutions.

I now get to declare open the community comment section of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Again, mobile phones silent, please. This part of the public hearing is intended to allow members of the public—but I am acknowledging that we are also going to have a Member of Parliament—speak to us today to let the Committee know some views on homelessness, particularly in this area. We ask that contributions are kept to a maximum of 3 minutes to allow everyone who wishes to speak to have time to do that. By the way, normally in Parliament we get 90 seconds to say what we think, so, you know, generous at 3 minutes, we would say.

When you come forward, if you would not mind, please clearly state your name for the record. As you can see we are recording this. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore the information you give today is protected by law; however, if you repeated those comments outside this hearing, it may not be protected.

As we say, this is to help us in looking for those solutions. It is to help us to have a greater understanding of homelessness, and particularly in this region, so ultimately this transcript will be made public. If you did not want your name, I am assuming you will have spoken to Lilian about that previously, but it will go up on our Committee's website and it will form part of our Inquiry into this. So again I thank you all for coming today.

I would like to welcome Suzanna Sheed, Member for Shepparton, and Myles Peterson, her colleague. I am well aware that they have been doing significant work in this area in parallel to the Inquiry, so welcome.

**Ms SHEED:** Thank you very much, and I know it is a short time, so first of all I would like to say thank you very much for coming to Shepparton and hearing from our community. You will have heard from so many of the organisations while you have been here who know so much more than I do and work in this space, but we have in our work spoken to many of them. I think the things that brought me to the point of looking into this in a more focused way were two things: one, I think everybody needs a home. It is not just about a roof over your head; it is having a home. The second is I am aware that there are empty houses all around the place. There is one down the end of my street, and, Luke, you will know of a house that has been empty down the end of our street for five years. I do not know who owns it, but it has never had anyone living in it.

Now, this triggered in my mind the fact that there are many empty houses in our community, and the 2016 census identified that there were 2471 unoccupied dwellings on the night of the census. That seemed like a ridiculous figure, and indeed I believe that it is. It also identified 350, say, homeless people in Shepparton on that night. Now, we all remember that that census was a bit of a dud for a whole lot of reasons. The technology failed; no-one was ever followed up as to whether they filled in the forms or anything because nobody wanted to really go down that path, but if you use that as a broad brush, it still seemed to me that 350 people is not a lot of people in this community that we ought to be able to house somehow. So, we approached the local water authority and we got them to identify every house that does not have water connected to it. That is how the State Government identifies properties that are vacant for the purposes of the vacancy tax that they introduced a couple of years ago, so I thought, 'Well, let's go down that path'. We have identified that there are—

**Mr PETERSON:** Approximately 200 in Shepparton and about 100 in Mooroopna that are definitely properties that are registered, but they are truly vacant by the criteria.

**Ms SHEED:** So some of these we expect will be Department of Health and Human Services properties that have been empty for at least one, two or three years. Whether they are to be offered on the market privately at some stage we do not know. We have had some discussions with an agent in particular who is particularly involved in this, where he has been asked to sell department housing, and he maintains that they do sit around

for quite a long time. They deteriorate. We have driven around. Myles has identified a number of those properties in our community, which just seems to me like this extraordinary waste of resource that has been sitting there year after year not being picked up, not being maintained, not being sold into the private market if the department does not want it anymore. At least if it is in the private market, then it becomes another house available for rent.

**Mr PETERSON:** It is very popular at the moment; buying up these properties is quite an endeavour in Shepparton. They tend to come straight back onto the market fairly quickly once they get a quick reno.

**Ms SHEED:** So we are at the stage of trying to identify each of them and slowly build a story of each property. Firstly, I would anticipate that quite a few of them are department housing, so my guess is they do not have a big enough maintenance budget to deal with the maintenance or renovation of them to get them ready quickly—although I believe they are meant to have something like a three-month turnaround, but I suspect that is just not happening.

So I wanted to do this work so I could come up with some policy to lobby the Government on in a meaningful way. Everyone else is doing something in the space, and you will have heard from many people today. We all know we need to have more housing in the market and more houses built, much more social housing, but it just seems to me here in our community we ought not have empty homes wasted when they could have a family in them. I say one family into one house at a time is not a bad goal. So that is sort of where we are heading, and I do not know where it will end up or what the pushback will be like.

**The CHAIR:** Please, keep us informed. We know where to find you.

**Ms SHEED:** You do. There are many other people here who have walked in even in the short time I have been here, so that was really the main point that I wanted to make.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Suzanna. I think that is a great project, and I think it is really creative. Thank you.

**Ms SHEED:** Well, Myles and I are on a mission here.

**The CHAIR:** On a mission, that is right. Thanks very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Father Simon Robinson, Rector, Mooroopna Anglican Church.

**The CHAIR:** Simon Robinson, hello. It is nice to actually finally say hello to you.

**Fr ROBINSON:** Hello—same. I am Fr Simon Robinson from the Anglican parish of Mooroopna. I have got a couple of different hats on this afternoon. As part of the greater Christian community across Greater Shepparton we are in the process at the moment of trying to set up a winter night shelter modelled on the Stable One model out of Melbourne. We are four church venues away from making that happen, but that is only half—we have only got half of the churches we need to put people up. They will put up 10 people a night every night through winter for those three months, but to me I feel like we are putting a bandaid on a cancer. I mean, it just seems to me to be a total waste of resources and time, even though I know it will make a significant difference to those 10 people who show up every night.

**The CHAIR:** Got any empty houses?

**Fr ROBINSON:** This is a massive issue, and it is on the doorstep of my church. I am in the canteen, the old SPC Ardmona canteen. People are coming up from the river every day, cutting through my car park to go and buy drugs, buy food, buy whatever and then return down to the river, and it is just passing by my nose. What do I do? And the homeless people that I have interaction with—I just came from one at lunchtime. I tried to get her to come down here to talk to you guys, but a classic situation: a woman who was basically, to be blunt, ‘If you don’t find someone to fuck, you’re fucked’. So this homeless situation has created a scenario where women, especially, are pushed into sexual servitude and domestic violence just to make sure that they have got a secure housing situation, which may be just a camp down the river, just down from my church. This is insane.

She was self-medicating, so I could not bring her down here, and I do not blame her, because her partner died of an overdose just two days ago. Both are of Indigenous heritage, so it is just an ongoing situation, and we have got this bandaid approach with the ministers across Shepparton, which again is important. But I look over my back fence and GV Water owns an enormous block of land over the back of my church, and I think, ‘Well, there’s an opportunity for pod housing. How would the council feel about that?’. But then we have got a caravan park across as a neighbour as well, and they would probably be cheesed off if we put a whole heap of free or low-income housing across the road from them.

**The CHAIR:** It might drop their prices.

**Fr ROBINSON:** But again, that is a scenario which is a nightmare to manage, because Yvonne, who manages that caravan park, takes two-thirds of their Newstart income, but she has to put up with drug addiction and violence every day, and I would not want her job for quids. And she is trying to bring the place up in quality.

Another thing that has happened recently is that we have partnered with the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project and Goulburn Valley pregnancy support to try and address these issues from the completely opposite end, so trying to socialise people into a—what would you say—more regular way of life, meeting the needs of mums and kids under school age. But we are doing that because there are no services available, really, here in Mooroopna. Everyone has got to slog it across this causeway either by bus or to walk it. I can run into Shepparton and back because I am double income, no kids, but I see people walking that or cycling it every summer just to go and get help. That is a 1-hour trip one way for someone who is walking. So there are some significant obstacles in the way of people who are living in Mooroopna. That is not knocking the council, because I love the way they are getting behind the homelessness issue, but there is only so much they can do.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Amazing. Thank you, Simon. I really appreciate you coming in, and I think you have nailed just a few of those issues there. Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Ms Kelly James.

**The CHAIR:** Kelly James, thank you so much for coming. We really appreciate it. You just start.

**Ms JAMES:** My name is Kelly. I am a 50-year-old woman, currently homeless, receiving a DSP, a disability support pension. My reasons for becoming homeless were I was residing in Mooroopna, running the international hostel. I had the Department of Human Services, Child Protection, ring me because my daughter was struggling with drug addiction, and they asked me if I could take care of the grandchildren. There were four of them at the time. Because of my residence I could not have them with me, so I resigned my job and my place of stay to move into the family home to take care of the grandchildren. That was March last year. By August my daughter was back out of rehab—had not done the whole program. DHS screened her for one week afterward and closed her file. My daughter and I have a struggling relationship because of these things.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it would be strained.

**Ms JAMES:** So for me to reside in the family home with her was a struggle. Five days before Christmas I was made homeless. I rang the Department of Health and Human Services, Child Protection. There was no exit plan for me. I am now homeless, no services, no resources. I am 50 years old. I have tried the private housing sector because I found out on emergency priority it is a seven-year wait. So I am now forced into private housing, which eliminates my public housing—I automatically go off that list.

**The CHAIR:** That is not right.

**Ms JAMES:** Yes, so I have just struggled with that. I have tried to put myself—I am going back to school to do a diploma of nursing, so I am hoping to resit that test, because with everything going on I struggled with the last one. So I am resitting it to do that again to start a career so I do not find myself in this situation ever again. But listening to everything I have heard being said here today, I agree; it needs a different structure with flexibility and more personalised criteria, and stricter criteria on people receiving housing—that they do need to present to programs; it is compulsory—because I walk around the north end of Shepparton and like Suzanna said, there are so many empty homes, or vacant blocks because the house has been burnt down through the production of drugs. I walk around and I see this. I am currently staying in a motel that is emergency housing; \$350 a week I pay, which is—you do the numbers. I get \$23 000 a year on the pension; it costs \$18 000 a year to live in this place. I have been there eight weeks, and I feel I am getting nowhere, because I do not fit certain criteria. My age holds me back because I am in between that 50–55, and because I suffer with mental health as well; that is why I am on disability. When things become overwhelming for me I find it hard to make good decisions, so I feel trapped. I feel vulnerable. I am staying in a place where there is still domestic violence, drug use, there was actually a 62-year-old woman living in there for two weeks. She had actually asked me to assist her with suicide. Her cat is in Nathalia in a shelter, and that is her life. That cat is her every reason. She has no children. Her husband—she was in a domestic violence relationship. She is out of the Four Corners caravan park, right out of town, no car, very little support.

**The CHAIR:** Oh, Kelly, thank you. That was amazing, and I so appreciate you coming up here, because I know—

**Ms JAMES:** Oh, thank you. I have been so—

**The CHAIR:** I know it took a lot of courage to do that, and I really appreciate it. I wish you all the best. I look forward to seeing you with your nursing diploma. I think that is fantastic, at 50 to be looking at a new career.

**Ms JAMES:** Yes, well, I thought, ‘Seven years for housing, it’ll take me three years to do this and be a nurse, and then I’ve got housing’.

**The CHAIR:** There you go; that is right.

**Ms LOVELL:** Good luck, Kelly.

**Ms JAMES:** Hopefully the mental illness keeps down and I cope with it.

**The CHAIR:** You look after yourself, and I think once you have got some stable accommodation—and I know you have been talking to Wintringham, so I am hoping that that pathway is widening and becoming a bit smoother for you.

**Ms JAMES:** Thank you so much, and thank you for hearing my story today.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Kelly.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Ms Patricia Moran, former family support worker.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Thank you so much for coming down.

**Ms MORAN:** Well, thank you for providing me with that opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** No, it is wonderful.

**Ms MORAN:** I will just give you a bit of background. In 1979 I became a family support worker with the department of social welfare, as it was in those days, and from thereon started a lifetime of working with people and families on low income living at a disadvantage in this area. The first year that I commenced work one of the families lived on the river here in Mooroopna: two parents and four children. So that was my first knowledge of it, and it really concerns me that it is worsened now to the extent that it has. At that stage we could go to the Ministry of Housing, or housing commission as it was in those days, with the families and advocate for rental housing. You know, there was not a great list, but they had to have an advocate with them all the same. We worked very well for a number of years, but anyway I now am in a volunteering capacity working with the pregnancy and family support service here, but that is not why I am here. I have read up and researched it all and I sat and read the Greater Shepparton submission, and it was absolutely fabulous.

**The CHAIR:** Wasn't it.

**Ms MORAN:** It is a most comprehensive document—

**The CHAIR:** The mayor is here to hear your compliments.

**Ms MORAN:** with all the information that you would need to know how dire the situation is. So I just put a few thoughts together here, and I will go ahead and read that to you.

When Greater Shepparton was recognised as having the highest number of homeless persons in regional Victoria, why was the area overlooked for a portion of the State Government's \$209 million regional public housing budget allocation 2019–2020? The budget allocation would have allowed for the building of 1000 public housing properties over three years. We have a shortfall of 1751 affordable dwellings for low-income housing and 1041 identified on the public housing waiting list as at June 2019. This has continued. Throughout all these years there has been that waiting list. I think the 2000s, I would say, there was a drastic turnover.

**The CHAIR:** It went up.

**Ms MORAN:** Yes. This issue needs to be urgently reviewed and addressed. Forty per cent of Greater Shepparton's identified homeless encompass family units, which is another disgrace; 61.3 per cent of these are women, which is another disgrace. Unscrupulous investors are buying up low-priced houses, a lot of them public rental houses, and renting them out at high prices. Also, many houses are occupied by too many tenants paying \$100 per week just for floor space. That is identified through the affordable housing strategy of the council, which I fed back to with the consultants there.

The affordable housing strategy project in Greater Shepparton highlighted this situation. One solution could be—and I have thought about this over a couple of years now—that a housing cooperative is formed by community members/philanthropists and/or in partnership with the State Government to build low-income rental housing or buy up existing homes, as has been done by unscrupulous investors, with a priority for low-income renters and with suitable supervision, because I know that—

**The CHAIR:** People need help.

**Ms MORAN:** some of them damage the places that they are in, and they are left lying idle for far too long, when some really good family—well, when I say 'good', some needy family that would look after it and would cherish the fact that they had it.

Greater Shepparton City Council also advocates for a change to the dreadful homelessness issue for its constituents and has submitted a comprehensive document to this Inquiry. Council also supports the Raise the Rate campaign, with the aim to influence Federal Government to raise the long-term, low Newstart benefit for 373 local people struggling to survive on the pittance that is well below the poverty line.

So that is just a snapshot of what I have learned over many, many years, but thank you for the opportunity to come and speak to that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Pat, and I love the idea of the community as a whole getting behind this, building homes—

**Ms MORAN:** Well, we are; I am sure we are. There may not be a huge amount coming in here, but I have talked amongst people, and they are so concerned.

**The CHAIR:** Oh, believe me, this is wonderful.

**Ms MORAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Pat. Thanks very much.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Councillor Kim O’Keeffe, City of Greater Shepparton.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Thank you so much; nice to see you.

**Cr O’KEEFFE:** Good afternoon. Thank you so much for having me. I am representing community. I know you have had council representation today, and I am sure you have heard a lot of things that need to be said. In the last 12 months I have been very invested with the community in regard to the community wanting to support homelessness. We are in a crisis. I am sure you have heard that. Statistics are all there; proof is all there, so really today it was about coming to you and letting you know—Wendy knows it—that the community want to get behind this. They really want to support. What that means we are still working out.

I am involved with the winter night shelter, which is an important initiative—the Greater Shepparton winter shelter. To me it has been said, ‘It’s a bandaid effect’. It is actually bringing people in that need support and other than sheltering them overnight is looking at perhaps some services they are not tapping into. It has been very successful in Bendigo, Queensland and other areas. So from my perspective as a community member, we are trying to push our arms out as far as we can and pull people in that want to help. As I said, it is a crisis in our community. If you look across our community, you will see the growth that we are experiencing—a wonderful region, a wonderful community—but we are leaving people behind and we do not want to leave these people behind. We want to know what is the future; what can we do as a region, as people, as a council to work with you and to make sure that we can see some significant change, because we need significant change to happen sooner rather than later.

**The CHAIR:** Kim, thank you so much, and I think you probably speak on behalf of the community here. The passion in Shepparton has been wonderful, and yes, this solution will need to be whole of population; it will need to be the community and the Government who get behind this—and the private sector and the philanthropists.

**Cr O’KEEFFE:** Thank you so much. Having you here today is significant. It shows that you acknowledge the crisis that we are confronted with.

**The CHAIR:** We do. We understand it is almost an epicentre.

**Ms LOVELL:** We were not going to let them not come.

**Cr O’KEEFFE:** That is exactly right. So we are very grateful, and hopefully we can work together to make some change, because we definitely need it to happen.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you, Councillor, and we very much appreciate your coming down.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Ms Brenda Keenan, Project Coordinator, winter night shelter.

**Ms KEENAN:** Thank you. I did not intend speaking. I intended—

**The CHAIR:** Well, it is nice to have you.

**Ms KEENAN:** coming to listen only.

**Ms LOVELL:** That would be a change, Brenda.

**Ms KEENAN:** That would be a change! I have been appointed as project coordinator for the Greater Shepparton winter night shelter project, which we are currently getting organised and providing an infrastructure around. I am a Shepparton girl, born and bred, and have not lived in Shepparton really since I was 18. My first response was I was shocked to hear that outside of Melbourne, Greater Shepparton had the largest number of homeless. I just think it is a blight on society. These good people behind me and obviously those you have listened today, we are keen for change and opportunity—and opportunity for all. So I am not here to make comment other than to say thank you for coming. I do not know, I do not understand, parliamentary inquiries. I have been living overseas for the last couple of years, so I am a little bit out of touch, but I certainly hope that you have got some legs as well. I just assume you do, because it is a great effort for all of you to be here. But for those in need, and there are many, and I am guessing—I do not know; I am guessing—it is a growing concern here in this region and I daresay across lots of regions and metropolitan areas as well. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Brenda. That is wonderful. It is not often politicians get thanks.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Ms Vicki Scott, Community Project Coordinator, Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project.

**The CHAIR:** Hi, Vicki.

**Ms SCOTT:** Hi, how are you?

**The CHAIR:** Great. Lighthouse?

**Ms SCOTT:** Great. I did not actually realise I was speaking today, but here I am.

**The CHAIR:** Here you are.

**Ms SCOTT:** My name is Vicki Scott, and I am community project coordinator at the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project. I work extensively in the primary years space but most importantly—well, I think importantly—I do a lot of my work in Mooroopna. I am a born-and-bred-Mooroopna person and have a lot of passion about the community. Simon has been up here, and we have been working a lot with Simon. We recently opened our Mooroopna Family Haven, which has been magnificent.

So, why am I here? I am actually probably wearing a few different hats. I am wearing the Lighthouse hat; I am wearing a Mooroopna Rotary hat and just a community hat. A number of years ago I started to develop more of an understanding of the community. Homelessness was something that I just never understood, and now I am starting to—well, I never really realised it existed to the extreme that it does, and it bothers me a lot. So I am here today because I do not think it is good enough. I think it is wonderful that we are at least here having this conversation. I am wanting, as with Simon, Kim and other people that have been speaking here today—we have a lot of social capital around, ‘Let’s work together to do something about this’.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Hear, hear. Thank you, Vicki.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Mr Allan Mitchell.

**The CHAIR:** Hello. Good afternoon.

**Mr MITCHELL:** I am Allan Mitchell, and I am a case manager in the Magistrates Court, although I must express my opinions are those of a community member and not my employer or program.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you.

**Mr MITCHELL:** I do bring it up rather just to qualify my observations as a community member.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr MITCHELL:** We support those with complex needs in the justice space. Usually they have a range of complex needs, such as AOD, mental health and relationship breakdowns. They are often the things that lead into the justice space and homelessness alike, you know? So it is usually quite a difficult solution for the people we support. I did actually hope to have somebody with me today. He is not here. He does actually live very nearby in the woods you can see from this window.

When asking for the account of my clients, which I have done in the lead-up to today, generally I would say, 'What's your opinion on it?'. There is no housing. That is the blanket statement. When asked to elaborate, generally it becomes apparent that the gap between Newstart or Centrelink allowances and the cost of a private rental are just far adrift. Likewise for our clients who do find themselves released from custody into the community, any crisis accommodation is an even further insurmountable cost. I mean, local providers—we talked about unscrupulous landlords before. It way outreaches what they can achieve on Newstart. The gaps between crisis accommodation and actually securing a house via the public housing system are years, as you have probably heard already. So there are not really a great deal of options for our clients.

Now, what I have seen working to great success in the last year or so is the transitional property option, and it is really, really limited often in the youth space here in Shepparton. The reason it works is it is affordable and it requires the tenant to meet certain criteria, usually around support planning for their specific complex needs. If they are not addressing those complex needs and becoming a more viable tenant for their long-term sustainability, the transitional property is then given to another person who is willing to approach that.

We talk about—and Ms Sheed brought up—potentially 200 vacant houses that are sitting here and again, perhaps to quote the 'unscrupulous landlords' line, these are not affordable for the people I see day in, day out and try and support. If there is some sort of legislation or some sort of way to develop agreements and assurances for private landlords to maybe open those as transitional housing, find a way to bridge that gap. normally when we put the people who are suffering into housing it actually encourages them and motivates them to address their problems and increase their sustainability as a tenant and ideally address their global issues, you know, which is a huge thing we witness here in the community every single day in this space, I would say.

**The CHAIR:** I bet.

**Mr MITCHELL:** I could talk for a long, long time about this, but I guess they are the general points, so I will stop there.

**The CHAIR:** Allan, thank you so much, and I think that intersection between the justice system and homelessness is so obvious. If you do not have a home, it is really hard to live a life that the rest of us live. The justice system, if you rub against it, you are much more likely—

**Mr MITCHELL:** These problems have to be addressed at the same time. Just as an addition, one last thing: I did a count today of my current client roster, and 55 per cent of those clients right now are homeless.

**The CHAIR:** Wow.

**Mr MITCHELL:** So I will leave it at that. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Mr Chris Blizzard.

**The CHAIR:** Is Chris Blizzard here? Great, Chris. Come on up.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** How are you going? I am not really good at speaking, but we will give it a go.

**The CHAIR:** Well, so far, so good, Chris. Hello.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** My name is Chris Blizzard. I am one of the homeless out on the river. I am one of the ones that is homeless, living and struggling every day.

**The CHAIR:** I'll bet.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** It is hard to get help. If we are not on that phone at 10 o'clock, by 10 past 10 we do not get help. There are not enough services.

**The CHAIR:** Who do you ring at 10?

**Mr BLIZZARD:** We ring the Salvation Army or SalvoCare, things like that. Those appointments are gone within 10 minutes of them places opening. I have also got back problems; I am on pills. I have trouble sleeping, so I do not make them times. If I do not make that 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning, I do not get help. I live in my car. I am sort of lucky because I am one of the homeless that have got a car. I can get around a little bit, but lots of them out there cannot. They cannot. We struggle. BeyondHousing will get us into a house or into the Aspen Lodge—\$200 a week, plus 50 bucks power. I get \$540 a fortnight. How am I meant to live?

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** They have made my friends stress so much. They got them off the street. They did very good. I love their work. They put them in so much stress a few weeks later when the first lot of bills come in, they are bugged. Back out on the streets, start all over again. Because you have already got help, who will be able to help you? You get wiped out.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, so I am guessing that—

**Mr BLIZZARD:** It is frustrating.

**The CHAIR:** It must be. So affordable housing—

**Mr BLIZZARD:** Affordable housing is what we need. We do not need a house. We need a room to sleep for the night, a camp kitchen, community kitchen, somewhere with security.

**The CHAIR:** So you can feel safe.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** So it can be looked after. Yes. It is not just me; it is everybody—girls, boys, kids. There are lots of people—old people. We just need a room for the night like the church people are looking at. That is a really good idea, a very good idea.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. How many of your people do you share the river with at the moment?

**Mr BLIZZARD:** Oh, there would be 50 people.

**The CHAIR:** Fifty people?

**Mr BLIZZARD:** Yes, that is just between here and Mooroopna. That is without down this side of the river past the police station here.

**Mr COSKUN:** That's what we know of.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** That is who we know of.

**The CHAIR:** That is who you know of, yes.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** That is without new people coming in. Every couple of weeks we get Melbourne people coming in, new lots of homeless. We do not know them. It just puts more struggle on the system here in Shepp.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** They are struggling really hard. I do not know what else to say. I have got so many things, I just get frustrated with it.

**The CHAIR:** Chris, you were just so succinct. That was really good. You are a good speaker, actually. You are a very good speaker.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** I haven't got no more to say because I will get down. I have pretty much said what I needed to say.

**The CHAIR:** And you did. Look, I think that is what we are hearing, and we are going to take that on board, Chris, and hopefully at the end of this we will be finding solutions.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** And did anyone go around the homeless and say that there was a meeting or anything or see the homeless themselves?

**The CHAIR:** Look, we did not personally, but I think a few of the organisations did get out there and try and encourage people to come up. I think a few people wanted to come and then at the last minute probably got a bit shy.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** I only heard about it on the radio yesterday, so it was like, 'I need to get there'.

**Ms LOVELL:** We had a couple of presenters who said they hoped clients would come with them, and we just heard from Allan that he had hoped a client would come with him, but there have been others during this as well.

**The CHAIR:** We had Kelly before you. But, yes, also if you want to spread the word we have actually got a website that we are going to email to you, because we have got your email address, and if you want to spread the word we would love to hear from all of you. It is really easy just to type something in and send us an email.

**Mr BLIZZARD:** Send an email, yes, most of us have got phones. We have not got computers or a house, but we have got phones. We can still communicate. So thanks for letting me have my say.

**The CHAIR:** Good on you. Thanks so much for coming. Hear, hear. Thanks, Chris.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Mr Aaron Gilhooley, Operations Manager, The Cottage.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Aaron.

**Mr GILHOOLEY:** Hello. I can see the pamphlets there. I will have a bit of a discussion about the Cottage and my journey to there. I had a pretty shitty upbringing, and then I turned to drugs. My mum actually got sick of it towards the end and probably about two-and-a-half years ago she said she had had enough. She said she did not want me to come home, so I was then forced to live on the street. I was either sleeping in my car or on friends' couches. That was usually good to help evade the police as well. Obviously I was a drug dealer and drug addict. I was very paranoid. Probably some of the safest times I ever had was actually when I was just in my car because I knew that it was just me. That was until I found the Cottage.

I have been to jail three times, and my mum said she felt safe when I was actually in jail. That is quite sad, that that is what my life was, that it was just going in and out. Obviously I went to the Cottage, and it was not like anywhere else I had ever been. They actually trusted me. That was what I had not got anywhere else in my life. I had never got trust from anyone. And it ended up being affordable. It was very hard at the start. I was not used to living on—but the skills that they helped teach us was that you have to budget.

**The CHAIR:** And are you working at the Cottage now?

**Mr GILHOOLEY:** I am actually Operations Manager.

**The CHAIR:** You are operations manager? Congrats.

**Mr GILHOOLEY:** Yes, I have been operations manager for 12 months now. When I speak with people, either in custody or on the streets or anything, I say that we try and do the most we can and we try and work with whatever we can, because I understand that it is growing more and more. Especially more and more people I speak to are either living in their cars or they are living on the streets or couches for several different reasons.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Aaron. I think sometimes people just want to give up with people who have got really complex issues around drugs or around the justice system, and it is wonderful that the Cottage does not give up, and to see you and everyone else at the Cottage just thriving—you are a picture of health, mate, you know. You look amazing.

**Mr GILHOOLEY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much.

**Witness withdrew.**

**WITNESS**

Mr Zafer Coskun.

**The CHAIR:** Zafer Coskun, how are you going?

**Mr COSKUN:** Good afternoon. How are you?

**The CHAIR:** Well, thanks; all the better for seeing you.

**Mr COSKUN:** Thank you. I, like most of the people, had not planned on being here today. I only heard about it yesterday. My friend is Chris.

**The CHAIR:** Chris. Thanks for bringing him.

**Mr COSKUN:** He is staying with me at the moment. He had a bit of an unfortunate incident under the bridge. I find the homeless people miss out a lot, as in, they get into the justice system and that is because they are always out there and they have got nowhere to hide or get away from it. I have been on drugs for a long time. I am eight months clean off drugs at the moment.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Well done.

**Mr COSKUN:** Thank you. I am living with my son in a friend's lounge room on a mattress. We both sleep on the same mattress. My son is 11 years old. I cannot get rent. I cannot get a rental, a home, because I am on Newstart allowance. In 2013 I hurt my back at work. I have not been able to work since. On my Newstart allowance I have to look for work. I am in limbo between a pension and Newstart, so I cannot go anywhere. They will not do anything for me because there is no final decision on my back or whatever, but since 2013 I have been out of work. My marriage has failed since then. I lost my wife and five kids, and I have just got my son back. I lived out of my car until it was unregistered and I could not pay for the rego. I got in a lot of trouble with the police. I am still serving a corrections order, which I have only got a month left of.

Drugs is a major issue here, a major issue. Everyone that is homeless, I can guarantee you, is taking drugs. Some of them start taking drugs when they become homeless, but most of them become homeless because they are taking drugs. Ice is a major issue here—massive. It needs to be addressed, like, immensely. It really needs attention here.

**The CHAIR:** So what would have helped you?

**Mr COSKUN:** Support—support instead of getting in trouble. The police seem to just want to throw you away, not deal with the problem. I got attacked. When I finally got a home in Shepparton the guy that took me in attacked me, nearly killed me. I went to the police about this and I saw that nothing has been done about it still to this day. The same guy was the guy—

**Mr BLIZZARD:** I've been attacked too. I got bottled four times under the bridge on 2 January this year by someone in a house because I was homeless, trying to get some shade.

**Mr COSKUN:** The gentleman spoke about transitional homes—housing. I have stayed in one of those transitional homes with a person that was put into one. The day he started living there he was dealing drugs. We had police contact. We had a 4-hour siege at that property with the police, detectives, everything, and he was still allowed to live there. So there is a major issue there with screening people who are getting these homes. If they want to take drugs, that is their problem, but there are people that want to do the right thing and want to help the community.

**The CHAIR:** So are you seeing a counsellor now?

**Mr COSKUN:** Yes, I am. Glen Pratt at GV Health.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you. Look, it is so important to hear these stories and it is so important to hear those stories directly from you.

**Mr COSKUN:** I would just like to add that I have been living where I am for about 12 months now on the mattress with my son. In 12 months I have probably applied for 300 homes, rentals, and not one—that is all because of Newstart allowance.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is right. How can you afford it?

**Mr COSKUN:** And if I could work, I would work.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, of course. Zafer, look, all the best. I hope that path turns and it gets brighter. Thank you so much for coming.

**Mr COSKUN:** No worries. Cool. Thanks for listening.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you for sharing.

**The CHAIR:** Again, thank you to everyone who has come today. I think this really shows the compassion in the community of Shepparton and the amazing work that you are doing for what is an escalating problem. We have really appreciated our time in Shepparton, and I do not think this is the last you will see of us. Please, if you have not contacted the Inquiry, feel free to do so. Talk to us after. We will give you links to it. We have got a very simple submission process on our website. If you would like to give a few more words to it or if you would like to encourage other people to do that, we would really welcome it. Again, thank you very much and I think we will call the meeting to a close.

**Committee adjourned.**