

SEAFORD HOUSING ACTION COALITION

23 October 2018

Overview

The Seaford Housing Action Coalition (SHAC) originated in 2014 from six 'social justice committee' gatherings held at St Anne's. Using the Joseph Cardijn (YCW) 'See Judge Act' method, we noticed what was happening in our neighbourhood, including the sudden onset of rooming houses, and people sleeping on the beach. Everyone we spoke with who had been sleeping in cars had been assaulted or robbed. After being joined by the Seaford Community Committee, the Mt Eliza St Vincent de Paul Society, and residents of the Seaford Beach Cabin Park, we adopted the name SHAC.

We have invited many speakers to educate us about homelessness. Most of our work has been advocacy: asking election candidates their position on housing, and preparing submissions on particular government and council inquiries. We have prepared our own reports about local issues, notably "Sleepless in Seaford" (2017).

In 2014 we organised a public meeting at the Seaford Community Centre that saved the homes of 120 people at the Seaford Beach Cabin Park. We then stepped into the breach left by the closure of Frankston CityLife Church, managing a weekly meals program for 12 months.

Frankston Council has recently invited us to present our ideas for crisis housing on a surplus government site. We are now developing plans for a cabin park.

We have learnt many things, including:

- Firstly, that faithfully attending monthly meetings even when progress is minimal seems to engender trust and eventually credibility in the wider community.
- Secondly, meeting people who are homeless has helped us understand the wisdom of Pope Francis' call to engage 'people' before taking on abstract notions of 'justice'; we try to give pride-of-place to the knowledge and involvement of the poor in our actions; as the Pope suggests, we can be evangelised by them.
- And thirdly, it has been inspiring to work for the common good with non-church people of good heart and commitment, as envisaged by Vatican 2.

Homelessness: A View from Seaford

Some anecdotal impressions of homelessness in Seaford might be of interest to some other suburban parishes.

Our investigations suggested that the reason for the rise of rooming houses and rough sleeping in Seaford was that the gentrification of large inner-city boarding houses was pushing former residents to the suburbs and urban fringes. Some businesspeople began partitioning bedrooms and living-rooms in ordinary suburban houses to accommodate eight or often more residents. In these rooming houses someone who was temporarily down on their luck found themselves sharing bathroom and kitchen facilities with unstable characters and substance abusers. Many prefer to sleep rough.

The new suburban rooming houses were beginning to attract media, often as a result of gross exploitation by a landlord, or as a consequence of poor safety provisions, sometimes with tragic outcomes. Legislation has now ensured that an owner's credentials are scrutinised, and safety conditions (but not rents) are improving. However authorities appear slow to follow-up the very many rooming houses that remain unregistered, probably for the good reason that there is presently no alternative housing option for most of their residents.

At the same time, caravan or cabin parks, the traditional affordable accommodation option in suburban Melbourne (especially in those outer areas that once catered for holidaymakers or travellers) are now, in the booming property market, being sold for intensive apartment developments, nursing homes or other higher value uses. Some badly managed caravan parks have in the past acquired a bad reputation as a result of nuisances associated with out-of-control drug or alcohol use. However when well managed, we have discovered how supportive these communities can be for residents, and inoffensive to neighbours. For residents (especially women) they have the critical advantage of providing security, a higher level of privacy, and personal bathrooms and kitchens. Unlike rooming houses they also permit single fathers to have precious weekend access to their children.

For decades state governments have invested very little in public (government owned) housing, increasingly turning to support social or community housing providers. The prospect of new public housing for low-income working families presently seems remote, but we believe that provision of public housing ('social infrastructure') should be reviewed. Even waiting lists for those on the welfare margins have ballooned out to the extent that it seems unlikely that most could be housed in the medium-term.

Another question that we are asking in Seaford as a result of these scenarios is whether the admirable 'Housing First' approach now advocated by housing and welfare agencies should necessarily preclude less than archetypal 'permanent' dwellings or units. Given the utter crisis in emergency and low-income accommodation, might it not extend to the much more economically viable cabin park model? We know that this model can be a very beneficial option, either as crisis or longer-term accommodation. As in the USA, they also seem to be a viable and attractive option for under-capitalised low-income elderly retirees.

In any case, we would welcome discussion with other parishes regarding homelessness issues. Perhaps in the future we will have regular forums.

A Homelessness Inquiry

On the basis of our Seaford experience we have prepared a Homelessness Inquiry that might help some parishes on their journey into this issue.

While locally focussed, if desired the inquiry could be extended to also consider the deeper 'structural' issues identified in the Australian bishops 'A Place to Call Home' statement.

Although the 'See Judge Act' method might appear simple, it can be powerfully transformative.

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