

## When a house is not a home

Chris Middendorp  
May 24, 2008

*Chris Middendorp is co-ordinator of Sacred Heart Central, a division of Sacred Heart Mission*

**SOME** years ago I helped a 30-year-old woman to get a public housing flat. When Kate moved in she said, "I don't need a bed or any furniture or electricity. I don't need a kitchen or a bathroom — just somewhere to crash." She ended up sleeping on the floor by the toilet — the smallest room in her flat — with the door firmly shut.

After 15 years living on the streets, Kate felt safer that way. She couldn't remember how to sleep in a bed. She couldn't cook, didn't see the point in showering and left her home every day at 7am to roam the streets. Kate liked to spend her days at a particular tram stop in the city and enjoyed watching the people go by. At night, she drank cask wine in the park — returning to her flat only to get a few hours' sleep. Although Kate was housed, she remained homeless.

It took 16 months before Kate was able to sleep in a bed, another six before she was able to prepare simple meals. The work was slow and involved linking her into a range of support and local community services, all of which played a crucial role in helping Kate eventually leave behind the homeless subculture. I have no doubt that without that support she would have gone back to sleeping rough.

Working to house people can be fraught with unexpected problems. But I figured that something was gestating in the nation's psyche when then opposition leader Kevin Rudd secretly dropped by a Melbourne crisis accommodation service late one Saturday night last year. Without ceremony or a media entourage, and even before he was elected, the putative PM wanted to see for himself what was going on.

On Thursday the Rudd Government released its *Green Paper on Homelessness* as the first step towards the generation of ideas that it hopes will guide social policy for the next decade. Exploring the extent of the homeless problem and a range of possible solutions, the document is unambiguous about one thing — homelessness is not just a question of housing.

Over the next six weeks the community is invited to respond to the paper with their own submissions. All this will help inform a "Homelessness White Paper" (due in September), which will articulate the Government's final vision as to what needs to be done. For those of us who work in the welfare sector, this is an exciting moment — the nation is about to ask the tough questions about homelessness.

With more than 100,000 Australians struggling and homeless on any given night, it is obvious, even to the least civic-minded individual, that something must be done — and soon.

For years the problem of homelessness has been delineated as a shortage of affordable housing for people on low incomes. But is this familiar focus on the idea that people just

need a roof misplaced? Of course people need housing, but that is just the first step. It is naive to suggest that putting a roof over someone's head will resolve their personal problems. And it is even more naive to expect that a person with a long history of homelessness will be able to maintain their housing.

For a decade, I've written regularly about the circumstances of people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne. Letters or emails often come to me in response. In the early days, some of those letters were querulous — correspondents told me to go shove my mephitic "Bolshevik ideals" and accept the fact that some people in life are "losers" who deserve to suffer.

These days, I'm more likely to receive letters from generous folk offering a spare room or even a whole house to our clients. Community compassion for those experiencing homelessness appears to have consolidated, and the PM may well be partaking in a general climate of public sympathy. We can probably thank the feel-good narratives provided by TV's *Choir of Hard Knocks* for functioning as a kind of fulcrum on this issue.

But real and lasting solutions to homelessness need a lot more than compassion and the construction of more low-cost housing. Homelessness is a nebulous and complicated social problem that has proved difficult to define, let alone resolve.

Some of the more insightful research into the issue has been conducted by

Dr Guy Johnson of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute at RMIT University. In *On the Outside* (Australian Scholarly Publishing), Johnson and co-authors Hellene Gronda and Sally Coutts write eloquently about the experience of homelessness. They explore how people experiencing homelessness can become immersed in a subculture that becomes harder and harder to escape the longer they are immersed in it.

This homeless subculture is a double-edged sword. While it provides a sense of belonging that is often missing in people's lives, it also introduces them to a new set of social practices needed to survive on the streets and in dodgy rooming houses. Once homeless, people become susceptible to violence, street sex work and other illegal activities. People may develop mental illnesses or existing mental health issues become greatly exacerbated. They may look for succour through drugs and alcohol.

Often, in order to survive, you must, in the words of one Sacred Heart Mission service user, "hollow yourself out and never care about yourself or others again".

*On the Outside* demonstrates that the pathways people take into homelessness will influence how long a person is likely to remain homeless. Someone who becomes homeless because they have lost their job and cannot pay the rent — what the authors call the housing crisis pathway — may far more easily establish a new home and life than someone who ran away from abuse as a 12-year-old and is still on the streets at 22. Crucially, the authors show how people who travel different pathways need different levels and types of assistance.

One clear conclusion is that the process of helping a person to reconnect with the general community can take a long time and often requires ongoing, specialised social and economic support.

It's hard to reduce these kinds of complex proposals into a set of slick sound bites that the general community would respond to. These insights certainly resonate with the experience of workers at the coalface and they provide a useful framework. So often I've observed that

when you place a person who has been homeless into a flat or house, they remain isolated, excluded from mainstream society and ultimately unable to maintain their housing.

We can see this in the failure of many public housing tenancies, where people allocated a property simply haven't got the skills to live independently. Anyone working in the housing sector knows of dozens of people whose tenancies have failed within the first year because they haven't known how to budget, pay bills, shop, clean or cook. Some have had a drug problem that remains out of their control. Others suffer from debilitating trauma as a result of childhood abuse. Many people are unable to work through simple problems without extremes of anger or sadness. Some people are so isolated from their local community that sitting at home feels like doing time in jail, so they return to the streets.

A seasoned welfare worker once crystallised this for me with a simple maxim: if you've been homeless for five years, you're unlikely to solve the problem in five days, or five months. And yet this is so often what the community expects. If you give the homeless a home, it's all fixed ... right?

At Sacred Heart Mission in St Kilda, about 400 people attend for meals and support every day and, unfortunately, the numbers are increasing. About 80% of the service users have a mental illness and just over 50% have substance-abuse problems. The average age is 40 and 65% are men. More than half of our regulars have been homeless for more than two years. To find lasting solutions for the people seeking help we must think creatively. We require a longer-term commitment to supporting them, not just into housing but towards social inclusion.

It astonishes me that some of the people we are helping now, I knew as homeless

18 years ago, when they attended a different agency where I once worked. Our rickety, threadbare homeless services are obviously failing people.

I spoke to 56-year-old Ken recently. By his reckoning, he has been housed about three times a year by services around Australia since 1988. That's 60 attempts at housing, all of which were unsuccessful. Why was he unable to maintain his housing? Ken said he wasn't sure why, but he felt it had something to do with the fact that workers left him to fend for himself once he was housed. Ken, who has schizophrenia, also struggles with voices in his head. "They tell me something terrible will happen if I stay under one roof. I go sleep outside, where they can't get to me."

Mental health services appear to have great trouble offering successful, ongoing treatment to the itinerant. The result is that many mentally ill people travelling the nation almost never find the chance to gain the right support to settle down and rebuild their lives.

It's essential to emphasise here that no two people who experience homelessness are the same. There are people who become homeless who don't partake in the homeless subculture. They retain their independent living skills. This is usually because they have had stable lives for many years before things fell apart. They tend to be people who can deal with stress and setbacks through effective problem-solving strategies.

**WE ALSO** know there are groups of people who, through no fault of their own, have been dealt some substantial challenges. For those with a physical or intellectual disability or a mental illness, it is far easier to slip into poverty, social isolation and homelessness. Reclaiming a life is not easy and only lengthy and intensive assistance has the potential to offer solutions.

If we really want to end homelessness it's imperative we educate the government and the wider community about the complex nature of this issue and stop focusing just on roofs — on timber and tile solutions. Tackling the problem of homelessness seriously will require considerable investment of government money.

This makes sound economic sense. How much does it cost the community at present to have the same people constantly falling in and out of homelessness? How much does it cost the community to be offering endless short-term, Band-Aid responses that quickly come unstuck? How much does it cost the community to be constantly creating more homelessness by not having the right amount of support and crisis services to assist people when they first need help?

In a way, we are cursed by the use of the word "home" in homeless. It keeps us looking in the wrong direction for answers. When you unpack the notion of home, you realise that it's not about a roof at all. It is a quality of life. It consists of a range of attributes — safety, privacy, a place where you can pursue your interests, a connection point to a community.

A home represents our link to other people and to the region we live in.

Those who only know the harsh fellowship of life on the streets, in the homeless subculture, are likely to view the condition of homelessness as home — counter-intuitive though that may seem to the rest of us. It's where many people think they belong, because they're effectively excluded from mainstream Australia.

It's in all our interests that the *Green Paper on Homelessness* engenders some innovative solutions. It's time to foster some brave responses to homelessness with a focus on people and not on structures. We must invest in positive strategies that can help isolated people rejoin the wider community.

We need to build people's confidence and skills and autonomy. We need to offer them training options and jobs. We need to help heal their emotional damage. It's time to bring them home.