

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Mr Charlie Beckley

Organisation Name:South Port Community Housing Group

Your position or role: Manager Corporate Services

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::

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

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

Working with Aboriginal Victorians ,An advocacy body ,Working in Homelessness services

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

FILE ATTACHMENTS

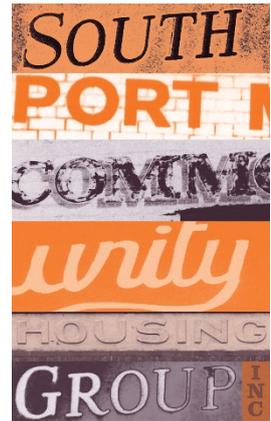
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File3:

Signature:

Charlie Beckley



SOUTH PORT COMMUNITY HOUSING GROUP INC

Submission to the Victoria Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

March 2020

Acknowledgment

South Port Community Housing Group (SPCHG) acknowledge our office and properties are located on the ancestral home of the Yalukut Weelam clan of the Boon Warring people. In making this submission we pay respects to their elders, past and present.

Introduction

SPCHG welcomes the opportunity to provide insights into the issue of homelessness in Victoria and commends the Legal and Social Issues Committee for its review. The inquiry is both timely and much needed.

The increased visibility of people sleeping rough on the streets of Melbourne is a daily reminder of our collective inability to meet the needs of those most vulnerable in our society. Rough sleepers, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. Increasing numbers of people are being priced out of the market for rental housing. Support for community mental health services is declining and becoming more fragmented. Incidences of family violence are increasing, despite government's unprecedented investment. Social housing, once considered essential infrastructure, is becoming increasingly reliant on market solutions to supply. The current approach is clearly failing.

We call on the Victorian Government to provide:

- more social housing targeted for those most in need – those on very low incomes priced out of the market for affordable housing.
- strengthen the Opening Door Framework – move from funding throughput of homelessness services to outcomes (refer to Council for Homeless Persons “Preparing for Outcome Measurement” Position Paper (May 2018).
- more support for community mental health services – address the gap being created by the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

Organisational Background

For over 35 years, SPCHG has provided long term, safe and secure housing to marginalised singles in the City of Port Phillip. The youth homelessness support service has been operating for over 30 years.

The organisation was formed in response to the growing displacement of people forced out of affordable accommodation by gentrification and the selloff of State-owned local rooming houses in the City of Port Phillip area. Over this time, SPCHG has grown in capacity to manage 285 tenancies: 71 in properties owned by the organisation; 214 in properties under a General Lease with the Director of Housing in Victoria.

Aside from a small amount of grant funding and private donations, the organisation is independent of government funding, relying solely on rents from tenants to fund its operations. Since 1998, tenants as members of the organisation, have had voting rights and a say in how the organisation is run.

Our model

SPCHG target housing exclusively to people in the lowest income groups coming from homelessness or housing crisis. The organisation offers an intensive, fair and compassionate

approach to working with our clients and tenants. We are compliant with all relevant legislation and agreements and signed on to the Victorian Government's centralised social housing waiting list, the Victorian Housing Register.

SPCHG runs two programs:

- Long term housing for disadvantaged single people coming from homelessness. This housing is primarily high-density blocks of flats and studio apartments (once rooming houses) in South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and Albert Park.
- Case managed support for young people facing homelessness.

Our housing model has many features of a Housing First approach. We employ housing staff with expertise in social work and community development, who provide a personalised and supportive attitude to tenancy management. This enables early intervention, effective referrals to local support services and sustains many tenancies which otherwise might fail. Over half our total tenant group have sustained tenancies for over 10 years.

We offer new tenants the opportunity to 'advance' through SPCHG's range of housing stock from small bed-sits through to one-bedroom flats. We place a strong emphasis on meaningful and effective tenant communication which aims to build trust and engagement in local services, events and community life.

Our youth homelessness program supports around 25 young people (and dependents) at any one time to find and obtain a safe and secure place to live and engage with relevant services. Most of the young people we support have had transient lifestyles, histories of abuse and trauma, and face significant difficulties in negotiating the demands of daily living.

Local focus enhances community connections

SPCHG has always resisted growth beyond the local community of South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and Albert Park on the grounds that being embedded in the local area can enhance connections for our tenants and clients.

We believe that the local focus of our organisation adds value in our strong skills and connections with local agencies which enhance the capacity of tenants and clients to develop community connections. The model encourages our staff to: a) connect to local events and facilities managers to achieve free tickets for our tenants to eg. Melbourne Arts Centre, Melbourne Academy of Music South Melbourne, and b) find local funding and organise regular in-house events such as a festival, art classes and barbecues. We also involve tenants in planning, organising and performing at events, which for some people can enhance self-esteem and a sense of community and belonging.

Scale of organisation enables people coming from homelessness to feel known and valued

SPCHG has resolved to keep the organisation at a scale where staff know the names of tenants and clients; greet them by name; treat them as valued community members; and invite them to local community events.

Organisational model involves tenants in governance role

SPCHG is an Incorporated Association with a voting membership. Since the 1990s SPCHG has encouraged tenants to join the Association, to come to Annual General Meetings and to run for election to the board. There are currently three tenants on the board. SPCHG believes this keeps decision making 'real' and focused genuinely on developing and managing housing in a way that meets real needs.

Nature and Scale of Homelessness

Between 2006 and 2011 the rate of homelessness in the City of Port Phillip grew by 32 per cent compared to a national increase of 30 per cent.¹ Of all Victorian LGAs, Port Phillip had the second highest homelessness count in the 2011 Census.² More recently, rates have fallen by around 22 per cent between 2011 and 2016 suggesting increased service provision and coordination has been effective. However, demand for homelessness services remains high and oversubscribed.

The City of Port Phillip has traditionally been an area with a high proportion of short-term or shared accommodation. Private boarding houses, rooming houses and hotels provided affordable housing to a mixed client group of single adults including port workers and the unemployed. However, over the last 30 years, the area has undergone rapid gentrification, which has resulted in this type of private affordable housing option all but disappearing. Less than one per cent of private rental housing is now affordable to low income households.³ Closures of large rooming houses such as the Gatwick, have forced many into the spiral of homelessness and prison services.⁴

The increase in homelessness is felt at SPCHG, with the increase in people requesting housing. SPCHG have also noted an increase in older people seeking to escape homelessness who seek our services. Over 50 per cent of our tenants are over 55 years of age.

Key factors impacting on homelessness

Lack of affordable and appropriate housing

The key factor impacting rates of homelessness in Victoria is the lack of housing affordability and availability. It is an alarming fact that there are very few options for single people on low incomes to find safe and secure rental properties in Victoria. Scarcity of affordable housing for singles has been a chronic problem in the private and public sectors for many years.

¹ 2049-0 Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness (2011), released November 2012

² Southern Homelessness Support Network (2016) *ABS Census Homeless Estimates Southern Region Report*

³ City of Port Phillip (2015) *In Our Backyard: Growing Affordable Housing in Port Phillip 2015-2025*

⁴ Gleeson, H. (2019, May 6) 'Alarming' number of women forced to move out of the Gatwick for The Block are now in jail *ABC News Online* Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-21/gatwick-st-kilda-alarming-number-women-in-prison/10513530>

The cost of housing has increased significantly since the early 1980s. Home ownership rates have collapsed, and rents have skyrocketed. Additionally, it has been estimated that around 60,000 Melbourne apartments are sitting vacant, despite the vacant residential property tax introduced by the Victorian government in 2017.⁵ The Australian Bureau of Statistics has recently recorded the median weekly cost of private rent has increased by 51 per cent in the last two decades, to \$366 per week in 2017-18.⁶ This trend is also highlighted in Anglicare's most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot, which found only two properties listed for rental across Australia were affordable for single people on Newstart.⁷

Adding further pressure to this issue is that supply of social housing has not kept up with demand and is falling further behind. The Productivity Commission revealed in their 2019 Report on Government Services, there were 200 fewer social housing units in Victoria than in 2014.⁸ Adding to this, in their 2020 Report, Victorian social housing spending per person is the lowest in the nation, at an average of \$92.02 per person (the national average is \$159.10).⁹

Despite the ever-growing need, the proportion of social housing stock in the City of Port Phillip has declined over the past 20 years. In 1996, social housing comprised 8 per cent of the City's total housing stock, declining to 7.2 per cent in 2016.¹⁰ This is also despite the achievements of the three community housing agencies and the local Council which has historically been very supportive.

In addition to an increasing national shortage of private rental options for those households on lowest incomes; people on low incomes, single parents, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people with disabilities (including mental health issues), face significant discrimination by real estate agents and landlords in the private rental market. We hear such personal stories all too regularly.

Increasing rates of mental illness and complex needs

Day to day, mental health is the biggest and most common issue we deal with.

The relationship between homelessness and mental health is a highly complex one. People experiencing severe bouts of mental illness without support of family are highly likely to fall into homelessness, especially when on low income. And on the other hand, housing insecurity and homelessness both causes and prolongs mental ill health. In 2017-18, at least 30 per cent of people who sought help from a specialist homelessness service in Australia reported a diagnosed mental health issue. This incidence is far higher than the 18.2 per cent of Australians who have a mental health condition.

A major Victorian study has found that just 15 per cent of people accessing specialist homelessness services had mental health issues prior to experiencing homelessness, while

⁵ Bleby, M. (2019, Apr 8) Investors keep 16.2pc of Melbourne apartments vacant. *The Financial Review* Retrieved from <https://www.afr.com/property/residential/investors-keep-16-2pc-of-melbourne-apartments-vacant-20190405-p51bca>

⁶ ABS Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2017-18

⁷ Anglicare (2019) *Rental Affordability Snapshot 2019 Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/our-work/research-reports/the-rental-affordability-snapshot>

⁸ Productivity Commission (2019) *Report on Government Services*

⁹ Productivity Commission (2020) *Report on Government Services*

¹⁰ City of Port Phillip (2015) *In Our Backyard: Growing Affordable Housing in Port Phillip 2015-2025*

another 16 per cent only developed mental ill-health after their experience of homelessness commenced.¹¹

The failure to properly respond to homelessness affects not just individuals but the Victorian economy as demand for homelessness services increase. This is particularly the case for the mental health system, leading to worse outcomes for consumers, and decreasing the efficiency of the resources used for mental healthcare.

Policies and Practices that have a Bearing on Delivering Services to the Homeless

Community housing is integral to addressing homelessness

In recent years, South Port has become increasingly aware of the impacts of the rationalisation of the community housing sector. As governments have encouraged community housing providers and associations to grow, corporatize and become more financially independent, they have increasingly needed to operate seemingly as for profit businesses. Naturally, the community housing sector has shifted towards targeting tenants on higher income payments and with less complexity to house. While housing associations have achieved accreditation and proven they can obtain finances in the private market to deliver new housing projects, in some cases this has been to the expense of assisting those most in need.

SPCHG has been able to grow incrementally and deliver more affordable housing only through generous donations and partnerships with organisations that have enabled access to cheap available land. However, the reality is that as a housing provider determined to house exclusively those most in need, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain financially.

The continual use of rooming houses as a form of housing people who have experienced homelessness is problematic. SPCHG's experience of managing rooming houses, was that they often provided an unsafe and insecure environment for singles seeking to escape homelessness. The organisation has spent the past 10 years, working with the Director of Housing to upgrade our properties to self-contained units. Currently, we are in the process of converting our final property into self-contained units. Since we ceased to have rooming houses, our turn-over rates have fallen from 50-75 per cent turnover per annum in rooming houses to less than 10 per cent after conversion to self-contained. This is because people are staying longer due to the stability, control and safety afforded to them. A self-contained flat also provides a greater sense of home and something they can take some pride in. Evictions have fallen dramatically and we are able to support more tenancies.

Strengthen the Opening Doors Framework

SPCHG's Youth Support Program operates within the Opening Doors Framework as a Specialist Homelessness Service provider. People seeking homelessness services are directed to access points in the inner Southern region of Melbourne. In each Victorian region there is a Local Area Service Network (LASN). This is made up of senior representatives of housing and support agencies who are funded to deliver homelessness services in that region.

¹¹ Johnson, G., and Chamberlain, C., 2011, Are the homeless mentally ill?, Australian Journal of Social Issues, Volume 46, Issue 1, p.36.

The LASNs are responsible for maximising the effectiveness of the homelessness system in their region, within the guidelines of the Opening Doors Framework.

Access points are designed to prioritise and connect people to services and resources. At an entry point, people seeking assistance will meet with an Initial Access and Planning (IAP) worker who assesses their needs and situation. IAPs can access Housing Establishment Fund funding to pay for emergency accommodation. They can also access a resource register, where housing and support vacancies from specialist homelessness services are listed.

The Department of Health and Human Services funds SPCHG's Specialist Homelessness Service on the basis of how many support periods we are expected to deliver.

Our program provides trauma-informed, holistic case management and is guided by our principles of support:

- Empowerment: through client-centred and directed support plans. We work from a perspective that the client is the expert in their own lives.
- Flexibility: This is another aspect of client-directed support. The support worker is to work in a way that is flexible to the changing needs of young people.
- Interdependence: encourages clients to develop skills to live relatively independently but to draw from resources that are available to them.
- Early intervention and prevention: the program will assist a young person, wherever possible, to not enter the homelessness system, rather focusing on assisting a young person to sustain their current housing arrangement or strengthen relationships or uses funding to assist the young person to access mainstream housing services
- Child focused, Family-Centred practice: Where working with a family unit, YHSP workers practice using Family-Centred principles. Each child has their own support plan. Workers are expected to engage with children as well as their parents.
- Harm minimisation: strategies are used to reduce the harmful consequences associated with various lifestyle choices and behaviours. Harm minimization strategies are generally discussed in relation to health, drug use and sexual behaviours.

Yet despite being able to offer effective case management the key need of youth clients is for safe and secure short-term and long-term housing in the inner south east area. Without being able to offer this, many clients become very frustrated with what government/community services such as ours can offer them.

Additionally, the opening doors framework has seen an over-reliance on crisis and emergency responses. Access points are often unable to effectively meet the needs of complex young people who may be interacting with the homelessness system for the first time. Instead, they are often provided with short term, privately run crisis respite, such as backpacker's dormitories. After such an experience, young people are often unable or unwilling to re-present to an access point the following day for follow up. One idea that has been suggested to help tackle this issue is adopting a 'duty to assist' rights approach to youth homelessness.¹²

¹² Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). Report 6: Duty to Assist – A Human Rights Approach to Youth Homelessness. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

The lack of affordable housing options in the Port Phillip area, for people on Youth Allowance means that often case management can last for years before a housing outcome is achieved. Not only are there very few social housing options that are appropriate, high private rental costs means that there are no 'real' housing exit pathways.

Furthermore, SPCHG believe the Opening Doors Framework could be strengthened through an improved funding model, which moves away from funding for support periods to funding for the duration of need. This would also help move towards funding for outcomes rather than throughput.

Another issue with the opening doors framework has been in the way information is recorded. While funding has been related to support periods, many clients have multiple complex presentations over that support period. Additionally, support periods are not generated when clients are turned away from a service. Both of these factors play a role in underreporting the amount of assistance sought by clients.

Provide more support for community mental health services

One of the systemic issues we observe is the fragmentation of support available to people at risk of or experiencing mental illness. This has been particularly so after the mental health system was deinstitutionalised in the 1990s with the expectation that patients would be accommodated in social housing with adequate supports attached. While we recognise the criticality of housing to helping people address and manage mental illness, we often see support services withdraw after a person is housed.

SPCHG believe there is benefit in providing accessible community health services close to where people live to access when needed.

Funding is needed for professional health support for people in community housing, such support to be attached to the community housing agency.

Where a community housing agency such as ours houses exclusively people on the lowest incomes coming from situations of homelessness, support needs becomes a huge issue. People who have come from traumatic life situations need counselling and active outreach to enable or encourage engagement with society. Some of the risks include social exclusion, squalor, anti-social behaviour and chronic drug and alcohol abuse.

There is huge variation among community housing agencies as to the level of support provided to tenants. The significant question is, who funds it? In our case, we fund it from our own operating budget, employing social workers and community development workers just because we can see that it's a model that is needed and it's a model that for most clients works.

Conclusion

The causes of homelessness are multifaceted and complex. The factors leading to someone being homeless is often a combination of both market failure and individual circumstance. No one, however, chooses to be homeless. SPCHG believe the issue is solvable and the Housing First model being increasingly adopted by organisations around the world is the right approach. The solution to homelessness lies in providing more social housing.