

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Friday, 22 November 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Major Jenny Begent, National Head of Social Mission, and

Mr Shane Austin, State Manager, Homelessness and Social Mission Coordinator, and

Ms Livia Carusi, General Manager, Homelessness Australia, Salvation Army Australia.

The CHAIR: We are recording this, and we are also live streaming this, which is really exciting for the Parliament. We livestream question time, and that is not the Parliament at its best. This is the Parliament at its best. In saying that, I will declare the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing open. Welcome.

Just to let you know that, as I mentioned, this is being recorded and broadcast and all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. That is provided under our *Constitution Act* but also under our Legislative Council standing orders. The information you give to us today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside may not have the same protection, and any deliberately false or misleading information given to the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

We will provide a transcript to you in a few days time. You can look over that and make sure that you were recorded accurately and can pick up any changes.

Thank you again all for coming. On top of that, on behalf of the Committee thank you for the work that you have done for so many decades. If you would like to make some opening statements, and then we can open it up for questions.

Mr AUSTIN: Sure. We also thank you, Chair and the Committee, for the opportunity to come and speak with you on the first day of the hearing. We appreciate that. Thank you so much. My name is Shane Austin, State Manager of Homelessness with Salvation Army Australia and Social Mission Coordinator. I will make the opening statement on behalf of myself and my colleagues.

Visual presentation.

Mr AUSTIN: We also have a presentation on the screen too, or you may have a copy of that in front of you. How we would like to start is quite clearly your final question, in a sense: how do we end homelessness for good? For us we thought we would start there, and then we will tell you about what we see as evidence. Really for us there are four real key elements to end homelessness. The first one is to recognise that the problem of homelessness is everybody's business. We are encouraged that the terms of reference of the Inquiry are not into the homeless service system but are into homelessness, because there is a distinction between the service system and homelessness more broadly. For us to end homelessness we need the engagement of private, public and community. In addition to that it requires universal service systems. We believe that health and education beyond that of the specialist systems need to be engaged in the ownership of the issue of homelessness. Finally, and key to the element of addressing homelessness, is the individual's experience. The lived experience of someone who has been through or is in the midst of or is at risk of homelessness is key to addressing homelessness.

We know quite clearly that diverting people away from the service system is the best outcome. For us, if we can address someone's risk of homelessness and keep them in their housing, we know—and we know from the data that you would have available to you as well—that that is the best outcome. Once someone enters the system, the intent is to rehouse them as quickly as possible and then to provide the service that the individual needs and a length of support dependent on the need of the individual or family. The longer they stay in the system the more difficult it becomes to get out of it.

For us, we think that one of the most significant changes that need to take place in terms of addressing homelessness, in a system respect, is to move from a fixed-term support model to a duration of need of support. That is one key element. We need to focus on outcomes, not outputs. Churn and throughput in a system and numbers does not equal ending homelessness.

To end homelessness, for us as well, is to look at the structural and economic hurdles that must be addressed. We appreciate that some of these levers are and are not available to a state. Some of those are federal elements and some are community-based, but I think we want to call it out, particularly around poverty and income and a lack of safe, appropriate and affordable housing options.

For us, these are the five top presenting reasons for someone coming to our service. I think giving you these as an example—and the data is there for you as well—is to show not only where the people are coming from and their experience but where we need to target our response as a community. When we look at all of the services that we provide—that includes front-end people who come to a service for support and our housing—you can see that housing crisis was where they presented. That has a technical meaning, which is imminent eviction. Then you can see domestic violence, financial difficulties, inappropriate dwellings and, importantly, transition from custodial arrangements.

For us it is clear that income support, a safety net or wage stagnation and growth has a direct impact on homelessness in our community, and combined with housing or lack of housing. So if we can address those two elements, we think that we are able to end homelessness in our community.

Can I just make reference to areas that we think we could give additional attention to in the community in research, policy and practice. For us, as the Salvation Army, we think in the community that street sleeping should be a focus that we can end. The journey of homelessness is actually not linear, it is not a pathway that goes in and comes out; it is something that varies and people are on a particular journey. We need to recognise that and spend more time thinking about that and working on a practice.

For us, I just want to highlight one thing in particular here, which is around children and homelessness. We think that it is very important that we look at children specifically and with intent. In a moment I will share some data around those who present to our services. For us, 13 per cent of those who have come to our service for support are children under 10. We think that is hugely significant to recognise but also in terms of how we respond. So for us of course those children under 10 are not unaccompanied but they would be with one or other or both parents presenting. So I would like to think that the Committee would take into consideration where we need to focus some of our attention on children in their own right.

Exiting care: we are all very familiar with the data and statistics about those exiting care and entering into homelessness.

One other element too I think is veterans. Excuse the expression, but we think this is a sleeper in terms of not recognising how many people who have served, either on the front line or in the services, are entering the homeless service system. So I would just like to draw that to your attention. Work we are doing in other states in Australia in that space is also significant. We are happy to provide additional information if you would like that.

And all of you are conscious and aware of the justice system and those in custodial arrangements and when they are coming out of a custodial setting in terms of homelessness and housing, so I would like to bring that to your attention. There are just a few more points in our opening statement if that is all right, Chair.

The CHAIR: Of course.

Mr AUSTIN: For you this is some data and information we think is very useful for yourselves. As an organisation or a movement, the Salvation Army has 108 housing and homeless-specific services in Victoria. In addition to that we have 19 entry points. So the way the system works here is that you go to a service to get assessed, an intake, and we have 19 out of a total of 70 across the state. The Salvation Army runs 19 of those and 31 domestic violence services. So the Salvation Army is in a position where we have youth services, we have family violence and more generalist services to address homelessness clients. Also we run the statewide crisis phone centre out of St Kilda, so that is a statewide service people can ring 24 hours a day when they are in crisis.

I have already made mention of those clients that we see in terms of the data. It is there for you to see. You have got the presentation. So under-12 is the single biggest category in terms of age bracket, and then 35 to 39, 30 to 34 and 25 to 29. So for us that is significant and again where the bias could be in terms of our response.

I thought it was important for us to put our hand up and say there are those that we are not serving. There are those who come to our service and we just cannot support them, and there is one of two key reasons. Not the only reasons but the two key reasons are: we have no accommodation option to offer you—if you come to the service and would like accommodation and we cannot provide it for you, we have not been able to help you—and secondly, that we have insufficient staff to assist at the time of presentation.

Can I just explain what that means. What it means is when you come to a service we cannot allocate you a time to make a genuine assessment. So for us it is not about saying, ‘What do you need? Here you go’, it is to sit with that person, and we do not have the adequate time.

One thing that I have not provided for you but I would like to present is the Indigenous clients, in terms of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. For us that is 6.69 per cent of those that we serve, and the data for the state of course is 0.8 per cent of the population.

Just two more points if that is okay. There are other drivers that we think are consequences impacting both the experience of homelessness and ending homelessness, if we could be brave enough to say that the Committee could consider these in terms of a focal point during your deliberations. There are three—the unintended consequences of sector reform. We are all for sector reform, whether it is in mental health, family violence or NDIS, but often the resources available have been one lot, so when there has been reform in one of those areas the resources have been redirected as opposed to having additional resources placed. We are quite conscious—and I am aware a number of the members are regional, not just metropolitan, and it is important for us to recognise that—that industry moving into regional areas often impacts the experience and livability and affordability of those who live in those communities. So for us we think that considering what it means around having adequate housing when a regional centre develops an industry is important. And then finally around regional and rural towns are infrastructure constraints. I think that does speak for itself, but that is both in a digital sense—digital connectivity—and a physical ability for people to be engaged either in services or in community, because of course for us wellbeing and community are intimately connected.

A final point is that the Salvation Army, nationally and in Victoria, is building an agenda—a strategy—for how we will approach our next three years. As part of that development—and we are right in the midst of putting that together—what has emerged from our clients, from our staff and from our internal and external stakeholders are a number of elements that we will focus on as the single biggest provider of services in Victoria: older persons, folks sleeping on the streets and CALD communities, particularly in the regional setting. We are going to put in a lot of effort and energy in terms of research, practice and policy.

As we have already mentioned—and we cannot emphasise this enough—is the issue of children and their experience and their particular needs. In terms of development, we are working to effectively respond to homelessness with a focus on our own properties that we have across the organisation and with partners externally around developing and increasing long-term supported housing stock—metro, rural and regional. We will put metrics against those ourselves in terms of development and growth.

The client experience—we have talked about this; the quality of service offering and the provision of that service are key to our strategy; the duration of need; a tailored response to end homelessness; and finally, and most importantly, the lived experience is essential for our understanding and ending of homelessness. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Shane. I really appreciate this as an overview of the very diverse work that you do. I know that you can see all of our names, but I neglected to introduce everyone at the table and also to provide you with where they are from. So as you mentioned, we are all from different parts of Victoria. Stuart Grimley is from Western Victoria; Wendy Lovell, who I am sure you know, is from Northern Victoria; Tien Kieu is from South Eastern Metropolitan; Rod Barton from Eastern Metropolitan and Kaushaliya Vaghela from Western Metropolitan; and I am from the Northern Metropolitan Region. When I looked at it, we actually represent almost all of the areas of Victoria, with the exceptions of the far east.

Mr AUSTIN: My apologies too, Chair. Could I please introduce my two colleagues. Major Jenny Begent is the National Head of Social Mission, so that incorporates all elements of social mission from youth, family

violence, alcohol and other drugs, and homelessness for the whole country; and then Livia Carusi is the General Manager—National Manager—of Homelessness.

The CHAIR: Yes. I will just get the ball rolling. Obviously you mentioned keeping people in housing is the most effective form of service that we can do to prevent homelessness. Are there any best practice models that you have seen—and we have certainly heard about the private rental assistance program, but I was wondering if there are other services or programs—that enable people to stay where they are?

Mr AUSTIN: I would think that the private rental assistance program is a good program in terms of the scale and size of the support. I think one of the challenges is being able to provide not only financial support but ongoing case management. In terms of models that are effective, Livia may be up to speak to that as well from an international's perspective, but I will take that on notice in terms of providing some additional information for you.

Ms CARUSI: Look, I would have to agree. I think from my years of experience in the homelessness and housing sector, when we talk about prevention and keeping people housed it is certainly around strong tenancy rights and responsibilities. So in terms of a policy and legislative perspective, certainly having sufficient funds to intervene and to intervene very quickly—in terms of negotiation with either the community housing provider, the private rental market or the public housing authority—is important, but equally as important is access to case management.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms CARUSI: That is really important, because the financial allocation of funds is one thing that may resolve the at-risk-of-homelessness issue, but there are reasons and triggers behind that. If you can wrap around some intensive case management at the front end to prevent people from coming into the service system, that is the ideal outcome.

Maj. BEGENT: And a system that is flexible enough to put the client down and pick them up again. Often we find that when we use that model—when we are able to afford that model—the periods between when you put a client down and pick them up again get longer and longer and longer. So that support is really valuable and crucial at the time that it is added.

Dr KIEU: Once again, thank you for coming in here, and may I commend you on your hard work and very good work that you have been doing for a long time. Back to the question of keeping people in their existing housing, that is one of the key prevention ingredients so that people will not become homeless and then become worse and they will not become a chronic and epidemic one later on. Do you think, on the other hand, where people have been homeless for some time, the key ingredient for resolving homelessness is the supply of housing?

Mr AUSTIN: It is a combination. The combination is appropriate safe housing, yes, but we need to have the level of support that the individual needs. So what we experience in a public housing context or a community housing context is that when people have support they maintain their tenancy. When people need support for a longer period of time and it is not supplied, they often lose their tenancy. Between the first and second year of tenancy in public housing or even community housing if they have not got the support, and they need it at that moment, then their tenancy falls away. You cannot have one without the other in that sense, particularly if you are looking at that, as you said, with the more complex or the longer term experience. So that is why we absolutely think it is duration of need.

The other thing peculiar to that is that often we may think intuitively if we get someone into a house and we say, 'This is your home', that takes the pressure off. Actually it does take the pressure off but all those other issues then come to the front, and so we need to be able to dial up and dial down the levels and the mix of support that a person needs for that period of support and it has to be tailored to the individual.

Dr KIEU: Providing affordable housing has to be an integrated effort from the Government as well as from the private and community sectors. I would like to hear if you have any thoughts on a proposal or an idea that has been presented by a previous witness that developers, in developing certain estates, would either have to

pay a certain percentage of their profit or a certain percentage of their land would need to be developed to turn into social housing. What is your opinion on that?

Mr AUSTIN: I am happy to speak, and my colleagues as well. Mandatory inclusionary zoning, is that what we are talking about?

Dr KIEU: Yes.

Mr AUSTIN: For me I think that it is important to look at housing in terms of a continuum. If you are going to develop property and a site, particularly if it is a greenfield or even a brownfield development or if it is local government land or if it is public land, I think there needs to be not only an incentive but a mandated—I am not sure what you would call the number in terms of that—social housing component. In terms of Victoria, as you know, we lag behind other states and certainly internationally in terms of the OECD around social housing as part of our stock. I think anything that would be an incentive to be able to do that we should do—absolutely, for sure.

Maj. BEGENT: We would support that nationally around a mandatory inclusion of social housing. I think it will help. And there are a couple of instances in Victoria live where we could have done that and we have not done that.

The CHAIR: A missed opportunity.

Maj. BEGENT: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Thank you for coming in and presenting today. The people you do not get to service, can you put a number on that? On a daily basis how many people would you turn away?

Mr AUSTIN: There are probably two comparisons. One is how many people in Victoria do not get the service system wide. I think that is one in 19 from memory. I have got the data here. For us it would be actually a lesser percentage than that.

Ms CARUSI: This figure would include individuals that might turn up to the local parish or outside of the traditional homelessness service system that is funded. I think that is one of the failings of our system—to understand the numbers and the impact of homelessness. There will often be folks that we will never connect with for a whole range of reasons, be that perhaps their understanding of how to access services, the shame or the labelling that may come with that—they might never knock on a door; they might end up somewhere else—and those numbers are never counted.

You can apply that principle also to the amount of money that is used by homelessness funded agencies to purchase crisis accommodation in the private market. Outside of the homelessness service system you would probably not perhaps go dollar for dollar, but there would be a reasonable amount spent by local parishes and other groups who will come across someone who is experiencing homelessness and will put up the dollars for that night or a couple of nights to help that person out, because that is what they do—they respond to that local need. That would be the only caution: that when we are talking about numbers there is restriction in terms of analysis around the data that we actually utilise. There needs to be an important recognition of the other parts that are connected to this social issue.

Mr BARTON: It just terrifies me—and I am thinking about a family member, who used to get belted up, with her little kids. There has got to be a mechanism to say, ‘All right, this isn’t a perfect world, but we’ve got to get you out of this situation tonight’. I know in my electorate there are women sleeping with kids at the local footy ground.

Ms CARUSI: Absolutely.

Mr BARTON: It just blows me away that we are missing that. Maybe they are afraid to go to the police. Maybe they are afraid to go to the services. There are all sorts of reasons. I want that to stop.

Maj. BEGENT: So do we.

Ms CARUSI: So do we, and I think what we would equally like to see stopped or certainly addressed are the private providers that we have to rely on because there is an absence of safe crisis accommodation in this state and we are placing that 10 per cent of children at significant risk, all of which we have to take a level of responsibility for as adults in this community. That is a reality and it is a shameful reality. It needs greater attention—the providers that are substandard that have been utilised with public funds. If you and I will not stay there, we should not place someone who is vulnerable in that situation.

Mr AUSTIN: Can I respond too? If you or I feel that way, we have got our workers on the front line having to make those decisions with the person in front of them as well. So we acknowledge that and we think it is not acceptable.

Mr BARTON: It is not a criticism, by the way.

Mr AUSTIN: No, we understood.

Ms CARUSI: No, we understood, and I think we are like-minded on this. The Salvation Army cannot solve the issue of homelessness on its own—no organisation can—but we have made a commitment nationally and we have wrapped some targets around this, around ending homelessness, in particular street homelessness, right around the country because we think it is possible.

One of the things that we are doing because of the shortage of crisis accommodation and its failure to respond to the duration of need is undertaking an audit right around the country and asking the question: what properties do we currently have that are either under-utilised or sitting vacant and marked for redevelopment perhaps four to five years away that we can now repurpose? I have just come back from New South Wales. We have identified 45 units and three facilities or sites with our aged-care partner. Most of those will go to women over 55 with wraparound support, and a percentage will go to that group that Shane referred to as ‘sleepers’, which is veterans. That, I think, is emerging as a real issue across the country. So we too are trying to think of other ways of avoiding people having to go into those privately purchased accommodation stays.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Samantha, also from Northern Metropolitan—Dr Ratnam.

Ms LOVELL: Shane, you talked about the number of children that are presentations. One of the things that I believe we should be doing is a Child First approach. I was just wondering what success you have when a family presents—actually finding them housing in their own community so that the children stay in their schools where their friends are, so there are other family or support networks that are around that family at this vulnerable time in their lives?

Mr AUSTIN: Can I speak to one recent example? I am not going to use anecdotes but I think it is helpful in terms of the narrative. One of the challenges in doing exactly what you suggested, which is something that we are keen on doing, is the stability for the children. This particular example was a family violence situation, and the partner knew where the school was. So the intent of wanting to keep the child and the family where they were at, we could not in fact do that because we had to remove the family out of that situation. Depending on the presentation, for us I think the success if it is a family unit or a family that has come to the service, not from a domestic violence background, is to find accommodation in the local area. We do have the same approach in terms of wanting the children’s lives to be stable because we do not want to see an intergenerational experience of homelessness or vulnerability, but the tension for us depends on that presentation.

Ms LOVELL: And that is obvious. I mean, if there is a restraining order or if there is a family violence situation, they cannot stay in that community for their safety. But for the situation where it is not that case, it is always best to keep the family in the community?

Mr AUSTIN: Yes.

Maj. BEGENT: Yes.

Ms LOVELL: Are you having success in finding housing within the communities or are you finding that you are having to displace families?

Mr AUSTIN: Yes, we are having to displace families.

Maj. BEGENT: Because in some areas there are just no exit points at all. Often private rental is beyond their means, particularly if they are mums who have not worked, who have been stay-at-home mums, and often women in family violence have been stay-at-home mums for lots of other reasons around violence. So the lack of exit points is really significant. We have been talking about the lack of exit points for 10 years that I can think of.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, absolutely—more.

Maj. BEGENT: It is the critical part to what we are talking about here.

Ms CARUSI: Then the extension of that is the cost of relocation: school, family, friends—

Maj. BEGENT: Children.

Ms CARUSI: social networks, employment opportunities, education opportunities. It just goes on and on and on. Then we ask children to become resilient and robust around change. Then we fail to deliver specialist children's services that are for the child that is presenting. We still have an adult-centric service system in Victoria and across the country, yet we are a signatory internationally to the rights of the child. If we really want to make a positive change in the space of the experience and the impact of homelessness on children, we need to get more creative, more robust and flexible, and seriously fund the response to what children look like right across the board—from the front end, where mum, or mum and dad, or dad turns up with the children and the family, and we place them somewhere; the outreach to support, to provide secondary consults; to the place of transitional support in children; and some sort of post-exit out of the service system, a level of support to stabilise the family and the children in that family. It is critical. And to work with the school. Working with children is a specialised area. It is not a generalist case-management response. That is what needs to be recognised, I think, and well funded as a priority.

Ms LOVELL: So just a follow-up to that. Major Begent, you said there are some areas that you find particularly hard. Is there anywhere you could name—and I am not asking you to name a suburb, but an area like outer eastern Melbourne or southern metropolitan Melbourne?

Maj. BEGENT: Certainly rural and remote are really difficult.

Ms LOVELL: Rural and remote are the most difficult?

Maj. BEGENT: Yes. And even most regional areas. Geelong, for instance—we really struggle to find good, affordable housing for people who come through our family violence services in Geelong, in the Barwon area. I suspect even, I am not certain about this, but certainly northern metropolitan is really—

The CHAIR: There is not a single house for a woman escaping family violence in northern metro.

Maj. BEGENT: No. We end up with houses we own that are kind of transitional with people in them for three and four years. Now, that is not transitional. You might as well say, 'It's yours. You can do with it what you want'.

Ms CARUSI: It is long-term.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks for your submission and your time today. You have mentioned different age groups receiving the service and support. It stops at 35 to 39 years old, which is 12 per cent. Is that because you do not get older people approaching you?

Mr AUSTIN: No. I hope that is not misleading. I just provided the high-flyers in terms of age bracket. We have got the whole breadth. I can tell you, yes, we have got all of the data.

Ms VAGHELA: So they are there. Because you also mentioned older persons, particularly older women, increasing.

Mr AUSTIN: Yes, that is right—older women in terms of a rate of growth. I did not mean to be misleading in that information. If you have a look at your 45 to 55, that is another 13 per cent of clients. We have clients 65-plus, so we have got the whole demographic report. I am happy to provide that to you. The data tells us it is an emerging group in terms of the growth rate, in terms of older women.

Ms VAGHELA: Following on from that, you are still seeing an increasing number of older people, particularly women?

Maj. BEGENT: Yes.

Mr AUSTIN: Yes.

Ms VAGHELA: And what would be the reason for that?

Maj. BEGENT: The reason is often around women who have lived in rented accommodation with a partner who has been the primary breadwinner. The primary breadwinner passes away or the marriage, after the children leave, falls apart. She actually has no ability to go back into the workforce. She is still not eligible for an age pension. She cannot maintain the tenancy on her own, and those women often do not want to be in shared housing. They are increasingly ending up on the street. The fact that we have older women ending up street sleeping is a national disgrace—nothing short of that. It horrifies me because I am an older woman. Do I really look forward to that as a future?

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you for your submissions today. I am an ex-police officer and I have done a lot of work in Geelong, and on more than one occasion I have had a lot of family violence people that I have referred through the Salvation Army centre, particularly the centre in Geelong, in Belmont. I can honestly say on more than one occasion I've said, 'Thank God for the Salvos', because they really have helped out and been tremendous and had positive outcomes, from what I have seen from my experience. But just getting back to talking about those people that we are unable to service through having no accommodation options available to them, what happens to them? How are they captured from there on? If there is nothing to help them with there, are they referred on to anybody else, or what happens to them?

Maj. BEGENT: They are. It is really a referral in name only, because if we have not got access then more often than not, the service down the road will not have it either. They enter the service system and they continue to cycle through and end up sleeping on couches or in tents or in their cars.

Mr GRIMLEY: And that leads me on to my next question: given the number of services and organisations, do you find that it provides for a disjointed approach to solving the homelessness issue? If so, how can we do this better to provide a more centralised service delivery model?

Maj. BEGENT: The system is broken. It has been broken for a very long time. Livia mentioned children and school. The education department does not very often talk to the health department or the housing department. On the ground people talk to each other all the time because they want a good outcome for their client. That unfortunately does not translate up. It did not translate up until we got a national framework in place in the Salvation Army, so we did not talk to each other. We are actually starting to do that. I really think unless government and the not-for-profits and the corporates start to interact and see each other as partners we are really going to struggle to get over this. And we have to bring the corporates to the table as well, because for the philanthropic support for those kinds of big things that need to be fixed, we actually need them at the table. We need to be able to facilitate that.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you very much, and I apologise for being late. Pardon me if I am asking questions that you have answered, so please forgive me if I do that. You have just referred to the system being broken, and I would like to ask about some of the transformative solutions. We have tried a lot of different things, we have seen international jurisdictions now starting to think about much more transformative and radical solutions and the provision of housing being one of those. I was wondering if you could speak to some of the thinking that the Salvation Army is doing—and I know you are doing a lot of advocacy in this space as well—about some of the systems fixes for these issues?

Ms CARUSI: For me one of the most obvious is, we talk about it, but you actually do need a whole-of-government approach. There have been attempts, but unfortunately with our political system we start and finish, start and finish. You actually need something that is bipartisan, visionary and commits us to the long-term, to say, 'We're going to end street sleeping, rough sleeping and homelessness and inject serious dollars, with the corporate sector and NGOs like the Salvation Army, to bring about affordable, secure and safe housing'. With that needs to be a plan that is transparent with clear targets that are ambitious. I mean, we have committed ourselves to ending street sleeping right across the country.

The CHAIR: Was that just here, now?

Ms CARUSI: Certainly for the last few months, because we believe that with the resources that Australia has and the connections that can be formed, you can transform the space. So I think that is the first bit of the equation. The other I would say is there has been tremendous good work across the homelessness service system, and that needs to be recognised and valued because people do work hard every day to try and get a good result and outcome for people with the resources that they have. But we have to stop talking about reform at the service system level and lift it up a few notches, because there is only so far you can twist the tea towel; there ain't no more water coming out. So I think for me that is the starting point. It is the leadership, and something like homelessness needs to sit with the very highest office in the State of Victoria, because give it the recognition and the importance that it needs, and you will get transformational change, make no mistake about that.

Mr AUSTIN: Can I add to that? Some of you at the table have heard me bang on for a number of years about: it's everybody's business. So I think there is a narrative. If you put 'homelessness' into Word and you ask what is a synonym, it will have 'vagrancy, begging', things like that. This is not what we want to hear. We want the community to say, 'This is an issue of vulnerability. This is an issue where people are in our community, we take responsibility as a whole and we stand alongside people and we work with that person and say, "What do you need to develop?"'. That is not just, as Livia said, a service system issue; that is for all of us to take into account. Once that narrative changes then we can make movement.

Maj. BEGENT: And I think too what Livia said about a bipartisan approach that goes beyond the election cycle.

Ms CARUSI: Yes.

Maj. BEGENT: I understand you are all elected officials, but it really wrecks the service system when we get something where we are told, 'This is the way we're going to do it', and the Royal Commission into Family Violence is a great example. It was a good initiative, but from government to government it changed considerably. It lost some of its power and there was no commitment from one government to another to actually sustain some of those initiatives. I guess it is about saying, 'It doesn't matter whether I disagree with your party politics or not; we have to find common ground and have a long-term strategy that cannot be changed from party to party'.

The CHAIR: And hopefully this will do it. A few of us just have a couple more quick questions on this. You mentioned retrofitting. You mentioned you had done an audit of your stock, and in that you mentioned veterans. I find it extraordinary that our veterans are fighting homelessness. I just wonder if you could speak about the retrofitting and why we are seeing veterans now facing homelessness.

Ms CARUSI: Look, the issue for veterans for me personally, for a range of reasons, has been of interest probably for the last five to eight years. Some of it has been around the connections that I have made with people street sleeping. We are seeing research, such as the research undertaken by Paul Flatau from the Centre for Social Impact in Western Australia, illustrate that the numbers around people sleeping rough who identify—that is, they identify as being a veteran—is rising and is of considerable concern. I think recently AHURI came out with some other figures substantiating and supporting that position.

In terms of why veterans find themselves homeless, I think there is a range of issues. Some of it I think relates to how Veterans Affairs operates. Maybe it does not reflect the needs and expectations of this particular cohort. I think it is like other folks experiencing homelessness: it is a set of circumstances at that point in time which

sees them fall into the homelessness cycle and maybe not necessarily have the tools or the resources or the support to get themselves out of that cycle. So I think there is further work to better understand it, but from my understanding with the experience of veterans and homelessness in the United States—which I believe in 10 states has actually resolved; now the issue for those states is around sustaining that model so they do not come back into the system—some of the changes that they made to help veterans were supported on their return and whilst they were back home through the main departments was critical in ensuring that they did not fall into the homelessness service system. But I think it is a space that we can learn a lot more and get a better understanding of this particular cohort, and get the veterans themselves involved in the process.

Ms LOVELL: I just had one that is a bit out of left field. I know that these street beggars have been a source of constant frustration to the Salvation Army, particularly to Brendan, for a number of years. They were to me when I was housing minister, particularly one that I knew that I had housed in an apartment in Richmond who was still there begging. One night he was sitting just down from the Society and I saw at least three people give him a \$50 note. How can we work together to stop that so that they are giving you those \$50 notes so that we can end street sleeping?

Ms CARUSI: Look, I think the story of begging has been with us since dawn really. People find themselves in that position for a range of reasons. I know there has been some media sensationalism around some of the issues. I do think we can work better as a community to understand this group and how we can respond. I do not think it is about taking up the stick and necessarily penalising people. The issue of begging is an issue that has always been with us. It is how we engage with people as a community to make sure that we respond and respond well and address what is happening for that person. When people ask me, ‘Should I give something to the person?’, it is your call. It can be a smile, it can be a referral to the agency down the road, it can be the offering of a cup of coffee or a conversation, But there are reasons why someone is sitting there seeking that.

Ms LOVELL: Usually it is a drug habit or something like that. I go into McDonalds on Collins Street and buy a meal and give it to someone and have it thrown back at me. I know Brendan always used to say, ‘If only they would give us that money, we could feed 10 people’.

The CHAIR: I am watching the time. Rod had one more question.

Mr BARTON: The previous presenter told us that we are now seeing people who are working presenting. Are you seeing this as well?

Ms CARUSI: Oh, yes.

Maj. BEGENT: Yes.

Mr BARTON: I am assuming this is because we have had no wage growth forever and the terrible wages in the gig economy.

Mr AUSTIN: Both wage growth and increasing rental costs and livability, so absolutely, for sure.

Ms CARUSI: Even secure housing. If you look at the City of Yarra, if you are working in that part of the world, chances are, depending on your income, you probably are not going to get housing in that part of the world. There are some suburbs and local governments where people are simply priced out—not just those folks on Newstart but people who are in receipt of a wage. Think of an apprentice.

Maj. BEGENT: The freeze on wage growth has contributed, high mortgage rates. We have seen an increase in the last five years of people defaulting on their mortgage payments.

Ms CARUSI: Utilities, the cost of food.

Mr BARTON: Yes, the simple things. There is a Sudanese family at a local school out in the western suburbs. I spoke to the young family there. We were talking about why kids should have free public transport to get to school. I said, ‘How much do you spend?’, ‘It’s about 20 bucks’. I said, ‘Oh well, that doesn’t seem a lot’, and he goes, ‘Well, there’s three of us and Mum’s a single mum’, and all of a sudden 60 bucks is an enormous amount of money.

Ms CARUSI: It is.

The CHAIR: It is a lot, yes. I am sorry. This has been fantastic. I know that throughout our journey of this Inquiry we will be seeing each other again. Thank you so much for giving your time today and for providing some really interesting insights.

Ms CARUSI: And, look, thank you to all of you for taking the leadership around this issue. We talk about once-in-a-generation opportunities, but this is a wonderful way to set a platform and a series of recommendations on how we can, as a community, seriously work towards ending homelessness, and I thank each of you. So thank you.

Mr AUSTIN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. You will receive a transcript shortly.

Ms CARUSI: Terrific.

Maj. BEGENT: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.