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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Bairnsdale—Monday, 2 December 2019

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**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Captain David Jones, and

Captain Claire Jones, Salvation Army.

The CHAIR: I just need to read some formal notes to you. This is the Committee hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. The evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is via our *Constitution Act 1975* and also through the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore the information you give today is protected by law; however, any comment that you may repeat outside here may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. We are being recorded. You will receive a transcript of this session, and feel free to correct it for any mistakes in there. Ultimately that will be made public and will be posted on our website. Please make some opening comments. We have got 30 minutes, so if you can give us a little bit of time for some questions. Thank you.

Capt. D JONES: I may not need that much. I do have a PowerPoint, which hopefully is working.

The CHAIR: Oh, a PowerPoint. Great.

Capt. D JONES: Yes, I am giving you a picture show too today.

The CHAIR: Fantastic.

Ms TOPIC: You might need to just talk to it because it is not working

Capt. D JONES: It is not working? Okay.

The CHAIR: Sorry.

Capt. D JONES: That is all right. We can work without it. That is fine. My name is Captain Dave Jones. This is my wife, Claire. We are the local ministers of the Salvation Army in Bairnsdale. Our role is quite varied. We oversee two sites, the church site and the community centre site, which is where our involvement with the homelessness issue takes place. That is where our emergency relief centre is. We are a small site. We have a very small budget of around \$35 000. Only \$6000 of that comes from government funding. Our catchment area goes right out to the New South Wales border. The next Salvation Army from us to the east is Bega, so we have a huge catchment and a very small budget to work with. The Salvation Army in Bairnsdale primarily works with the underlying issues of homelessness. We do not deal in the housing area; we have to refer them on to other organisations such as Community Housing Limited or Gippsland Lakes health. Our role is more meeting immediate material need, spiritual need, financial need; anything to do with housing we have to refer on. However, in saying that we do have a fairly large engagement with homelessness, both on the street itself and those that present at our office. The numbers I want to give you today are only from our perspective; I cannot speak on behalf of anybody else. Oh, we have got it up on the screen. That is beautiful. There we go.

Visual presentation.

Capt. D JONES: There are a couple of hurdles that I guess are a real challenge for us as we work with the local community. Income is certainly a huge issue. Pretty much all of the clients that we work with are on a Centrelink benefit of some sort, generally Newstart or DSP, and so that is probably the first thing that we usually address when they come in to see us. But there seems to be also a real lack of housing in the East Gippsland area—long-term housing that we can refer on to and then they get put into.

The numbers that you see up there are actually the state percentages, and you are probably very much aware of these. They are the top five reasons for homelessness and the areas that we work in. So housing crisis—that is those who are affected by imminent eviction; domestic or family violence; financial difficulties; inadequate or inappropriate dwellings; and finally transition from custodial arrangement. Here in Bairnsdale we actually get a lot of referrals coming up from Fulham prison down in Sale, and again we have to refer them on or they are looked after by the prison system and put into some sort of transitional housing. We do get a few of those

during the year. That is not a big area that we work in, but it is an area that certainly is falling down, where people are just not able to find permanent housing. If they do not get a permanent postal address, then there is trouble with Centrelink, employment—all those sorts of things.

Income support is certainly one of the leading contributors in this area that we see through our office doors, as well as cost of living, increased rentals—all those sorts of things.

In Bairnsdale that present in our office, the top five that were just up there, are very similar to the state issues. Domestic violence is probably the biggest issue that presents to us, and relationship breakdown. We find that anybody going through those sorts of areas generally it is the men who end up out on the street, and unless they present to us we are actually not aware of it. We had a situation with a gentleman who presented to us some time ago. He had actually come through the court system. There were some things going on for him. He was living with his partner in Lakes Entrance, it went pear-shaped and he ended up coming back to us. I went with him to community housing and there was nothing available, not even in the short-term rental. So now I have got a situation where I have got a man that I am looking after, and I have got nowhere to put him. For us as the Salvation Army I can put him up for a couple of nights in a hotel, but that is certainly going to come anywhere close to fixing the underlying issues that are going on for him. We need to get people into longer term housing so that then they can be working with other organisations to meet the other areas where it is falling down, things like addiction, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, anger management—all those sorts of things. Unless they are in long-term housing, we cannot even start to look at those, because we know that if we meet the immediate needs of people—food, shelter, clothing—their mental state is a lot more stable, and it puts them in a much better position to deal with some of the bigger issues that are going on in their lives. And we certainly need to be meeting those underlying issues to help keep people off the street and making sure that they are in longer term housing. Those top five are very similar to the State values.

On the next slide, these are, from our records, the percentages of people who presented to us from 1 December 2018 to 1 December 2019. We have found that there is a real increase in people sleeping rough, based on the last calendar year. It has not gone up by much, but we are looking at around 26 per cent of our clients. We have 156 clients that we know of who have presented to us who are saying that they are homeless, they have no permanent address, with 26 per cent of that sleeping rough. Couch surfing, in the previous year, was the highest one, but it seems to have actually come down now. Couch surfing is fine, until there is something that goes wrong in that relationship, and then all of a sudden they have to move on. You would be amazed how often that happens, and so they come back to us, and they are saying, 'We need your help'. Again, we have to refer them on. So they get trapped in this cycle that they cannot get out of.

Improvised dwelling or squat—that is generally a tent or a swag, which we provide. We can do that as part of our emergency services. We are finding also there has been an increase in motor vehicle people sleeping rough. We are working with a few on the street at the moment who are in that position. One is a gentleman who is 75 years old. He is sleeping in his car. He is also a hoarder. You can imagine it is hard enough in a house with air conditioning when it is hot, and this gentleman is actually out in his car trying to weather some of the severe weather that we are facing. For us in Bairnsdale as the Salvation Army, motor vehicle is one that we counter a lot. We have a team that does welfare checks on these people throughout the week to make sure that they are doing okay, because we might not be able to provide them housing, but we can meet other needs while they are trying to get out of the system.

Again, these ones are State values. It is interesting in Bairnsdale. Like I said before, we are sort of a silo in that the funding goes to other organisations. The funding, even within our own organisation—government funding—only goes to Sale. Anything outside of the Sale area east, I cannot tap into my own resources, so we have to refer them on to local organisations or the St Kilda Crisis Centre. Again, they will only operate on a crisis element, where they will put them up for one or two nights in a hotel. Then we have the same problem again. They are back out on the street, or they come back to us. So we keep referring them on to other organisations, but they are at their limit. There is not much left for them to work with either.

There are 19 entry points around the state and 31 family and domestic violence services. Sadly, most of these are in Melbourne, and people just will not always travel down there. We are quite a long way out of the city. Access to transport is an issue for some people. If they have no money, they cannot get to Melbourne. So that is hard. The St Kilda Crisis Centre is up there. Statewide you can see there is quite a varied age bracket.

Homelessness does not discriminate; it affects all people. You can have a university degree one day and be doing well, and then life changes and you find yourself on the street.

The 13 per cent—that is a lot of children affected. We have worked with families—a gentleman the other day with five children had a relationship breakdown, on the street. What do we do with the kids? It is hard enough an adult sleeping in the car, let alone having five children to look after as well, and we have got nowhere to put them. For us, we do not even have funding to put people into a property. That breaks our hearts because adults are vulnerable on the street, let alone children. We have to look after the kids as well. They are not able to defend themselves and look after themselves. The amount of increased suicide, robbery and all those things affect our homeless people, because there is no protection from them. So they are vulnerable to the elements and they are vulnerable to the community as well.

In regional areas and rural towns, infrastructure is a huge issue. People do not have access to services that they might have in the city. Very often we see people through our office, they come up from Melbourne thinking that they are going to have more chance of assistance in the country, only to find that that is actually not the case. There are less resources in a regional centre than there are in the city. Often they will stay, but in a lot of cases they do decide to travel back to Melbourne.

Capt. C JONES: Just one thing, looking at the specialist medical—not even that, just a GP locally, trying to get in to a GP, for us, it took us four weeks to get an appointment at a local GP here. Most of the GPs in town, their books are closed. So if you have got anybody who is coming in, or even if they are just a local trying to get an appointment to see a GP, it is really difficult. Just that alone is another issue on top of everything. It is really hard.

Capt. D JONES: So then you see these people being referred on to emergency departments. It puts more strain on the system there. So homelessness is not just about housing; it puts a strain across the entire community, because they are having to rely on services simply because they cannot access other services. The strain on the community—homelessness is not just a local issue; it is a national issue; it is a world issue. The community needs to be working together. We have service groups, we have community members and we have other organisations. We try to work together as much as we can, but if we can pool our resources in a more practical way, I think we will certainly help to work through some of the underlying issues a lot more productively. We need to be more proactive, not reactive in how we work.

I am just trying to think what is on the last slide. I think it is just to jog my memory as to where we are going. We actually want to move people out of the system. We do not want people in the system to start with. I know we keep saying we have to build more houses, but that is not going to fix the problem per se, but if people have a permanent residence, then we can work on the underlying issues, and it is a community issue. It cannot just be done by one or two organisations. We need to create discussion, we need to have public forums like this one, and teach people—educate the community. When the community looks after each other, we do not have these issues. That is where we need to be working better as a local community, as a state community, as a national community—working together to tackle the issue.

If people do become homeless, we need to rehome them as quickly as we can. In Bairnsdale, East Gippsland, we do not have that option. We cannot rehome them quickly because there are just no resources available.

The CHAIR: Nearly a solution.

Capt. D JONES: Nearly but not quite. It is not something that is going to be fixed quickly. You cannot just click your fingers and it is fixed. There are a whole heap of issues that need to be addressed to fix the problem.

The CHAIR: Thank you. If you do not mind, we might ask a few questions.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks to both captains.

Capt. D JONES: Thanks. We go through together in the Army.

The CHAIR: Usually it is Tennille.

Ms LOVELL: That is showing your age.

Capt. D JONES: That's right.

Ms VAGHELA: You mentioned about the budget of \$35 000, and out of that you said \$6000 comes from government funding. Is that just for homelessness specific to youth in Bairnsdale?

Capt. C JONES: This is our emergency relief budget. This covers food vouchers, buying actual food, paying for accommodation, travel tickets, buying swags—whatever we need to operate our emergency relief when people come in—paying bills. We can assist with bills, like Telstra bills, and rent. But our budget is so small we are very limited in what we can do.

Capt. D JONES: So we rely heavily on donations—things like the Red Shield Appeal we rely heavily on, and donations that come out of the court system, where people pay fines and things like that, so the department of justice helps us a lot. And we try to work with local business to get the best price we can for things like swags. You will be amazed how much a swag can change someone's life.

Ms LOVELL: It is not the answer though.

Capt. D JONES: It is not the answer though.

Capt. C JONES: Also, David was talking about where we have our emergency relief centre; it is also our thrift shop and our cafe. So the thrift shop funds a decent percentage of the budget too, so it is a whole heap of things together.

Capt. D JONES: And the frustrating thing for us is that there are not even adequate showering facilities in this part of town for people who are on the street. We have spoken to local council about this to try and work out how we might be able to create those opportunities for people. So, yes, our budget is very small, but at Salvation Army in Bairnsdale, East Gippsland, we only focus on the immediate needs—material aid, those sorts of things. Homelessness all has to be referred on to other organisations.

Ms VAGHELA: So then the case that you mentioned about a man with five children looking for housing support and there was nothing available, and you had to put him in hotel, how often—

Capt. D JONES: No, we could not even do that, because hotel rooms are not big enough for five children.

Ms VAGHELA: So what happens with that many children then?

Capt. D JONES: We just had to refer him on to community housing. That is all we could do. I think they did have a temporary solution to his problem, but at the end of the day when that runs out he is still a single man with five children on the street. How do you tell a kid 25 days out from Christmas, 'I'm sorry, but you're going to be on the street this year'? You know, you cannot.

Ms VAGHELA: How often are you in this situation where somebody approaches you and you are not able to help in terms of like this particular gentleman?

Capt. D JONES: Every week. We see 36 clients a week. Our office is open 9 hours for the week. We see 36 clients a week. We have around 1100 clients on our books—156 of them are homeless. We will see at least two or three people a week coming into our office telling us that they have got nowhere to sleep tonight. My \$35 000 budget cannot meet that.

Capt. C JONES: As of the end of November it was over \$2000 in hotel room invoices and stuff, so that is well over three-quarters of our budget for accommodation, and we have not even got to the six months of the financial year. So we have had to even tighten it up a bit more because we know we have got another seven months to go.

Capt. D JONES: And once we get to winter that changes the game again.

The CHAIR: And I guess in these hot summers as well.

Capt. D JONES: Absolutely. We have been offered an opportunity in Bairnsdale to possibly offer a mid-range sort of accommodation. I guess you could almost call it transitional. The problem I have is: I have no staff and no money to even take up that offer. We know of a motel in town, they are selling the lease and we believe the owner is selling the building too, but I have no resources to even think about taking that on and expanding how we operate. So we are talking with our head office about that to see if we can work out solutions to offer another avenue for people while they are trying to find a more permanent—

The CHAIR: That is an opportunity that you cannot let go.

Capt. D JONES: Absolutely, and I am pushing this as hard as I can.

Capt. C JONES: And it is the perfect location.

Capt. D JONES: It is the perfect location. It is a motel that we work very closely with and we are always in discussion about the homelessness issue. They will help us out the best they can. The problem is if we put people in there and they burn their bridges, they are no longer welcome. Then there is another resource that we have lost. It is hard.

Ms MAXWELL: I just have a quick one. Do you have much contact with organisations, such as motels or caravan parks, who say, 'We just cannot have homeless people?'. I think in all of this we need to have that input too, because if we are going to address this, we need to see what is happening, what is breaking down those—

Capt. D JONES: Through our office, unless a client has done something which has blacklisted them, we have never been refused. They will try and accommodate our clients the best they can, and I think people are on the same page—no-one wants to see people on the street, but just putting them in a caravan park or a motel is a short-term solution to a bigger problem. We need to be somehow working out a way of getting people into permanent housing long term—not a couple of weeks, not a couple of months; long term—so that they have time to sort out their lives. If they have addictions and things like that, they have time to go through the rehab processes. A lot of relationships can be restored, but you need time to do that. If you have got children, the priority has to be the kids too. We have to get them into schooling because they start missing school, they fall behind and then that puts them into another bracket. So let's get the housing sorted out first. It is not the be-all and end-all, but let's get the permanent long-term housing fixed first, then we can work on the underlying issues.

Ms LOVELL: You say you have never been refused, but do the local hotels work with you to give you a rate that is affordable or are you paying full rack rate?

Capt. D JONES: That can often be a challenge. It depends on the hotel. There are some if you are taking out more days during the week they will give you a reduced rate, but for us we cannot do more than one or two days. I do not know about the other organisations. So we have to pay the full rate. And, look, even if we have not got the money, we will work something out because I do not want to see anybody on the street. If it is a weekend, a Friday, that they present, we will try and get them through the weekend. I hate the thought that money is the issue, because we are talking about people, we are talking about human lives here. It is easy for us to say we have not got the funds, but let's find the money, let's find resources. We have got enough big businesses in Australia, surely we can tap into some of that—surely.

The CHAIR: We are a wealthy country.

Capt. D JONES: We are. Compared to other countries around the world Australians have got it pretty good. I have lived in two countries and I have been to many others, and we have got it pretty good in Australia. If we just learn to look after ourselves and look after each other, we would not have this issue. In 2019 we should not have a homeless situation. It is ridiculous.

Ms LOVELL: So the budget of \$35 000 is obviously very challenging. Any fundraising that you do, like the Red Shield Appeal, does that go to a global budget and come back to you? Do you keep that local money locally?

Capt. D JONES: Did you want to explain that one?

Mr BARTON: I think I already know the answer to this.

Capt. C JONES: I am not sure if you are aware, but the Salvation Army has been through massive administration change. We have gone from two territories in Australia to one. This year they have decided that we can have 80 per cent of what we collect in our area. That is still being sorted out. We do not have that in our bank account yet, but I am pushing for that to come.

The CHAIR: But in theory that is what you are going to get.

Capt. D JONES: In theory 80 per cent should come back.

Capt. C JONES: Yes. Because it is tax-deductible money it has to go to a service that is in our social side. It cannot go to things that we would do through our church. It needs to go through something—I cannot explain it. I do not even really completely understand it myself, but I know where it has to go, and it really has to go through our Doorways service, which is our emergency relief, because those services can have tax-deductible money.

Ms LOVELL: So will that be a positive or a negative? If you are keeping 80 per cent local, does that mean that they will change the break-up of the global budget and you will get less than the global budget? That could be a negative in a community like this, where obviously your collection from Red Shield is going to be a lot less than they are collecting in Malvern.

Capt. C JONES: I do not particularly see it as a negative, because in the previous way of doing it we did not get much Red Shield money. This actually gives us a lot more.

Ms LOVELL: That is good. As long as it is a positive impact on your budget, that is great.

Capt. C JONES: Yes. We have just got to work out how it is going to work, because we have had so much change and so many things are happening. So, yes, we are still waiting.

Ms LOVELL: It provides a little bit more of an incentive too to really work that Red Shield Appeal, I guess.

Capt. C JONES: Well, it means we can actually possibly increase our budget.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, and perhaps get some other service clubs—Rotary and stuff—on board when they know the money is staying locally.

Capt. D JONES: We rely heavily on our thrift shop to generate income for our ER, so the more people shop with us we can guarantee—because we are a thrift shop, not a Salvo store—all money through our cafe and our thrift shop stays in East Gippsland. It does not go in a pool, it does not go to head office—100 per cent of it stays here. There are no admin costs or anything that come out of that. So we want to encourage people, if they are going to donate, to donate locally, because that will affect us locally. Because of the way our finance system works, we cannot just take money from one pool—we could not take it from a social cost centre and move it into a church; we are not allowed to. And those things are there to protect the donations that people give us. We want to be 100 per cent transparent with what we are doing with the money we are receiving.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic.

Ms LOVELL: But we all know that the Salvos have that respect.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of time. We have just got to—

Capt. D JONES: Yes, sorry.

Mr BARTON: Please do not take this as any reflection on the work of the Salvos—I think it is a bit of a reflection on the work of everybody—but the public does not really appreciate what is going on. I think we see some homeless people sleeping on the street, and that is all it is. I am horrified to think that we buy people

swags and we do not put them into housing. That is not a reflection on the work you are doing, but as a society, how is that acceptable to a modern society like us?

Capt. D JONES: I do not get it; I really do not. Yes, it should not be happening. I would rather say ‘Here are the keys to a house’ than give to someone a piece of material that—

Mr BARTON: Of course, yes. But we have to bring the public with us. We have to educate them.

Capt. D JONES: Absolutely, and this is why it is a community discussion. We cannot be working solo. We have to get people talking about this. I think there is still this perception that homelessness is an old guy with a beard on a bench. It is not like that anymore.

Ms LOVELL: Or young kids that are drug addicts—have an addiction—yes.

Capt. D JONES: Absolutely. Most people take up addiction after they are on the street.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Capt. D JONES: And the reason why they do that is that is their support mechanism—that is how they survive the day.

The CHAIR: The trauma of not having a home.

Capt. D JONES: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Just a quick question from me as we finish on the noticeable increase in rough sleeping that you mentioned at the beginning. Do you have any thoughts or theories as to why you are seeing rough sleeping here in a much more obvious way?

Capt. D JONES: They just have no other option; it is as simple as that.

The CHAIR: It has been over the last 12 or 18 months you were saying you have been seeing it.

Capt. D JONES: It is getting worse because the cost of living is increasing and Centrelink payments and salaries are not following suit. You look at someone on Newstart—as soon as they pay for rent and their mobile phone cost, which they need these days, that is it, their money is gone. There is nothing left to survive on. Just giving them food hampers and vouchers, we do not want to be handing them out food, because it teaches them nothing about meeting the issues underneath. We need to give them a hand up. The Salvation Army especially tries to deal with the root problem, but when there are no resources, that makes it very hard to do that.

Capt. C JONES: A lot of them are single males, so that makes it hard. There are no resources for them to go into, so they are stuck sleeping in a swag, which is horrible, but in some ways it is better than sleeping with nothing. At least you are protected from some of the elements. It is not a great solution, but it is better than nothing.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming today.

Capt. D JONES: That is all right. I hope it was helpful.

The CHAIR: It was. It was very helpful, and thank you for everything you do. We greatly appreciate it.

Capt. D JONES: Thanks for giving us the opportunity to talk with you all.

The CHAIR: Thank you. As I mentioned, you will receive a copy of this. Any further information that you would like to share with us, please feel free to send it to Lilian.

Witnesses withdrew.