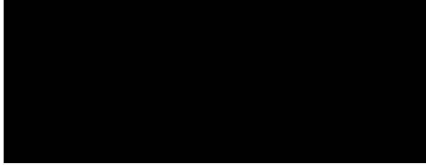


Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

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Following correspondence with Fiona Richardson MP, I was invited to make a submission with a specific focus on; **The connection between Homelessness and the prevalence of Family Violence** as observed in the areas that I work in.

For the past eight years I have worked as a Primary School based Chaplain working at two schools within The Shire of Yarra Ranges.

In this capacity I work with staff, students and their families. This brings me into contact with the confronting and traumatic challenges that are impacting some families and their ability to ensure that normal routines and educational opportunities are able to be accessed.

Of late I am becoming more and more aware of the challenges families are facing in order to secure basic, safe housing. I regularly hear accounts of families applying to numerous advertised vacancies again and again to be continually unsuccessful. One account I heard of (and I imagine it is not isolated) was that after applying unsuccessfully to a range of rental properties the prospective tenant found the same properties re-advertised as unfilled.

I have sat with families in a variety of Housing Agency offices-: Anchor, Wesley, Harrisons and Box Hill Crisis Accommodation, the conversations that have unfolded lead one to reflect that the staff have become 'gatekeepers' of extremely limited housing resources and equally limited funding, rather than agencies offering an opportunity for a fresh start.

In a conversation with a crisis accommodation agency when it had been explained why the waiting list was between 6 and 18months for a woman and her 12 year old son who had already been homeless for 7 months; I asked what families would do in the meantime. We were told that people would either 'couch surf' or stay in caravan parks, and we were handed a list of caravan parks to contact. The list was so outdated that a couple no longer existed, many no longer took long term tenants and others were overrun with people dealing with their own 'demons' that they could barely be considered safe, not to mention located in a place suitable to access education.

This person had found themselves and their child homeless as a result of sustained and calculated violence which carried with it very sinister threats. Over a period of time this violence impacts the mental well-being of the victims, and renders them less able to seek out alternative safe housing so that a victim is left making an impossible choice between ongoing violence and homelessness for themselves and their dependents.

The experience of trying to secure alternative safe housing brought her to one agency which told them to "go away and never come back" threatening that if they did they would notify Child Protection to take her son from her.

Had safe, accessible housing been available the choice would have been simple but now the family is still homeless 9 months later, fearful of the perpetrators impending release from gaol and slipping further and further away from an opportunity to engage positively in the community.

I have been attempting to support another family who have been long term victims of Family Violence, they had moved to our area in order to make a fresh start, only to be victimised in their new rental property. As they had ended up on the other side of the city they have little or no extended support and on finding themselves homeless they have experienced the same responses from Housing agencies, there is nothing at all available and there are no funds for Motel accounts. These families are also using up a large proportion of their funds paying indefinite storage as they know that they will not have any funds to set themselves up again when they do eventually find some accommodation.

In this situation the 15 year old son has disengaged from school completely and been 'picked up' by a gang of males of dubious character who, despite the parent's best efforts, are drawing him into a potentially criminal lifestyle.

I have worked with a family, whose contact with Human Services recommended they leave the family home last November due to Family Violence; there are still four children in that home aged from 4-11 with the abuser as they have been unable to find a place to move to.

Another woman I met is trying to find secure accommodation whilst the perpetrator of violence in her case has broken parole and is on the run, pursuing her with confronting texts.

I hear reports that the Department of Housing are no longer building housing for those unable to access the commercial housing market, I am also hearing that there are a number of properties owned by the Department of Housing that are lying vacant, I have no way of confirming or refuting this information but the general outcome of this 'talk' leads to further fearfulness in finding secure housing and therefore further eroding the individuals belief that they will be able to begin to build a positive, productive life for themselves and their families.

In the Terms of Reference; point 1 part b, the Governor of Vic. The Honourable A Chernov asks the Commissioners to make recommendations to improve; early intervention. I would like to suggest that safe, affordable, appropriate housing be available at a variety of locations with staff skilled up to support victims disempowered by the violence, and to assist them to locate long term housing and skills to rebuild their lives. Whilst families are homeless there is no time or energy left to do anything but look for housing, leaving them unable to reconnect to their community with the hope of re-establishing a rewarding life and with the opportunity to be able give back rather than be a permanent victim and ongoing drain on the community purse. The extended length of time this is taking fuels mental instability, exacerbates health issues, compromises educational opportunities and leaves open options for lifestyles that will be an ongoing drain on the welfare system. Successful early intervention is not only the act of a humane, civilised community it makes long-term economic sense.

It is important that these agencies are integrated and able to operate across a breadth of fields, there are currently so many artificial boundaries that regulate so many aspects of those who are and are not eligible to receive support. As many of these families are compromised by the consequences of their life experiences this leads to an inability to meet regular appointments, and keep on top of a range of compliance requirements so they forfeit what little access they have to intervention and therefore spiral further out of the protective shelter of the already overworked agencies. Families also find that when they go to check the progress of lodged housing applications through the required processes that their vital paperwork cannot be located.

There is a model of support that is being used in some of the Nth Eastern shires in relation to services for 12- 25 year olds, this is called **“No Wrong Door”** and is an attempt to streamline services and ensure that the process of applying for early intervention does not further alienate the young person.

I believe that money spent in this area does not only improve the lot of victims of Family Violence it ensures a safer more effective community for all, it creates opportunities for young people to reach their full potential and will long term reduce the welfare, policing and mental health budget and open opportunities for richer contributions to our overall wellbeing.