



AFRICAN THINK TANK  
RESPONSE TO  
PATHWAYS: CITY OF  
MELBOURNE HOMELESSNESS  
STRATEGY  
2011-1.

**Prepared by the African Think Tank Team in association with the Eritrean Community  
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## **OVERVIEW**

This report comes from a history of working with homelessness issues by members and workers of the African Think Tank. This response will not be restricted to the difficulties of Australian-Africans, as the ATT team has experience of, and wishes to respond to, wider homelessness issues. However, although this issue is of great concern to us, the experience of contributors with homelessness issues directly within the City of Melbourne is limited. Experience in Sydney, Canberra, and more recently, City of Melbourne, Yarra, Stonnington, and especially Maribyrnong will be considered. Specifically, the experience that is drawn on is:

- Homelessness in the inner and wider Sydney area during the early 1990's and 2000
- Homelessness in Canberra during 2001/2
- Homelessness in the City of Melbourne, Yarra, Stonnington , Hobson's Bay, Port Phillip and Maribyrnong during 2004
- Work on rooming house issues in Maribyrnong in 2009/10
- Community work with homeless or housing-challenged Australian-African community members in 2009-2011.

Therefore , many of the suggestions will not be specifically applicable to the City of Melbourne. However the mobility of homeless people means that this issue cannot be considered in one local government area in isolation, since the homeless will relocate to any area that offers accommodation and is broadly within the wider inner city area. They will not so readily relocate to outer suburbs of which they have little or no knowledge. It is hoped that the general overview will assist those with more specific knowledge of conditions in the City of Melbourne to develop policy and procedures and promote essential liaison with other local government areas. As one of the best-resourced, largest and most powerful councils, the leadership of the City of Melbourne has a large leadership role to play in addressing deficiencies in housing and service provision.

## **1. ACCOMMODATION**

### **1.1 EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION**

The Emergency Accommodation options provided by the Department of Human Services are very limited and very overstressed. Even people in present danger may have to wait weeks for options.

As compared to Sydney or Canberra, there are relatively fewer short-term or overnight accommodation facilities. There is a certain tension between the need to use any means however crude to get vulnerable people off the streets at night, and the morale implications of very low-quality accommodation. During past years, this has moved in the direction of less places that are higher quality.

For example, in Sydney during the 1990s, overnight accommodation options ranged from the absolute minimum to good. Proclaimed Places for drunks basically provided nothing. Foster House (Salvation Army) provided about 400 places which were nothing more than the

most primitive type of ex-army sack-style camp beds placed four feet from each other through three floors of a large warehouse. Matthew Talbot (St Vincent de Paul) offered basic, mostly shared rooms for about 150, while the Smith Family offered good quality booth-style accommodation for about 80. The Smith Family was an example of a very well-run service. Incoming occupants received brief but sympathetic and supportive counselling. The booths each offered a bed and bedside table. The booths offered a measure of privacy and the facility was clean, new and neat. Tea and cold drinks were available and there was also a social room with TV. This was the preferred and exemplary accommodation service within Sydney. While the booth accommodation removed it from the charge of competition with private accommodation, it was safe, well-supervised by professionals (trustee supervision as at other services is invariably impotent or abusive), and had a safe section for women. In general, the non-religious services offered better options, because they were less fettered by elderly workers and outdated social attitudes.

Sydney at the time had, and probably still has, a homelessness support line. This has continually updated information on available places. Operators can triage callers and direct them to available beds all over the city, covering probably more than 85% of available beds. During this period, it was rare to find crisis periods where absolutely no bed was available. High-strain periods tended to be filled by small house operations run by Catholic-related charities accepting people on any terms, even if they had to sleep in house passages with a blanket. This was overlooked by the councils involved. During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the more slummy of these facilities, such as Foster House, were upgraded, with a drop in the number of available places. The present situation is not known to ATT.

In Canberra the system is not city-organised but, being a smaller city, relied in 2001 on constant contact and co-operation between the very excellent Samaritan House (St Vinnies and the only short term service – 8 beds) with Ainslie Village (Centacare-medium term-240 beds) and the Queanbeyan, NSW service (12 beds) run by the a Catholic Brotherhood.

In Melbourne, local services like the (former) Argyle Housing do excellent, high-quality work, but rely on networks that have been built up. There does not seem to be access to a centralised system. Outside the areas covered by Argyle, services such as MetWest in Footscray are hugely under-resourced, have very little and very outdated information, and most often cannot help at all.

- The Pathways estimate of 100 people sleeping rough in the MCC seems to be an underestimate caused by the mobility of people in that category. Also, some providers in the Primary category, eg church-run services, are reluctant to speak frankly to Council services as they are reliant on funding from Councils.

## **1.2 SUMMARY OF EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION**

There needs to be a compromise between the need to get people off the streets and the entrenchment of inferior services. It is highly desirable that flexibility exists to accommodate immediately anyone who is capable of acceptable social behaviour: anything is better than the streets. But the entrenched long-term operation of extremely primitive services should not be allowed.

The costs of the Housing Support Line operated by Sydney City Council were shared between SCC, other councils and the State Government. If this service does not exist in Melbourne, it needs to be organised urgently.

### **1.3 ROOMING HOUSES**

As opposed to Sydney and Canberra, the role of private rooming houses within Melbourne is much more important. There appear to be far less large charity operations, thus less beds overall. Small or private services take many of the people that in Sydney and Canberra are accommodated by larger services, with overnights at backpackers and similar commercial operations being subsidised by housing services..

#### **1.3.1 The rooming-house campaign**

In 2009/10, a task force operating out of the office of the Planning Minister, Richard Wynne, and involving DHS, Argyle and other representatives, encouraged local Councils to crack down on exploitative operators with particular reference to fire alarm provision.

The results of this were disastrous. In Maribyrnong alone, a minimum of 150 people, according to stories by two local newspapers, were forced onto the streets. At least forty sites, many of good quality, were forced to cease operation. The number of people sleeping at the local football oval increased from 8-10 to over fifty. The campaign was defective for the following reasons:

1. As Council Inspectors had been sacked in Coburg, inspectors applied maximum rigour out of fear for their jobs;
2. The regulations, which are very unclear, were interpreted in the widest possible fashion so that ANY accommodation shared by more than two unrelated people could be declared a boarding house;
3. Properties of normal shared-house size, accommodating less than eight people and in many cases 3-4, were required to provide fire safety within 14-30 days. at a level far in excess of that required for comparable rental properties occupied by, for example, young families with babies. In many cases, there was no serious fire risk. Insurance costs alone for a property defined as a rooming house zoom to \$8000-\$10,000 per year, a figure completely incompatible with economic operation. Therefore places had to close;
4. Council inspectors were credibly accused of racist comments and or targeting accommodation shared by CALD groups and students based on anonymous verbal complaints;
5. Social problems increased as mentally ill and substance-dependent individuals were forced onto the Footscray BD streets during the day;
6. The appeal process was to appeal to the Building Appeals Board. This was expensive, intricate, required professional legal services and was beyond the reach or understanding of most. One appeal to the State Government Ombudsman produced no clear result but resulted in the informal abandonment of Council action against that property;

7. Council claimed that help was available to people who had been summarily required to leave their homes. There is no record of such help ever being offered. It is clear the inspectors did not make any attempt to contact the people they were forcing out of their homes, nor did they endeavour in any way to refer displaced people to services. There appear to have been no attempt to record any details of displacement whatsoever. Local housing services, especially MetroWest, had no capacity to help;
8. In fact, the fire safety record of rooming houses was far superior to that of private houses or D.H.S. properties;
9. The involvement of the Tenant's Union in providing information to the campaign severely damaged the credibility of the Tenant's Union and the willingness of threatened people to approach them.

The rooming houses campaign was wound back after widespread community action, newspaper stories and protest, but much damage had been done. It is not clear to what extent action continues. Eventually, the Minister's office announced a \$20 million aid package for affected residents across Melbourne. However, the package was completely unrealistic and much of the funds were earmarked for relocation of residents to outlying suburbs with no services and which were unknown to the residents. A familiar environment is very important to the mentally ill in particular. Some of the points that can be learnt are:

- Rooming house regulations must be clear, rational, and consistent across legislation. Properties operating at the same level as normal shared houses should not be subject to extreme regulations.
- No property should be forced to arbitrarily close. Where an upgrade is clearly required, Council staff must work with operators and have sensitivity to the resources and time frames available.
- No person should be forced into homelessness without due aid. All persons forced into homelessness should be recorded and the aid given noted.
- Appeal processes must be within the means and abilities of residents and operators.
- It needs to be understood that the type of user that is understood to traditionally have recourse to Rooming Houses no longer applies. Many people, such as mothers with children, who are seeking flats have been unsuccessful and are forced into rooming houses for a shorter or longer period of time.

#### **1.4 RENTAL PROPERTIES**

The accommodation picture has improved a great deal during the past year, for reasons that are not clear. At the time of the greatest housing crisis last year, only two properties were available in the Footscray/Seddon/Braybrook area in the range up to \$250/wk. At the time of writing, 81 such properties were available, four of which were standing vacant.

People without transport are much disadvantaged in the competitive process of applying for properties. House inspections are advertised for only ten or fifteen minutes, with different agents having inspections at different times on the same (usually Saturday) mornings. This means that only one property can be attended, and applicants are competing against 5-10

other applications. Wearing smart clothing at these inspections is also beyond the means of many.

The disadvantages faced by CALD members and those without stable employment in obtaining accommodation are well-known and do not need to be gone into here. One improvement that could be made is with bond support. The present process of obtaining bond support is rather involved, and agents are very reluctant to suggest a tenant that has little personal stake in the bond. This could be improved by a process whereby Human Services provides the tenant with a cheque made out to the agent upon sighting an unsigned lease or account, with the tenant subsequently providing D.H.S. with a receipt.

MCC should also lobby the Federal Government for a realistic increase in Rent Assistance.

### **1.5 D.H.S. ACCOMMODATION**

It has already been noted that provision of housing by D.H.S. is inadequate. Most of this is beyond the scope of this response, however there are two points that need to be noted.

Once housing has been allocated, it can be very difficult to make changes if for some reason the housing is inadequate. In one example, the ECA has been trying unsuccessfully for over nine months to have an elderly person who has knee and leg problems that mean he cannot negotiate stairs, relocated from a fourth-floor walk-up to a ground-floor unit.

In general – and this applies to almost all environments which are used by socially challenged people – the level of caretaking and maintenance is inadequate. The excuse is given that users will not care for facilities. Just as an example however, in the case of one community facility used by many Australian-African organisations, cleaning materials are never present. Three years of efforts to get toilet paper and hand-washing liquid have failed. It is not clear to users what cleaning/maintenance contractors are supposed to provide, and it seems likely that they are underperforming relative to their contracts. A discussion with one contractor on a rare visit to the facility showed prejudicial attitudes. Throughout government services generally, there appears to be poor or no spot-checking of contractors and complaints do not seem to be acted upon.

## **2. FOOD**

There has been little or no change in this over the past twenty years. The food that is provided free is almost all substandard, unhealthy, culturally insensitive, and would be rejected by most people.

### **2.1 FREE FOOD**

Some services offer very good food. For example, the food that is offered at Foster House in Sydney and Samaritan House in Canberra would be welcome at any table. However most services are short of funding, reliant of donations of food past its use-by date, and food preparation can be very poor and in poor facilities. Food policy tends to be made at the local level and depend on the awareness of the worker, often elderly, on food value matters.

Probably about 80% of the food available comes from bakeries, which are proactively approached by food aid services. Bakers Delight is known to supply leftover bread at C.O.B. to many food services across Australia. This means that buns, cakes, rolls and bread are the greatest food source. They are filled with white sugar. For example, a Christmas

Package received from the Salvation Army in 2005 contained almost no real nourishment – white sugar cakes and lollies of poor quality made up almost all the package. Occasional contributions by Lebanese fast-food and Sushi places help to provide better nutrition.

Food vans also provide culturally inappropriate food. For example, the food van in Footscray, which is overstressed but tries hard, visits places with a large Muslim population, and does not know whether its meat is Halal and the only nourishing food is ham rolls!

## **2.2 FOOD DISTRIBUTION POINTS**

Food distribution points are often set up at locations that offer only one power point for two urns and no other cooking or heating facilities. The quality can vary. For example, in Canberra, a weekly food stall operated by the Seventh Day Adventists in Gareema Place conscientiously tries to provide thick, nourishing soup and to source valuable food such as Falafel. It also provides very high-quality bread from a boutique bakery. Nearby, in a government-run building that provides small offices to community organisations, various services take it in turn to provide food several days a week in a hall with very limited cooking (reheating) facilities. The food provided by the Salvation Army is extremely poor quality and almost inedible, with one worker being heard to comment ‘If they are hungry enough they will eat anything!’ This is not true. People will rather starve, or at least face severe nutritional inadequacy, than eat culturally inappropriate food. In contrast, the food provided by the Hare Krishna movement is very good, tasty and popular.

In Melbourne, in general various food services within the Port Phillip area offer good food, while food vans and services in Fitzroy/Coburg, MCC and Maribryngong offer poor and limited food.

Food services are an area where the greatest improvement could be made. Every day at Little Saigon markets and Footscray markets, for example, large quantities of fruit and vegetables that are edible if consumed within 24 hours are thrown out. In fact, a person living in Footscray can eat well by scavenging at Footscray market. Perhaps Mr. Binh Le, who owns Saigon, and Alan Kong, who owns Footscray Markets, could be approached to see if some of the food, especially fruit that now ends up in dumpsters could be better used. MCC could work with other councils to provide initial contacts and transport services that could then be taken over by NGOs.

## **3. CLOTHING AND BEDDING**

Clothing is varied. Knitting by volunteers provides really good-quality winter jumpers, and generally there is no shortage of good bedding material. Clothes are also quite available, though there are limitations of size range. It may be possible to develop better contacts with factories for seconds in addition to relying on donations.

## **4. FURNITURE AND HOUSING ITEMS**

Generally, furniture and housing item provision in Melbourne is good. Some stores and services give free customers their worst while selling their best. Others, for example St Vinnies, keep high-quality goods to give away. Receiving high-quality goods is very good for morale.

## **5. EMPLOYMENT**

The best possible assistance to anyone in a situation of income difficulty or homelessness is to make employment available even for one day a week. This has a huge effect on morale and social integration. Employers who will provide part-time employment to a wide range of people doing simple work need to be encouraged.

This is the most important issue, but deserves more discussion and consideration than is possible in a report of this type.

## **6. I.T. SERVICES**

The Digital Divide Program run by the ACT government was an example of a program that recognised that those without access to IT and Internet face increasing and even disabling disadvantages in obtaining employment and in accessing a wide range of information, education and services.

These types of program need to be continued, with an emphasis on the provision of accessible internet cafes to the disadvantaged. Library services are often overused and not always appropriate. Care also needs to be taken that adults and the elderly have adequate access and that the use of services is not dominated by young children, although the importance of this in education is recognised.

## **7. MORALE**

Morale depends on an attitude by workers and volunteers that is aware of the social value of the people they are helping. The attitude needs to be that it cannot be known, of the people they are helping, how many may be suffering from conditions beyond their control, or may be people of high abilities but no monetary achievement. Assistance needs to be free of religious pressure.

NGOs should be given incentives to help them employ workers and subsidise volunteers of CALD backgrounds. One deficiency in general of most services is that a religious background makes them monoculture.

In general, more than three years on the 'front lines' of social work result in tired, dispirited, and burnt-out workers. Rotation needs to be encouraged.

The more sensitivity and awareness of diverse backgrounds, and the more belief in the value of the people that are being assisted, the better for the morale of the people being helped.

Note must be taken here of community organisations, such as the Eritrean Community in Australia. There is still a common view that these are 'cultural' or 'social' organisations. It needs to be understood that the call of first resource for people in difficulties will in many cases be an organisation that understands and is appropriate to their needs. In other cases, people will try hard to ensure that difficulties that they are going through do NOT become known to other community members – but they eventually bring their problems to the community organisations because no other service has ability to help or understand their problems.

It needs to be understood that many community organisations OPERATE AS SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANISATIONS, providing the best, most cost-effective support at many levels. The funding of grassroots workers in these communities is the single most effective way of working with difficulties of people in the CALD communities.

## **8. GENERAL SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Individual points have been dealt with in individual summaries. However, these are the main points and recommendations emerging from this report.

- The most important priority in the short-term is to see that nobody is forced to spend a night on the streets. However, poor-quality, stop-gap services should be funded or encouraged to upgrade, and never allowed to become entrenched.
- Homelessness can not be approached in government areas in isolation but must be done so co-operatively, with a committee set up between councils and another committee covering councils, NGOs and community representatives.
- The provision of employment of even half a day a week is the best possible medium and long-term solution.
- Culturally sensitive services are, to a certain extent, neglected by traditional service providers, who should be given material encouragement to improve this.
- Campaigns like the rooming-house campaign that are insensitive to the real needs of the people they are claiming to serve are nothing less than abusive and disastrous.
- The provision of nutritious food is general extremely poor and is the area that can be improved with the least effort and expense.
- Supporting community-based, grassroots organisations is the single most cost-efficient and most effective way in helping improve service delivery.

The African Think Tank hopes this report will assist in the improvement of service delivery throughout Melbourne.