



**SLEEPLESS IN SEAFORD**  
**SLEEPING ROUGH: GATED CAR PARKS AND OTHER RESPONSES**  
**An exploration of Housing Loss & Homelessness**

**SEAFOORD HOUSING ACTION COALITION**

17 December 2016

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***Coalition Members:***

*- St. Anne's Parish Social Justice Group*

*- St Vincent de Paul Mt Eliza Conference Social Justice Group*

*- Seaford Community Committee*

*- Residents of the Seaford Beach Cabin Park*

## **SUMMARY**

'There is a perception that all homeless people have mental illness, drug and/or alcohol abuse and anti-social behaviour. In reality a relationship breakdown, unsafe home environment or job loss can leave someone in sub-standard accommodation, in a car, on the street, couch surfing or in a rooming house.

Whatever the reason, when a person becomes homeless or is without secure accommodation, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain a job, attend school and manage the simple things in life we take for granted.'

Community Support Frankston: <http://www.frankston.net/erhelp.htm>

It is clear that sleeping rough, including in cars, is uncomfortable, stressful, fraught with danger of assault and robbery, and also of being 'moved on' by authorities. It deprives people of access to good (or even just warm) food, showers, clothes washing, and access to basic communication, such as the internet, and mobile phone charging.

It also worsens social disenfranchisement, reinforcing diminishing confidence and self respect.

Sleeping rough (including in a car) leads to sleep deprivation, which worsens problems with mental health, and weakens coping skills and resourcefulness.

Evidence from elsewhere in Australia seems to suggest that there are two groups of people sleeping in cars: a longer-term group that has chronic issues; and a newer group which has unexpectedly found itself in crisis through unemployment, health breakdown or relationship breakdown. The latter group is especially sensitive to the decreasing affordability of housing and shortage of crisis accommodation. Our primitive survey of people sleeping in cars has found clear evidence of the former group in the local area, but is as yet nowhere near advanced enough to identify the latter group.

At this stage the evidence regarding the number of people who might use a local Gated Car Park is not clear. It does not seem to be high, but significant enough to justify a trial.

The 'Our Backyard' trial at Lake Macquarie suggests that it might be straightforward to establish such a facility. However it has had an extraordinarily supportive church, which provides the site, pays for rent of buildings, funds (through its regional welfare arm) a full-time project co-ordinator, and provides volunteer workers; it has also had the support of local council, media, and community, and its state Member of Parliament. It has not yet had any real security problems, but this possibility, and the issue of liability, would need to be considered and accommodated.

The extent of security required – whether it be merely 'safety in numbers' (without a fence), a fenced and gated car-park, even with a professional security guard as recommended by some – would have significant implications on the number of available local sites, and on the operating cost and viability of a project.

The extent of housing sector and local government support available would be critical for a Gated Car Park trial to succeed. Initial responses from welfare professionals were both positive and negative, because it is not a permanent solution, and because of security issues. Some consider that a 'supported' service, with welfare, housing and health professionals on hand to connect with people, would be more acceptable.

It appears that Royal District Nursing Service is one local group who might be more open to the idea. If it is decided to proceed with the Gated Car Park idea, a first step might be to

approach Frankston Emergency Relief Providers with a request to submit and discuss this report at one of its monthly meetings.

There are also other options available to assist those sleeping in cars or sleeping rough, which need to be compared with the Gated Car Park option in terms of effort to develop them, and their potential benefits.

Programs have recently been commenced in Melbourne and around Australia to provide mobile services to homeless people. These services not only provide food and companionship (eg the 'soup vans' which have operated in different localities including our own for decades) but also clothes washing and drying, and showering. A businessman has suggested to SHAC that a local initiative of this sort, which might also include a 'virtual post office' (internet access, mobile phone charging), would likely find support by local business.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that 'safety' is the first concern of all people sleeping rough, particularly women. Apart from the Sleepbus, which is still being trialled in Melbourne, the mobile services would not address this issue. The Sleepbus would also provide a warm and comfortable sleep. Apart from the Sleepbus, a Gated Car Park's ability to provide safety would distinguish it from the other services for people sleeping rough. On the other hand it would not provide for those sleeping rough who don't have a car.

Another alternative course of action for SHAC would be to address the acute shortage of low-income housing and appropriate crisis accommodation. Some of the very few 'shelters' available around Melbourne have a poor reputation amongst many homeless. Options for addressing the issue of crisis accommodation include education, advocacy, or direct provision (with others) of low income or crisis accommodation.

*Education:* distribution or even publication of concrete, personal stories of homelessness, along the lines of those included in this report, are one potential educational technique that would suit a community group such as ourselves.

*Advocacy:* there is also a special place for a community group in reactive and proactive advocacy, to all levels of government, for public, social and crisis housing. However it is uncertain how many would be interested in attending meetings or writing reports. Broader campaigns (perhaps including delegations, public actions/protests, fundraising, writing shorter letters, distribution of flyers etc) might be of interest to more members.

*Provision of Accommodation.* We have developed a singular understanding of the value and potential of small housing/cabins on the Seaford Beach Cabin Park model. Judging from demand for that service, and social and family trends, there would also appear to be a strong demand for small housing in the future. The Minister for Housing has recently announced a scheme for community groups to apply for land and financial support for social housing models. It may be that a local proposal could be developed, likely in conjunction with an established accommodation provider, whether not-for-profit or commercial.

## **LOCAL STORIES OF PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH, AND IN CARS**

In 2012-13 it was evident that there were quite a few men 'sleeping rough' on the Seaford foreshore, on Kananook Creek, and other bushland around Seaford.

We also observed homeless people sleeping in secluded and sheltered places such as the foreshore bushland, under bathing boxes, Kananook Creek and other bushland, and football ground coaching boxes, races and grandstands.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2012 the *Frankston Leader* ran a number of prominent and well-received stories on Mykal, one of the homeless men living in the Frankston bush. He continues to occasionally appear in articles.

Many of the people spoken with reported having been assaulted and robbed.

Similarly people sleeping in cars have been attacked at night. The potential need for a secure car park in the area arose as an issue some two years go after a SHAC member who had visited CityLife in Frankston for some 12 months reported that of four men (including a couple) he had met who were sleeping in their cars all but one had been assaulted.

It was felt that a secure night-time (only) car park might provide them with safety and dignity, especially if toilet, basic kitchen facilities, and a power-point, could be provided.

Soon afterwards came the news of a young homeless couple killed while sleeping in their car, which had been parked on a lonely track on the outskirts of Ballarat. The cause was thought to be a butane gas heater they were using to keep warm on a cold winter night. In Ballarat particularly it provoked soul-searching about the 'forgotten people' and increasingly unaffordable housing.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the risks it is common for people to prefer to sleep in cars, which many feel are safer than Rooming Houses, or Homeless Shelters.

A number of those who sleep in cars do so because of pets, which make finding private rental accommodation very difficult.

The following reports are of local situations. (None of the names used are the real names of the people involved.)

- A SHAC member wrote of several recent (2015) encounters with people he had met at CityLife:

- "I met Jim and his wife Emma 18 months ago at CityLife church in Frankston, at the time they were living in their car. I met them in Frankston on Friday, and had a yarn. They now rent a 3 bedroom house in Frankston; Jim had his right hand bandaged as he had broken a bone in his hand as a result of a fight a couple of days ago. He is suffering from depression and anxiety. He said he had no reason for living and showed me his right arm where there are marks where he had cut himself trying to commit suicide.

Emma left him 4 weeks ago and had returned yesterday. She came by as we talked, does not look well at all.

I suggested Jim might get work in a restaurant in Red Hill; he said he could not cope with any work right now because of his anxiety."

- "I met Bill last evening. I asked him how long he had been living in his car, he said about 2 years. I then asked him what he did between 6 and 10 pm of an evening, where did he go. He said he spent a lot of time at McDonalds, sitting, reading and thinking. He would go to sleep in the car park at the Frankston hospital. He also said quite a number of people who go to breakfast at Citylife spend time in McDonalds in Frankston of an evening. I asked him where he washed himself; he said there are showers somewhere in Mt Eliza and in a couple of other places on the Peninsula.

Bill now has a small unit in Oakleigh and is doing fairly well."

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<sup>2</sup> *The Age*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2014, 'Young homeless couple in Ballarat found dead in car from heater'; *The Courier*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2014, 'Residents shocked after homeless couple, dog, found dead in car near Ballarat'. This incident may have contributed to the organisation by the Ballarat Interfaith Network of a well-attended forum on homelessness in the city in August 2015.

- St Vincent de Paul Society (Mornington). In an attempt to raise awareness of homelessness on the Mornington Peninsula, in 2008 local Vinnies volunteers wrote sketches of some of the people they were assisting.<sup>3</sup> Two examples featured people living in cars:

- 'Case 8'

"A blended family group of four adults and five children were living on the beach. Their only accommodation consisted of two cars.

Conference assisted the group with food and other essentials such as towels, bedding, utensils etc. No emergency housing could be found, but eventually a second-hand caravan was provided. This was an improvement, but by no means adequate. During the summer months any possible accommodation is usually rented out to holiday makers.

The search for emergency housing continued unsuccessfully. Finally the families were forced to leave the foreshore in April, and moved from the area."

- 'Case 15'

"Bruce lives in his ute which he parks on various foreshores each night, and says he doesn't get asked to move on by the authorities. He would often pop into the Main Street St Vincent de Paul shop (before it was burnt down), have a cuppa with staff, and we would get a call to see him.

Always polite and extremely grateful, Bruce would tell us about his kids in Queensland, whom he never sees, and all the money he has sent over the years to his ex which has left him broke and owing thousands to Centrelink for 'false claims', which he has tried to dispute in court.

He needs to keep his car on the road and change locations each night for fear of being banned from the foreshore parking areas. He has had to pay for constant roadworthies, gas for his cooking, wet weather gear etc, and of course, petrol.

It is an itinerant, hand to mouth, existence. Last word is he now has a site at an eastern suburb caravan park, which may have given him some sense of belonging somewhere."

- St Vincent de Paul Mt Eliza Conference Social Justice Group (May – July 2016):
  - Two people sleeping rough, the first a lady who tried to sleep at night while hiding, afraid, under beach bathing boxes.

"The second person was a male who sometimes sleeps in a car park in Frankston. He would drink a lot of alcohol to blot out his fear of sleeping rough and the drink would keep him warm. His needs were the same as the lady, hot shower, change of clothes or to wash them, mobile phone & phone card, access to charger. People sleeping in cars are a little better off, they have mobile shelter and can move off if an issue arises."
  - "We helped a homeless person who was sleeping around the streets of Frankston, in an old unregistered caravan in poor state of repair. This chap had lost his job due to

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<sup>3</sup> St Vincent de Paul, 'Peninsula Homelessness', 12/7/2008, pp.1-7. Real names were not used in this report.

an injury and could not find work due to his medical condition, could not pay rent and ended up on the streets sleeping rough. Six months ago someone offered him an old van.

The day we interviewed him he indicated to us that a women offered him her driveway to park his van and the use of the bathroom, but he could not move the van. We noticed a by-law officer from the council watching. So the next day we arranged to move the van late morning by flat top tow truck to the private driveway.

The day we moved him the council called and advised him they would be removing his van from the street the next day."

- Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre (SPCSIC)
  - The introductory video on its website includes an interview with an unidentified man who relates that:

"After a family breakup I found myself homeless. I was living in my car, and from that time it was a challenge to be housed somewhere long-term. It's not what you expect. People spend their lives in these situations because they feel there's nothing left."

- 'Monica', in her late 40s, attended the second day of the SPCSIC's new 'Spash' program of mobile services on Rosebud foreshore. She presently sleeps on the foreshore camping ground in a Winnebago (RV). She has tertiary qualifications, but can't function during her bouts of depression. She spoke strongly about homeless women being 'invisible' because they so often feel unsafe; for example, unless driven to it by hunger they preferred to avoid homeless services such as free meal services that were attended mainly by men, especially if offensive language and threatening behaviour was not properly enforced by the organisers. She says that homeless women have a good idea of the situation of other women: women sleeping in cars don't go to public car parks or foreshore reserves, but go instead to ordinary suburban streets, where they sink down into the seat and hope that they won't be noticed. In poorer suburbs people seem to be more concerned about who is parked in front of their houses, so she had preferred richer suburbs during the period she had been sleeping in an ordinary vehicle. As well as choosing an inconspicuous street, she said women chose a parking spot that would allow them to drive off (escape) quickly. Bedtime and waking are early; they drive off before the neighbourhood wakes and notices them.

She raised the potential issue in a Gated Car Park of safety for women from the men who might also be staying there. She spoke about being hungry, and how anyone could end up homeless. She remembered with emotion how she had been bashed many years ago. 'Safety', she said, even more than food, is the most important consideration when you are homeless.

- The Salvation Army (Appeal brochure, July 2016)

Includes a story of 'Jodie', who "spent three months living homeless in a tent and car":

"I never thought homelessness would be my story. It all happened so quickly. My body started playing up, and it got worse. My balance is really bad. The pain is excruciating. I was working full-time in two cleaning jobs, but I had to stop. I had no choice. That's how I lost my house.

I've worked hard all my life. And this is where I ended up. I was homeless for three months. I'll never forget the first night on the streets, because it poured down with rain and I didn't know how to set up my swag. It was very cold sleeping rough."

- Seaford Community Centre (evening meals, 2016)
  - "An older man was persuaded by a younger woman sleeping in her car to allow her to park in the front yard of his house. (Many of the people who eat at the Seaford meals service look out for one another.) She told him that she had been sleeping in her car because of a situation with her partner. She disappeared without notice, but things mysteriously kept happening around the car (things put in there, or removed), which remained locked in his front yard. A group of men (one thought to be her partner) eventually turned up without notice and loaded the car onto a tow-truck. By this stage the situation had become a bit distressing for the man."
  - "A couple came into the meal. The man was quite reasonable and level-headed however his partner was very agitated and distressed. I sat with them for a while and then they opened up that their car was parked in the main shopping centre of Dandenong. It was not drivable due to being unregistered and the battery had died. The money for both they did not have and the management had demanded they move the vehicle. It held all their worldly possessions.

I offered to help them and gave them my phone number. However they did not have credit on their phone. I asked them to use a payphone to ring me the next day as I would start working on their problems as soon as I arrived at the office.

I spoke with the man twice on Thursday, once on Friday and again on the Saturday following our meeting on the Wednesday evening.

On Friday I got them to go and see the manager of Frankston Community Centre. He saw them personally to make sure something was done to assist them. When the man rang on Saturday I told them of a position vacant at the Seaford Beach Cabin Park that would be available in a week and that the Manager would like to see them during the following week.

This was the last time I spoke with him and they did not go to see the Seaford Beach Cabin Park manager. I can only hope that they either went to his parents (for whom the lady had no time) or a better offer came up."

It is evident that sleeping in a car, and sleeping rough, is an unstable, testing, undignified and sometimes unsafe lifestyle. It is always insecure and with the constant threat of being 'moved on'. It is easy to envisage how, as the 2008 Mornington Peninsula St Vincent de Paul survey says, homelessness:

- 'robs some of our children of a happy childhood and the ability to learn and achieve'; and
- 'leaves some of our adults without purpose, and sorrowful lives.'



## **KNOWN EXISTING GATED CAR PARKS**

### **Overseas**

Gated Car Parks appear to have originated in California. Around 2008, as foreclosures hit, those who had always struggled with homelessness were joined by senior citizens, women, and formerly middle class people with part-time jobs. By May 2008 a homeless outreach organisation in affluent Santa Barbara had a chain of 12 overnight car park refuges (including one 'women-only') on church and other not-for-profit properties.<sup>4</sup>

As the Global Financial Crisis impacted more widely the model appears to have spread across the USA, with many 'working poor' families forced into temporary accommodation such as private motel rooms, and the overnight 'gated car parks' set up by community groups. This was revealed to Australia in the Four Corners program 'America's Broken Dreams' in February 2013. Around the same time, web searches revealed Gated Car Parks in the UK and India. Recently however many US Walmart stores have reversed 'overnight parking' permissions (apparently used principally by 'Recreational Vehicle' travellers) due to security issues that have arisen.

### **Australian Gated Car Park: 'Our Backyard'**

'Our Backyard', at Lake Macquarie, NSW, is thought to be the only Gated Car Park in Australia.<sup>5</sup> It was initiated in early 2014 by local charities, Eastlake Women's Refuge, and Path to Change, in the grounds of The Macquarie Life Church, which also pays \$1000 per month rent for the two demountable buildings for its kitchen and office, and bathroom. Since 2016 has been run by Macquarie Care (a charity arm of the church in Newcastle) and partners.

Our Backyard now has a full-time co-ordinator, and no longer describes itself as a 'pilot' program (<http://www.ourbackyard.info>). It has moved from the original 'case management' to a 'support role' model, providing practical emergency support, and referrals to specialist professional services to make life a little easier for the homeless. It aims to direct people to longer-term community welfare supports, and particularly transition to secure stable accommodation. It is not a long-term solution, but helps people get through a 'sticky wicket'. They regard it as one of many possible responses to the problem.

The church charity, Macquarie Care, now employs a full-time (7 days a week, 365 days a year) overseer. It also provides a team of 20 volunteers.

### *The People Living in their Cars*

As much as generalisations are possible, Our Backyard appears to have identified two groups of people whose lives have been reduced to living in a car:

- Longer term homeless. This group often have more chronic issues such as substance abuse, mental illness, criminal records, and late rent payments to private providers or the Department of Housing. Many are on blacklists with estate agents, the Department of Housing and Centrelink. A few seem

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<sup>4</sup> CNN, 20/5/2008: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/05/19/homeless.mom/>; also *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 21/5/2008: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2003921/House-prices-force-Americans-to-sleep-in-cars.html>

<sup>5</sup> 'Our Backyard', Notes to SHAC, MaryAnne Hickmott; Note that an article in *Central Coast Gosford Express Advocate*, 23/7/2013, 'Homeless told to leave the Central Coast if they want affordable public housing', suggests that there were perhaps a number of gated car parks in NSW.



impervious to efforts to get them to help themselves. All have a story, some of which help the volunteers understand why they live the way they do.

- Newly homeless. These have unexpectedly become homeless due to a crisis such as a lost job, a broken marriage, a few weeks missed rent. These problems become a crisis when there are few family or friends to support, and in a time of diminishing availability of crisis housing, and increasing housing unaffordability.<sup>6</sup>

In 2015, not long after the trial commenced, Our Backyard proponents recognised that it was to some extent a response to the changing face of homelessness:

"These aren't the traditionally homeless people – they're people who've not been able to pay their rent because they've lost their job, but they've still got their car.

It's that pocket of people in the community that really aren't recognised as homeless, because they've still got some resources about them."<sup>7</sup>

The present project co-ordinator Peter Di Girolamo states that people using the service are:

- '...women escaping domestic violence ...'
- '...men after relationship breakdown ...'
- '... and couples'.

'Rent affordability and unemployment were major issues that left many people only two or three paws from housing crisis', he said.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Numbers of People using Our Backyard*

Numbers fluctuate. Also, different average numbers have been cited at different stages of operation:

- At one (earlier?) stage the present manager is quoted as saying that 50 people were helped in 10 months. Twenty of these were supported into private or public housing. This is an average of only 5 (presumably different) people per month.<sup>9</sup>
- In October up to 5 people slept there each night; in August 20 people stayed, some a few nights.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Operation and Security*

- There is no gate around the car-park, or security staff.
- The scheme does not disclose the location of the car park on promotional material, primarily to deter perpetrators of domestic violence. The need for exact directions is thought to be a major reason why an overnight security guard is not needed.

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<sup>6</sup> *Newcastle Herald*, editorial, 27/6/2016.

<sup>7</sup> ABC News, 6/3/2015 'New approach to homelessness offers safe haven for 'car sleepers': <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-06/new-approach-to-homelessness/6284836>.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne McCarthy, article presumably in *Newcastle Herald* (no date).

<sup>9</sup> Joanne McCarthy, article presumably in *Newcastle Herald* (no date).

<sup>10</sup> Notes on 'Our Backyard', MaryAnne Hickmott; Julie Melman, telephone conversation, David Moloney, 11/10/2016

- Security cameras (primarily for protection of property) are being considered.
- Intake is 4–6 pm, with project co-ordinator attending. People stay, with free use of the facilities. The co-ordinator is also available 8–10 am. Kitchen closes at 10 am.
- Local charities and community groups (the church, Rotary Club etc) have helped with cleaning, maintenance, food and companionship. The co-ordinator says it is working very well. There are still teething issues, such as with volunteers (responsibility, limits, and training).
- There are rules for those who attend:
  - These are read to those applying to stay, who have to sign that they will comply with them;
  - A record is kept of those staying. They are required to inform whether they have a conviction (and for what), are an alcohol or drug user, or have a mental illness.
  - No drugs or alcohol are allowed to be consumed;
  - Intoxicated persons are not allowed to stay;
  - One only warning is given before a permanent ban.
- There have been no problems to date. The only incident was a man who was banned through arriving drunk but allowed to stay rather than drive off; he returned another time, but left of his own accord when staff arrived.
- Their experience is that all come voluntarily seeking help, and are genuinely appreciative of the service. This is evident in the way they appreciate the staff and volunteers, and respect the cleanliness of the facility.

#### *Services*

- Originally, in addition to offering a 'safe haven', the facility also provided 'a hub', with access to a full-time caseworker (funded through the community welfare groups which auspiced the project). A staff member case-managed residents, helping with applications for jobs, housing etc. As it was staffed during the day, the service was open throughout the day (and included a playgroup).
- Maquarie Life Church has now assumed full management of the project and employs a full-time project overseer.
- Information about local services is provided (including RSPCA). They all have mobile phones, and are encouraged to make an appointment with the service they need.
- People are given a toiletry pack.

#### *Political and Housing Sector Support*

- The local mayor and Council strongly support the project. The NSW government is not supportive, although the local member is very supportive.
- Camping breaches Council regulations.

### *Thoughts of Organisers on the Project*

- The Macquarie Life church believes that it is worthwhile to spend \$1000 per month on facilities to help 20 people per month.<sup>11</sup> Macquarie Care also employs a full-time project co-ordinator.
- The initiative has helped people who slip through the cracks re local crisis accommodation, including couples (who cannot stay in either women's or men's refuges); and those with pets.
- It also helps with issues that contribute to homelessness, including exhaustion: 'you can't really sleep if you're in your car or on the street and watching for problems'.<sup>12</sup>
- Its co-ordinator emphasises that Our Backyard provides more than just a safe place, and facilities for charging a phone or making a cup of coffee. The visitors are called 'guests', not 'clients'. They build 'a sense of community', which honours a person's dignity and value. An important part of the story is responding to real people who 'just want to belong'.<sup>13</sup>
- The church describes it as a 'simple' thing to do. Its co-ordinator encourages us to develop a similar project in Seaford: simply find a spot and set up a meeting with decision makers.

## **INVESTIGATIONS INTO PEOPLE SLEEPING IN CARS IN SEAFORD, FRANKSTON AND PENINSULA AREAS**

### *Initial SHAC Inquiries*

SHAC's idea of a Gated Car Park was discussed at the Frankston Emergency Relief Providers (FERP) meeting of June 2015. The consensus was that there were many sleeping in cars, and that this was definitely worthy of further research. The Royal District Nursing Service representative offered to assist with health services if a Gated Car Park eventuates.

We identified some 14 potential Gated Car Park sites, mainly local churches and not-for-profit depots and stores, in the Seaford area. Some were already fenced, and some had basic facilities. In July 2015 we wrote to the owners inviting them to a discussion about the idea of a Gated Car Park.<sup>14</sup> Disappointingly there was only one response, advising inability to assist. Personal follow-up approaches might have met with more success.

During the course of the present inquiry, two additional potential sites (churches) with gates and toilets were identified in Chelsea. Frankston or Carrum (bigger) Police Station carparks were also suggested.

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<sup>11</sup> Conversations, MaryAnne Hickmott with, and David Moloney with Julie Melman.

<sup>12</sup> Joanne McCarthy, article presumably in *Newcastle Herald* (no date).

<sup>13</sup> Eg, a community barbeque of the fish caught by an older male guest who spends his days fishing on Lake Macquarie: a great celebration by both guests and volunteers. (Email, Peter Di Girolamo to David Moloney, 5/12/2016.)

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Vaughan, 'Gated Car Parks: A Proposal', SHAC (no date).

In February 2016 we decided to systematically investigate the idea of a Gated Car Park. A list of questions was drawn up under the headings: 'The Need', 'Other Examples', 'Necessary Facilities', 'Management', 'Potential Supporters', 'Potential Sites', and 'Local Government'.

This report provides the results of our research into the first and most fundamental of these questions: 'Is there a need?'

As well as anecdotes and stories of the people involved, we have sought to estimate the number of people sleeping in their cars in the Seaford-Frankston area.

We are not aware of previous investigations into people sleeping in cars by community groups, or government or not-for-profit welfare services. Just as no services are provided for people sleeping in their cars, no statistics are kept either. Church and community groups provide meals, companionship and other small but important services, and help them to present to specialist agencies that address health, work and accommodation needs.<sup>15</sup> But otherwise it seems to be a case of moving people on.

The following information was obtained from conversations with local groups. These included the local hospital, police, caravan parks, and housing and welfare agencies. Contacts were made with groups including Launch Housing, Peninsula Youth & Family Services/SalvoCare, St Vincent de Paul Mt Eliza Conference Social Justice Group, Centacare, Mental Health Support Group, Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS), Frankston Emergency Relief Providers, WAYSS, Department of Health & Human Services, and Frankston Council.

Various people also attended SHAC meetings to discuss the issue. These included Pastor Bill Nagi, well known in Frankston North for his grass-roots work with poor and marginalised people over many years, and Nycey Stanley, a worker at CityLife. Peter Chappaloni (Spike) of the Homeless Persons Union had been keen to come to meet a community group interested in homelessness, but was a late apology.

Kevin Bain of the Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group also attended a SHAC meeting opposing the Gated Car Parks idea as it was not a long-term solution, would undermine 'integration', and diminish pressure for governments and politicians to address homelessness. He also inquired whether there was expert welfare sector support for the proposal. Opposing views were put, including: people are in immediate need, and at risk; public housing is not available; the proposal is envisaged as a 'stepping stone'; and some preferred to live on the street despite its problems, including some parents who do not want to notify authorities of their plight for fear of losing children.

It is acknowledged that a Gated Car Park would not be easy to get going without strong connections with community agencies. Potential issues will include: support from local government, the community and the welfare sector; insurance for property owners; and everyday people management and security issues.

It is also recognised that there are alternative options that we might pursue, including political advocacy and community education regarding the need for emergency and social housing, and services to the homeless. There are also other types of direct 'service' provision that SHAC might engage in with others, including mobile services (showers, laundry, food etc), local food pantries, or promotion of 'small housing' (as at cabin parks).

Feedback about the idea was received from the following services.

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<sup>15</sup> Eg, the now-closed CityLife at Frankston, the now-closed St Paul's breakfast in Frankston, the St Vincent de Paul visitation services, the food services provided by Community Support Frankston, and Second Bite (through Salvation Army and other churches and community organisations), the John Paul College community soup van, St Aidan's Carrum, St Macartan's Mornington, Mary's Van Rosebud, Vinnies Kitchen Rosebud, SPLASH Rosebud.)

*Councils, and Municipal Homeless Services*

- Contacts were made with Frankston and Kingston Councils. Generally the need for emergency and permanent low-cost accommodation in the municipalities was recognised, and statistics cited. However, no specific statistics or information relating to people sleeping rough or in cars was available.
- Existing services that helped the homeless included:- Community Support Frankston (which issues sleeping swags and food vouchers); Salvo Care Eastern (which is the first port of call for emergency housing); and the local RDNS which runs a program specifically to tend to the health issues of the homeless.
- A SHAC member has also been attending the Dandenong Rooming House Network, which comprises service providers together with other community groups, and the Council. There are considerable problems with Rooming House accommodation.

*Frankston Police.*<sup>16</sup>

- Estimate that the number of homeless people encountered per week on night shift ranges from 5-15, with the great majority of these sleeping in cars. Sleeping in cars is a far worse problem in Frankston than Moorabbin. However it doesn't appear to have become worse over the past 6 years.
- Very difficult to know how many are assaulted or robbed as these are rarely reported to police. Older heroin addicts are particularly vulnerable.
- "By far the majority" have drug or alcohol dependencies and have fallen out with their families. Many have criminal records, perhaps unregistered cars. A few have mental health issues. Some have pets. Very few are backpackers, travellers etc sleeping in vans or recreational vehicles.
- The police officer's experience was that it is very much a temporary issue for people; it's rare to see the same face twice. They might move on to couch surfing, or find better accommodation.
- Very few domestic violence victims sleep in cars; if these contact police, they are referred to a crisis agency (eg womens shelter, Salvos) for immediate accommodation.<sup>17</sup> This is only for a few nights as police usually remove the perpetrator from the family home and restore the victims there.
- Locations in which people sleep in cars:
  - Secluded unlit areas off main roads, with toilets (& showers if possible), are preferred.
  - Beach car parks are popular: from the bottom of Oliver's Hill northwards up Nepean Highway.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Senior Constable Kolivas, with David Moloney, 13/4/2016. (It was reported that the Dandenong police also generally concurred with the information contained in the report of this interview.)

<sup>17</sup> While this applies to women who have suffered domestic violence, and perhaps women with children, our own knowledge suggests that it does not apply to single women who are homeless; social workers assess the needs of each individual case.

- Frankston North and Seaford the focus of the problem. Popular places include:
  - Car park at entrance to Pines Forest Reserve at south end of Excelsior Drive
  - Car park in Forest Drive/Monterey Boulevard reserve, with toilet
  - The Seaford North Reserve (Railway Parade, near station), with toilet.
- Sleeping in cars is not a crime. But it usually contravenes Council by-laws, and Council sometimes ring police during the day to ask them to move people on if they think nuisance or trouble might brew.
- If a Gated Car Park was to be established, the police officer wouldn't recommend one in a residential area given the incidence of crime associated with many of the people.

#### *Carrum Downs Police*

- The Police deal with the occasional homeless person but not on every shift. These are people who are sleeping rough rather than in cars.

*Frankston Salvation Army (formerly Peninsula Youth and Family Services, now SalvoCare) & WAYSS (Westernport Accommodation and Youth Support Services Inc):<sup>18</sup>*

- People who live in cars do not often visit SalvoCare or similar services.
- People who live in cars are often those who have become 'recently' homeless. Most likely, they have experienced a family break-down and are generally looking for permanent accommodation and would prefer not to sleep in their car.
- A high proportion of people who sleep in cars, do so because they have a pet and have found finding a private rental difficult.
- Other reasons for people living in cars include mental health issues. These might prefer the solitude of parking on a residential street.
- Other thoughts on the Gated Car Park idea:
  - Not a long-term solution to housing;
  - Likely difficulties regarding funding and council permits;
  - Security: potential users might see a Gated Car Park as a place where they can be "stood-over", robbed, etc, and be cautious of placing themselves in such a vulnerable situation. To succeed, it would need security and this will be expensive and potentially make the project unviable;
  - A gated car park could work if there is access to social worker support.

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<sup>18</sup> Six crisis workers were contacted at Frankston SalvoCare and WAYSS, and a meeting of Dandenong WAYSS (on Rooming Houses) was attended.

- In 2014 a Salvation Army officer was reported as saying that, throughout Victoria, 'more and more' people are resorting to living in their cars, or in summer sleeping on the beach, 'because of lack of affordable accommodation options.'<sup>19</sup>

#### *Launch Housing*

- 'Launch Housing', a recent merging of Homeground (property) and Hanover (welfare) services, is one of Victoria's largest providers of housing and homelessness support services. It provides emergency housing, homelessness support services and advocacy, and research into homelessness that provides positive change in the community.
- Its crisis workers focus on early intervention, and thus strongly oppose the Gated Car Park idea, thinking it might encourage people to live in cars. They advise that these people should instead be referred to those who would help them find better housing.

#### *Frankston Hospital:*

- The hospital security officer reported that in his experience people who sleep in cars like to be somewhere quiet where they won't be disturbed.
- They occasionally have a run of people sleeping in cars, but the car-parks are patrolled & compliance officers will book those who exceed time limits or don't pay. Due to expense of parking, sleeping in cars 'is not a big problem'.
- An area of free parking near the Botanical Gardens is also patrolled and anyone seen in a car is checked to ensure they are ok.

#### *Seaford Beach Cabin Park*

- The manager and owner have previously reported very high numbers of inquiries for accommodation at the park (up to ten a day), of which around three a week may have been living in their cars. Frankston hospital also regularly inquires to the Cabin Park seeking accommodation for people who have presented to it.
- However statistics (as far as is possible without being intrusive to inquirers) regarding how many accommodation seekers might have been living in their car, or sleeping rough, are only beginning to be kept. In six weeks (June-July 2016) there were only two (possibly) applicants known to have been sleeping in cars. In four weeks (September – October 2016) there was approximately one inquiry per week from people (3 men, 1 woman) who said that they were sleeping in a car.
- However these figures are very likely to underestimate the demand:
  - While there are many inquiries for accommodation (including people asking residents rather than management about vacancies), the manager believes that 'people may not be disclosing that they are living on the street'. This likelihood is confirmed by the experience of cabin park residents, who advise that people are unlikely to admit to landlords that they are living on the street when applying for accommodation. As well as the embarrassment and shame of admitting to homelessness, most landlords want proof that rent can be afforded, and information about previous accommodation.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Age*, 26/7/2014



- A 'no vacancy' sign has been displayed outside the cabin park

*Chelsea Holiday Park (100 Broadway Street, Bonbeach)*

- A minimum of 2 requests for temporary accommodation per day from people who are on the street or living in cars. In the last month requests from 4 people who were living in hotels and 2 in cars.
- Some residents who would normally be on the street are supported by charity and government groups. They are turning some of their tourist cabins into residential accommodation due to the high demand.
- They feel that there is a great need for more programs to assist the homeless and far more temporary and long-term accommodation needed in the electorate.

*Pastor Bill Nagi*

- In his 45 years working in welfare he has seen a steady cutback of government funding for youth support schemes, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs taken off-shore, and an increase in 'victim blaming' (eg 'unmotivated' youth).
- He worries that the \$550 million new funding for domestic violence might be at the expense of public housing.
- In his experience in Frankston North, police often 'hassle' people sleeping in cars, moving them on.

*(Former) Frankston CityLife*

*Nycey (former worker)*

- People living in swags are often bashed and assaulted on the foreshore, and need to get a new swag and CentreLink card. They live a very transient lifestyle.
- Initial inquiries at CityLife revealed three or four people living in cars. Most of the people there are used to doing things for themselves, and going their own way. (Perhaps the majority who use such facilities aren't the "newly homeless" who might be attracted to Gated Car Parks.)
- There were mixed reactions from the two respondents who provided feedback to the idea of a Gated Car Park. One thought it a good idea, but wasn't sure if he would use it regularly. The other initially thought it might be a good idea, but then thought that there may be trouble between the users. The CityLife security guard also anticipated the need for security at any Gated Car Park. Nycey also would want to be assured regarding security, and how the secure gate would work.
- She thought that it would be a transient population that would stay for some nights, but move around.
- She thought cabins might be a better way to go but that if a Gated Car Park could be set up cheaply it would be worth a trial to see how the needy responded.

*'Albert' (former volunteer; long experience in community work)*

- He is opposed to Gated Car Park idea due to potential problems, particularly liability; it wouldn't resolve the problem, but could create more problems.

- Putting strangers together in a confined space would be asking for trouble. Would have to pay for a security guard; would one guard be enough if a fight broke out?
- If someone was injured could operators or property owner be sued?
- Where would it be situated? Residential neighbours could be expected to object;
- SHAC would be better trying to house people or helping them in other ways.

*'Splash': Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre mobile laundry, shower and food service, Rosebud Foreshore.*

- After the first two weeks of operation the SPCSIC advised that of the 7 who had come along, 3 had been sleeping in cars.
- SPCSIC is developing a data-base of people coming seeking help. As yet information is broadly-based, with no categories as yet for 'sleeping in car' 'couch surfing' etc.

Figures available for the first six months of 2016 show that some 19.5% of visitors - 248 individual clients - identified their accommodation as 'boarding / lodging (including boarding houses), 'homeless', or 'living in a caravan park'. Of these, 74 (an average of about three different people a week) stated they were 'homeless'.

Of the 74 'homeless' people, 47 were male and 27 female. Of the 'homeless', 26 were on the Disability Support Pension, 24 on Newstart, 7 on Parenting Payment, and 5 on Youth Allowance. Twelve had no government payment.<sup>20</sup>

- The RDNS support service to the program said that in her (the nurse's) experience sleeping in cars was often intermittent, maybe over weeks or a month, between more 'permanent' accommodations. One woman was known to drive at nights to the street where she had lived in happier times. In addition to family breakdown, many had mental health or drug abuse issues.

The nurse thought the root cause of the issue was vanishing 'affordable' housing and crisis accommodation. At the most recent Peninsula regional 'Emergency Relief Providers' meeting it was advised that the nearest crisis accommodation is presently Endeavour Hills, with other options at Dandenong and St Kilda. There are some bad and overcrowded rooming houses, and the preferred caravan park accommodation is rapidly disappearing on the Peninsula.<sup>21</sup> Two that are still available for homeless people are: the Bella Vista on Trumans Road which has also been sold for some holiday development and is in the process of closing down (only 6 of its 40 cabins available); and the Sundowner Willows on Eastbourne Road, which requires photo identification, and a bond, both of which eliminate some homeless people.

## **DISCUSSION**

### *Housing Affordability and Homelessness in Frankston*

Homelessness and affordable housing are significant problems in the Frankston area. The scope of these issues is only beginning to be understood.

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<sup>20</sup> Email, R Coughlin to D Moloney, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2016.

<sup>21</sup> As SHAC is aware through the Seaford Beach Cabin Park. They include seaside holiday parks now used for permanent low-income accommodation. The sites are unusually large and well-located and in demand for higher return uses, eg apartments, nursing homes.

Anecdotally we are all aware that the prices of both houses and rental accommodation have soared. When it is difficult for many employed people to find independent accommodation, those on the edges fare very badly. As prospective homeowners unable to purchase in the heated property market remain as renters, vulnerable low-income earners are forced further down the property ladder, sometimes into homelessness.

The decreasing affordability of Frankston's housing is intensified by the relative vulnerability of the municipality's population, which has a high proportion of low-income earners, and approximately 25% of people dependent on pensions and benefits.

Some glimpses into the situation:

- In the ten years between 2001 and 2010 the percentage of 'affordable' rental housing in the City of Frankston plummeted from approximately 70% to approximately 20%.<sup>22</sup>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census figures showed a 35% increase in 'homelessness' in the Frankston electorate between 2006 and 2011. In the 2011 census 360 people were 'homeless' in Frankston. (While most of these did have a roof of some sort over their head, they were without a home.) Local welfare agency Community Services Frankston expects that the 2016 census will show a big increase in this number.
- Among the growing 'cohorts' of Frankston homeless are mothers with children, and older people.
- We understand that Dunkley is currently the sixth highest Centrelink district in Victoria for issuing extension payments for homelessness.
- In 2010 mortgage repayments for houses were 49% of the average annual household income in the municipality, and 40% for rental accommodation.<sup>23</sup> Housing in the City of Frankston is becoming less affordable.
- ABS analysis shows that 31% of Frankston tenants are experiencing 'rent stress', wherein a high percentage of their income is consumed by rent. The Council to Homeless Persons describes this situation as 'causing stress, anxiety and contributing to family breakdown'.<sup>24</sup>
- Some of those evicted as a consequence of being unable to meet rental payments will seek public housing. Yet despite steadily increasing population and a growing public housing waiting list in the Frankston area (1979 people in 2011), the number of public housing units in the area is stagnant (perhaps even in decline).
- In 2014 there were 30 registered Rooming Houses in Frankston, and an estimated 30 more operating without registration.
- The 2013 annual report of Community Support Frankston tells that there were 6000 calls on its emergency relief program in 2013, which included a 35% increase from people living in caravans, and a 55% increase from people living in shared accommodation (rooming houses). The 2015 annual report shows that the three big needs of visitors seeking assistance related to health, income, and accommodation.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pp.29-30

<sup>23</sup> City of Frankston Housing Strategy, Final Report, 2013, p.74

<sup>24</sup> Council to Homeless Persons, 'Low income families crushed by rent in outer suburbs', 8<sup>th</sup> October 2014

- The range of affordable housing types in the municipality – public housing, social housing, rooming houses and caravan parks – ‘are generally operating at capacity.’<sup>25</sup>
- The large tracts of land occupied by caravan parks in urban areas are valuable, and presently under pressure nationally for redevelopment as aged-care and higher value accommodation. In Frankston ‘many’ caravan parks have recently been purchased for residential development. In 2013 it was reported that between 619-743 persons were permanently housed in Frankston caravan parks.<sup>26</sup> We know of numerous large parks that have recently been or will soon be closed in the Frankston area.<sup>27</sup>
- It is becoming increasingly difficult to find emergency accommodation for those seeking help. The only crisis housing options in Frankston now appear to be the Beach Motor Inn, rooming houses (some of which are unsuitable), and the Log Cabin caravan park at Langwarrin. Otherwise the nearest ‘supported’ crisis accommodation is run by the Hanover Centre at Dandenong. Also further afield are caravan parks at Dandenong (Shawlands) and Rosebud (Sundowner Willows).

### *Reasons for Sleeping Rough*

Information (not conclusive) suggests that there are more people sleeping in cars in beach and poorer suburbs such as Frankston, Seaford, and Dandenong. Reasons people sleep in their cars, or sleep rough, include:

- Lack of affordable accommodation, including rental accommodation. This has increased greatly over past decade.
- The poor reputation of Rooming Houses in terms of safety.
- Impossibility of finding rental accommodation without a job, or employment record, or letters of references and credit rating.
- Council for Homeless Persons reports plummeting percentage of affordable rental housing over last ten years (eg in Ballarat, from 80% to 25%)
- Associated increase in rent, which is beyond most people on welfare (Newstart or Youth Allowance).
- Public Housing sold off over previous decades. It is now grossly insufficient and those eligible for public housing are confronted with impossibly long waiting lists for all but most urgent cases (primarily domestic abuse victims, but probably also women with children).<sup>28</sup>
- Some public housing in poor condition is being left vacant for long periods, and in the meantime is being trashed (Ballarat)
- Indifference and lack of compassion in the community (eg offering spare blankets, jackets, accommodation)

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<sup>25</sup> Frankston Housing Strategy, *op cit*, p.74

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.82

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.82; Karren Walker, Southern Housing & Support Services Network, 5/12/2013;

<sup>28</sup> One SHAC member was told six years ago that the waiting time for public housing was 25-30 years; more recently she has been told that the wait is now ‘indefinite’. In the past four years she has twice had to complete a renewal of her application, in default of which she would have been removed from the waiting list. A letter accompanying the renewal form advised that public waiting lists had been closed and no new applications would be accepted. Such reports suggest that authorities no longer want people on the public housing waiting list.

- Circumstances of the people themselves, including:
    - Unemployment or under-employment
    - Marriage or relationship break-up
    - Physical health problems or disability (including unexpected injury preventing work)
    - Domestic violence
    - Mental health problems (including unexpected breakdown, or depression, chronic anxiety)
    - Dependency on alcohol or drugs
    - Financial management difficulties (eg unexpected tax bill, gambling problem, generally poor money skills)
- Also:
- The working poor, and single income families
  - Older women retiring without adequate funds

#### *Attitudes of the Welfare, Health and Housing Sectors to a Gated Car Park*

- Most welfare professionals don't favour volunteer Gated Car Parks on the grounds that it is not a solution to the problem, and because of potential security problems. Some think that if support services could be obtained as part of the project it would be worth a trial.
- The trend in the welfare/homelessness sector appears to be towards supported services and supported residences. However it is evident that homeless services and accommodation are already insufficient to cope with demand, and that many people are obliged to sleep rough.<sup>29</sup>

### **POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS**

We realised from the outset that not everyone would support the idea, including those in the welfare and housing sectors, as it is not a permanent or tidy solution to homelessness.

Our original proposal was simply for a safe place with basic amenities. We had given no thought to possibilities for professional services to help people into work or accommodation, or social integration or rehabilitation, although this survey suggests that such services might well be a necessary part of any successful initiative.

During our investigations we also considered potential difficulties around security (eg, mixing stressed or troubled people together, mixing men and women), and alternative

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<sup>29</sup> A housing sector expert on ABC 774 Radio program on homelessness (11 am – midday, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2016) responded to the phone call of a Hastings man living in his car because of family breakdown, advising him simply that he 'didn't need to live in his car', and should ring 1800 825 955 to be informed of his closest homelessness service. I rang that number (the St Kilda Crisis Centre) and was referred to SalvoCare Eastern, which is the government sanctioned 'Housing Entry Point' for the Frankston - Mornington Peninsula region. It is well known that there is no crisis accommodation in this region, although SalvoCare works to find suitable accommodation outside this region (eg the city, or Dandenong) if these are options for individuals.

possible options (eg mobile 'gated' car parks, mobile sleeping/washing/showering facilities). Some of these are noted below.

*Other Possible Secure Parking Arrangements*

Non-Gated Car Parks.

- The Our Backyard scheme relies for security on the establishment of facilities, secrecy regarding its location, and, at night, the 'safety in numbers' of those sleeping in their cars.
- The success of this model suggests a big increase the number of potential Gated Car Park sites in the Frankston area, as fencing and gating would not be required.

Safe Car Parks with Services

- This was the original Our Backyard model. It is also the one strongly favoured by social workers.
- It would require teaming up with a professional service provider (eg RDNS, or SalvoCare) or other funded community groups. This would presumably ease the passage of the proposal through regulatory authorities, and also provide access to funding and grants.

Changing Gated Car Park locations.

- Different Safe Spots/Gated Car Parks might be rotated regularly, with only people who live in their cars knowing the location of the current Safe Spot. This would reduce victimisation and assaults.
- Police would hopefully be happy to know where the homeless were and agreeable to not moving them on if they were parked in a Safe Spot.
- It would also share the load on the community or local/parish churches, which would be asked to volunteer to provide and manage the facilities, provide sandwiches etc.
- Such a scheme might lead to the donation of a Gated Car Park or property and/or facilities that were more permanent;

*Mobile Services for the Homeless*

Another alternative to the proposed Gated Car Park would be provision of mobile services. These would be similar in terms of practical support.

In the last two years three initiatives for people sleeping rough have been developed in Australia:

- 'Orange Sky Laundry': Clothes Washing. In late 2014 young Brisbane friends Lucas Patchett and Nicholas Marchesi, who had spent many hours meeting homeless as part of a secondary school program, noticed the dirty clothes that had been discarded in parks. They initiated, with their own money, a mobile clothes-washing service to homeless people. Many similar vans have now been built and operated by volunteers of the not-for-profit charity, which is run purely by sponsors and donors.

It has been very successful, not least for the convivial chats and coffees that are part of the process.<sup>30</sup>

- 'One Voice': Showering. In 2014 another young man, Josh Wilkins, launched a pilot mobile shower for homeless people opposite Crown Casino in Melbourne. The success of this led to partnerships with organisations, and a world first, a Mobile Shower Bus. The full-size bus has two private shower cubicles, and a consulting room for health checks. One Voice states that there is a 'genuine and overwhelming need for access to safe and clean shower facilities.' In 2015 email contact with Josh revealed he had been showcasing the bus in Frankston, and met with Council. He advised that many groups were interested in working with One Voice, and that the first move locally would be to team up with the RDNS.
- 'SleepBus'. Once homeless himself, businessman Simon Rowe has attracted money from the corporate sector and crowdfunding, and skills from tradesmen, to convert a bus with multiple secure sleep pods, pet kennels, lockers, toilets, and an overnight caretaker. A 90 day trial in Melbourne was scheduled to begin 1<sup>st</sup> June. The bus is said to be a world first. If successful he envisages individuals and communities getting together to provide more of the (expensive) buses (apparently 319 buses that would house the 6,314 people sleeping rough around Australia).<sup>31</sup>
- 'Project Homeless.'

Local businessman and manager of Seaford Beach Cabin Park Michael Hibbert has recently proposed to SHAC the idea of a van or trailer fitted out to provide mobile showers and/or clothes washing, some food/refreshments, as well as a virtual post office (an internet computer facility) for homeless. The van could be moved around the car parks as well as bushland known to be frequented by the homeless. Michael considers that local businesses might provide a customised trailer for the purpose. It would require links with business people and a business plan, volunteers, and possibly, partnership with other professional welfare services.

- *SPLASH (Southern Peninsula Laundry and Shower).*

A similar idea has recently been initiated by the Southern Peninsula Community Support and Information Centre:

- The Rosebud-Rye section of the foreshore in particular attracts people sleeping in their cars because of its camping facilities and nearby community services (eg free weekday meals provided by Rosebud 'Vinnies Kitchen', Salvos Breakfast and 'Mary's Van'). After consulting with local welfare and housing groups it was estimated that about 30 people sleep rough in that strip every night.
- The service operates 12 – 4 pm every Thursday, on the foreshore opposite Third Avenue Rosebud. It provides shower, laundry, a basic lunch (soup & rolls at present, probably barbeque over warmer months), as well as all-day tea/coffee. A marquee, tables and chairs, and electric heating are provided. A power-point is provided for charging batteries. The Royal District Nursing Service attends on alternate weeks to connect people with health services.

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<sup>30</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21/5/2016 'Two of us: Lucas Patchett and Nicholas Marchesi'; also: <http://www.caspa.edu.au/blog/young-australians-of-the-year-began-their--ministry--at-brisbane-catholic-college>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.sleepbus.org>; *The Age*, 22/4/2016, 'Former homeless man raises \$58,000 to buy a 'Sleep Bus'; <https://www.gofundme.com/sleepbus>; <http://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2016/03/melbourne-entrepreneur-to-launch-sleepbus/>



- SPCSIC is a long-established service-provider, and also has the unique advantage of being able to capitalise on existing foreshore camping facilities. Advocacy by Mornington Peninsula Youth Services has resulted in support from Mornington Council, enabling access to the camping ground showers, washing facilities and power.
- At its first opening on 7<sup>th</sup> July five people attended. Upon opening it had been expected that word of mouth and community promotion might see it attract 10-15 people, 20 maximum. Just three months later it is regularly attracting 8 people on average (minimum 4, maximum 12). Community service agencies are now promoting it, and knowledge of it is growing amongst the homeless (some of whom are presently coming for an initial 'look').
- It is estimated that about 90% of those who attend are sleeping rough, on the foreshore, in their cars, or in a hidden caravan. At present most are older men. Some stay all afternoon. About three quarters are regulars; some come for a few weeks, and return again later; some come once only (a few have reported back that their circumstances have improved). Some men known to be living on the foreshore do not engage with the service at all.
- Conducted in conjunction with Mornington Shire Youth Services, SPLASH attracts a few younger people. These tend to be in a crisis (dispute with family) or recently moved to the area.
- The laundry attracts all age groups; perhaps 2-3 use it each Thursday. A few of these have been local older women who come down in winter to use the dryer, and enjoy soup and a chat to relieve their isolation. Only one camping-ground washing machine and dryer is available at present, and they are slow. The volunteer-run Orange Sky service has been invited to complement this facility. It recently ran a 6-week trial service at Rosebud, but its resources are stretched at present.
- Others, mostly men, come for a shower and shave. A few younger women (accompanied by partners) also come for a shower.
- Some come to recharge mobile phones and shavers on the power-point that is made available.
- Some have been connected to local services. The RDNS attends on alternate weeks. A few who have attended SPLASH have gone on to visit, for the first time, the nearby SPCSIC Centre at Rosebud for personal assistance with other issues. SPLASH is canvassing other agencies for advice, or possible involvement in the scheme.
- Some of those who attend are known to have occasional outings (bus travel) to the Frankston area, where they have options regarding meal services, or short-stays with friends.
- There are different 'demographics' at play in the area. The Vinnies evening meal, and laundry service (as yet little promoted and patronised), mainly attracts men in 35-60 age group. The local Salvos breakfast attracts a broader demographic that Splash also wishes to serve.
- Splash is being fully resourced by the local community. SPCSIC only has to co-ordinate the input; there are no other costs. Eg the Youth Services provide and set-up the cooking facilities; local businesses provide clean towels, shampoos,

food etc and the 'Work for the Dole' trailers in and sets up the marquees and chairs.

- SPLASH is now convinced of the need for this service. However it is very unusual amongst providers of similar services in its outdoor, makeshift nature.
- It is anticipated that the service will have to close when the summer campers arrive; it is hoped that this would only be for four weeks. Options being considered include the Orange Sky laundry service, and perhaps the use of a local football club's showers over this period.

*'Buildings' rather than 'Mobile Services'*

- Another proposal is that a Council (or perhaps welfare agency or church) building might be a better solution than mobile services, as:
  - It would provide more comfort and relaxation for people, with space, electricity, water, sewerage, gas, phone, internet, television.
  - Mobile phones and other devices could be charged, and perhaps computer internet access provided.
  - It could provide locker storage to secure personal items.
  - It might provide people with an address (on their CentreLink card).
- Potential difficulties: would require staff as well as premises (and maintenance); might be seen as a 'homeless shelter', which have a poor reputation in some homeless quarters.
- It is possible that schools (under the State Government's new 'Shared Facilities' program) might make their hall (which usually incorporate toilets and kitchens) or perhaps sporting facilities (which might also include showers) available for overnight accommodation.
- Alternatively, these could be drop-in centres at staffed Council Community Centres, where people could relax and get access refreshments, power for charging phones, internet etc. Until recently Frankston has had two vital church-run drop-in centres (St Pauls, and CityLife) but both have recently closed due to security and tenancy difficulties.

In response to community concerns Frankston City Council has arranged temporary meal services centres.<sup>32</sup> Two of these do in fact utilise Council neighbourhood and service centres (at Frankton North, and Seaford) in a manner not unlike this proposal. Another venue is at the Frankston Community Support, and the other is the Frankston station car park (hosted by Lifegate).

- Sporting club facilities usually include showers as well as toilets and kitchen facilities. On Crown land, and usually built with substantial local government support (such as the new football grandstand and facilities at Frankston Park), a way might be found for these to be utilised for overnight accommodation. Our survey has identified that many homeless already choose to sleep in coaches boxes, players' races etc at football grounds.

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<sup>32</sup> Until a permanent solution is found

### *Advocacy on Behalf of People Sleeping Rough*

There are numerous alternative tasks that we might undertake to help the local homeless sleeping in their cars. These include advocacy and lobbying. For example:

- for reduction of state and local government restrictions on building housing (granny flats, caravans etc) in backyards;
- against cuts to funding of service providers such as Community Support Frankston;
- for regulations to “put empty houses to better use”;<sup>33</sup>
- for use of vacant government buildings (civic halls, schools etc) for crisis accommodation;
- for increased Council involvement with low-income housing (including perhaps providing shelters);
- for increased government provision or support of public, social and crisis housing;
- for small housing, perhaps on the cabin park model, or co-operative model;
- for ‘inclusive zoning’, to ensure a percentage of affordable housing especially in subdivision of former government land;
- improvements to rooming house, tenancy etc regulations;
- provision of homeless shelters.

### *Education*

In addition there is also a strong need to educate the general public, local government, and politicians regarding the extent and need to address homelessness. (Including perhaps, widespread distribution of ‘directory’ information with services for homeless and at-risk-of-homelessness people.)

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<sup>33</sup> Catherine Cashmore, *Speculative Vacancies 8 Report*, Prosper Australia, December 2015; also editorials of some suburban Leader papers (eg Knox, Whittlesea), 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016

## CONCLUSIONS

Options for action include:

### 1. *Continuing Investigation.*

The evidence we have at present is not conclusive as to either numbers, or the preferences, of those sleeping rough. Further evidence could continue to be obtained from:

- Conversation with those sleeping in cars: their needs, knowledge, and preferences:
  - continuing contact with homeless or at risk of homelessness people at local services, particularly the temporary meal service presently being provided in Seaford on Wednesday nights;
  - while our request to go out with Frankston police to meet people was denied, we have prepared a flyer and the police have advised that we could visit known car-parks and make contact ourselves;
- Continuing to monitor numbers seeking crisis accommodation at Seaford Beach Cabin Park, Frankston SalvoCare, Chelsea Holiday Park;
- Dialogue with influential local community groups and agencies, including those who might presently oppose this idea;
- Contact with other groups which may have an interest, eg, Frankston Emergency Relief Providers (FERP), women's groups which address homelessness;
- Conversations with relevant state and local government departments, to gauge their initial views;
- Contact (letters, media etc) with the wider public, including local politicians, would help gauge community interest in assisting people living in their cars. A short description of possible Gated Car Park schemes would need to be prepared as part of this process.

### 2. *Trial of a Gated Car Park*

- While present research is inconclusive regarding potential numbers and further research is possible, the information presently available suggests that there would be demand for a Gated Car Park in the Frankston area.
- There is opposition to the idea from some local welfare and housing agency workers. Support from some of these groups would be important in order to proceed.

FERP, which originally received this idea positively, might be able to offer constructive comments or assistance.

- If there is some support in the local welfare, housing, or health sectors, and liability issues can be resolved, and a local venue can be obtained, a trial might be made.

This would need to be as simple as possible, perhaps without security personnel, but with some minimal professional co-ordination, and volunteer involvement.

It would need to operate for a minimum period (say a year) for it to be promoted and become known amongst the homeless.

### 3. *Other Alternatives*

- 'Watching Brief'. Keeping a live interest in people sleeping rough in the area, providing moral support, assessing their needs, and working with Council and police regarding the issue of 'moving on' people sleeping in cars.
- 'Mobile Services'. Provision (with others) of mobile services, which offer more than a Gated Car Park, such as clothes washing, showering, food (eg soup van model), although some of these might also be incorporated into a Gated Car Park. Such mobile facilities have the advantage of servicing all those sleeping rough, rather than only those with cars.

However mobile services would not address the critical safe sleeping issue (unless a SleepBus was provided). Neither would they deliver the evening toilet or kitchen facilities that it might be possible to provide in a Gated Car Park.

Other than providing permanent crisis housing in the Frankston area, the SleepBus is the only option that would provide comfortable, as well as safe, sleeping for homeless people.

Provision of internet access and access to power to charge phones have also been suggested as useful services, and a way might be found to incorporate these services into either a 'Project Homeless' mobile service, or a Gated Car Park.

- 'Advocacy' in support of emergency and social housing, and existing welfare and homeless services.
- 'Education' of public and politicians at all levels regarding the extent of homelessness, affordable housing, needs of homeless, and options for personal compassion.
- 'Small Housing'. With others, investigation of options for low-income housing, either in suburban backyards, or in estates (eg, on the Seaford Beach Cabin Park, or 'Carry On Victoria', or other models). The State government is presently proposing to identify unused land, and provide financial assistance to local community initiatives for affordable social housing. Some of this could perhaps provide crisis accommodation to serve people sleeping rough.
- 'Support of Existing Services'. SHAC members might also personally support 'hands-on' established services, or join with others to support new community services, such as drop-in centres or food pantries. SHAC might also lobby in support of and promote such facilities in the local area.

## **APPENDIX:**

### **SOME RECENT STORIES OF PEOPLE IN HOMELESSNESS OR AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS**

These additional stories have been collected recently by SHAC members. While not relating specifically to people sleeping in cars, these stories have been included in order to develop understanding in the community of homeless people. Any names used are not the real names of those involved.

Most stories have been collected over recent months at the Wednesday evening meal service provided at the Seaford Community Centre by the Victorian Government and Frankston City Council after the closure of CityLife Frankston.

#### *One*

I went to the city yesterday and met a homeless man. I wasn't more than five minutes out of the train station. I stopped and asked him if he was alright which might sound like a silly question but I wasn't asking about the obvious that he was homeless, but that he was shaking and visibly in distress. He seemed like an intelligent person and tried to tell me his story though it was hard to hear what he was saying, as it was noisy on Elizabeth Street. He told me he had been on the street for two and a half years. He said he had cerebral palsy (he had callipers nearby) and epilepsy. I could see that he had a problem with one of his hands and he had difficulty speaking both emotionally and it also seemed physically.

He said that he had a case worker who had put him on a list for a room but he had to come up with some money upfront which he needed to get as soon as he could otherwise they would give the room to someone else and he would go to the bottom of the list to wait again. He couldn't get Centrelink payments without a room and he couldn't get a room without money from Centrelink.

He said that he had been sleeping in a disabled toilet but a security guard had poured a bucketful of cold water over him and it was only that the toilet had a hand dryer that saved him from freezing. It took him four hours he said to get dry again. He was half crying and at the end of his tether. Able-bodied people were given preference to people with disabilities has been his experience. He looked to be in a bad way physically and in utter despair. I did what little I could for him and left.

#### *Two*

I met a young woman at the meal. She opened up that she was living with an abusive father. She had tried to stay at home to help her mother and younger brother but the situation had become so unbearable she felt she had to leave and find accommodation as soon as possible.

I gave her my phone number and asked her to ring me on the Friday as I would seek to get help for her as soon as I got to work on Thursday after the meal.

I contacted Frankston Community Centre and found she was well known there as she had been trying for sometime to get assistance. However up until this encounter she had not been prepared to leave home. Community Services Frankston said they could assist with bond money for her if I could find her accommodation.

Again I contacted Andrew at the Seaford Beach Cabin Park and as the couple I originally had set up the accommodation for had not arrived, the position was open for this young woman.

I called her and left a message. I did not hear from her for a week and then I received a message that she had been in hospital for a week and she had been unable to contact me. I instantly rang her but again it went to message bank so I told her of the accommodation and the bond money and asked her to call me.

Again I have not heard from her since. I am concerned that something may have happened and she is once again obliged to remain at home for her mother and brother's sake. However short of knocking on her door which may or may not lead to further complications for her, I leave a message once a week to see if she will get back to me.

### *Three*

A young man attended the meal with a rucksack. It contained all his worldly goods.

He had come up from Melbourne to attend meals being offered on the Tuesday in Frankston and Chelsea.

I asked him if there was anything I could do for him but he had called ahead to a boarding house in the City as he had acquired enough funds to enable him to stay the night.

After the meal he set off on the train back to Melbourne. He was unhappy that similar accommodation was not available in or around Frankston as if they had he would have stayed there instead of going back to Melbourne.

A point to remember is that the cheapest accommodation in Melbourne is \$30 a night. The other boarding houses range from \$50 to \$60 per night. Without the funds no one can stay. The reason most folk are begging in the City is to raise the required amount to spend a night out of the cold and off the pavement.

### *Four*

An older lady attends the meal regularly. She attends all the meals offered by the State Government through Frankston City Council. She has accommodation but it is private not social housing. Once her rent is paid from her pension she has little else to pay bills and food comes a very bad last in the list of what has to be paid. This week she did not have the money to pay for continence pads and was waiting for her pension to be able to purchase some. I offered to go to the Pharmacy across the road and buy them for her but her pride would not allow it. I was able to give her some toothpaste, soap, hair shampoo and a handkerchief with which she was delighted. It never ceases to amaze me how many things we all take for granted but cannot be taken that way for these folk.

### *Five*

A young man came to the meal. He had accommodation but it was sleeping on the floor of a friend's flat. He was tired and I realised that he had not taken his medication, which may have been due to not having the money to pay for it.

We had been talking for a while and then his conversation became erratic and then he became abusive. It was not him but the lack of medication and that I was not able to tell him exactly where the Friday night meal was being served. He had attended but not found the van giving out hot dogs.

Unfortunately I found out later that the charity had not attended that Friday as they did not have enough volunteers to do the work.

I spoke to some of the older men to see if they knew the young man. Two did and also understood his circumstances. I asked if they would be prepared to look out for him. It was



a delight to hear them just this week speaking in front of the young man and telling us all that they were his mentors. This pleased the young man immensely and you could see the camaraderie was having an effect on this young man's mental attitude.

*Six*

An elderly man from overseas has lived in Australia for several years but is not entitled to government benefits because he is not a permanent resident. He applied for that years ago and was told that they're only processing about 10 per year. Despite being at risk of homelessness, he has not been prioritized. [People who marry Australian residents get it through in a few months.]

*Seven*

A man in about his 40's. Has a serious medical condition and other health issues. Was living in the family home until several months ago when a family situation arose and he was forced to leave. Tried to retrieve his possessions but was not able to do so and they have now all been disposed of. Another family member moved their parents to a retirement home, sold the house and kept all the money. He is now destitute and has nothing but the clothes he wears. He said that Legal Aid refused to assist him, as did local police who were also rude and dismissive towards him.

*Eight*

A woman in about her 60's. A widow for many years, reliant on CityLife for a long time. Shares a private rental home with 2 other people and is currently dealing with a stressful situation at home, where she is bullied and unable to sleep. She said she has nowhere else to go. This has led to mental health issues and possibly risk of suicide ideation. After paying rent and bills she has barely enough money to live on. She said she has been in some terrible situations and seen some terrible things in recent years.