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JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT FROM HOMELESSNESS, HOUSING & SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCIES

The CEOs of 36 Victorian homelessness, housing and social services organisations have released an open letter appealing for a shift in the conversation away from vilifying rough sleepers to a focus on the lack of affordable housing that underpins the crisis.

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Open letter: Moving on the homeless does not make them disappear

Until we join the dots between housing and homelessness, we will never solve the crisis.

Recent coverage of the 'shame' of Melbourne's homelessness focusses attention on the wrong end of the problem. Vilifying people sleeping rough does not help them, splashing the faces of people in crisis in the paper only further stigmatises and isolates them, and fuels public fear and resentment.

Yes, it is shameful that there are people sleeping on the streets in a country as affluent as Australia.

The real shame is that this crisis has been with us for some time, and it is only now that it has become visible in our streets that there is outrage and reaction.

Perhaps we are more self-conscious of it with the international spotlight on us this week, but this crisis is not a new one. And the causes of it are not new; Australia is in the grips of an affordable housing crisis that has been building over many years, and we currently don't have a strategy for how we will solve it.

We have the right to feel angry about homelessness, but we need to direct our energy towards the successive government policies that have created it, and not towards those sleeping rough.

We do not condone aggression and public drug use, and there are avenues through which the police can pursue such behaviour. But it is not illegal to be poor and homeless. We will never solve poverty and homelessness by moving people on, or by putting them in crisis accommodation for a few weeks.

Reports of people on the streets declining offers of accommodation ignore the fact that the housing offered is usually a few nights in a rooming house, or a refuge. Like you and me, what people who are homeless want is a safe, affordable and, most importantly, permanent place to call home. To provide this we urgently need more public and community housing.

The City of Melbourne is struggling valiantly to balance a humanitarian response with public health and safety, and homelessness services are working hard to engage with chronically disadvantaged people, some of whom have complex needs.

But until something is done about the national housing crisis that underpins this problem, we are simply bailing water on a sinking boat. The irony of reading news coverage of property investor borrowing skyrocketing alongside coverage of the homelessness crisis is not lost on us. These two issues are intrinsically linked, and until we join the dots, we'll never solve the crisis.

The poor have been squeezed out of the private rental market, and there are tens of thousands of people waiting for public housing.

The Victorian Government has committed more than \$600 million to social housing and homelessness support largely in response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. We are still awaiting the Victorian affordable housing strategy.

Our Federal Government is a long way from having a plan to tackle this problem. Meanwhile, those on lowest incomes are being pursued by automated Centrelink debt notices, reducing their already meagre incomes. This will inevitably increase homelessness.

Let's not think for a moment that by moving people on or placing them in temporary accommodation like rooming houses and motels that the homelessness problem will go away.

Poverty and disadvantage behind closed doors is still poverty and disadvantage. We need to stop demonising those without a home. We need to stop trying to come up with quick fixes.

As the CEOs of Victoria's leading homelessness, housing and social service organisations, we've been raising this problem for a long time, and it's not going to go away overnight. The way to solve rough sleeping, and other forms of homelessness is by providing enough safe, permanent, affordable housing, and, when needed, the intensive supports to go with it.

We're calling on the media and policy makers to maintain their focus on the real shame of the lack of action on housing affordability. We need to get on with making the hard decisions that will solve our community's housing problem. So many people have more than one house and so many more have no home at all.

Undersigned by:

Anglicare Victoria, CEO, Paul McDonald

Australian Community Support

Organisation, CEO, Karenza Louis-Smith

Berry Street, CEO, Sandie de Wolf AM

Child and Family Services Ballarat, CEO,
Allay Joy

cohealth, Chief Executive, Lyn Morgain

**Community Housing Federation of
Victoria**, Executive Officer, Lesley Dredge

Concern Australia, CEO, Michelle
Crawford

Council to Homeless Persons, CEO, Jenny
Smith

Domestic Violence Victoria, CEO, Fiona
McCormack

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand,
CEO, Dimity Fifer

Hume Regional Homelessness Network,
Jan Armstrong

Jesuit Social Services, CEO, Julie Edwards

Justice Connect Homeless Law, Manager
and Principal Lawyer, Lucy Adams

Ladder, CEO, Elisabeth Tuckey

Latitude: Directions for Young People,
Manager, Rhonda Collins

Launch Housing, Acting CEO, Richie
Goonan

McCauley Women's Services, CEO,
Jocelyn Bignold

Melbourne City Mission, CEO, Vicki
Sutton, CEO

Merri Outreach Support Service, CEO,
Robert Sago

Reclink Australia, CEO, John Ballis

Sacred Heart Mission, CEO, Cathy
Humphrey

Safe Futures, CEO, Janine Mahoney,

SalvoConnect, The Salvation Army,
Network Director, Janet White

South Port Community Housing, CEO,
Janet Goodwin

Tenants Union of Victoria, CEO, Mark
O'Brien

The Salvation Army Victoria, Major
Michael Coleman, State Social
Commander

The Salvation Army, General Manager
Adult Services, Jane Barnes

Victorian Council of Social Services, CEO,
Emma King

VincentCare, CEO, John Blewonski

Wesley Mission Victoria, Chief
Operating Officer Raelene Thompson

Whitelion, CEO, Mark Watt

Wintringham Housing, General Manager,
Helen Small

Wombat Housing & Support Services Inc,
Executive Officer, Steve Maher

Women's Health West, CEO, Dr Robyn
Gregory

Women's Housing Limited, CEO, Judy
Line

Youth Projects, Chair, Melanie Raymond