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New money for homeless as rough sleeper numbers surge



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• Clay Lucas

The Victorian government is investigating using empty office space to house homeless people as it struggles to deal with a sudden surge of rough sleeping in the city centre.

On Monday, Housing Minister Martin Foley announced almost \$850,000 in new funding to assist rough sleepers on Melbourne's streets.



A homeless person's camp in the Treasury Gardens. Photo: Pat Scala

He and Lord Mayor Robert Doyle appeared at a press conference at the state parliament on Monday to announce the funding, \$500,000 of which will go towards providing additional emergency accommodation for homeless people.

Another \$283,000 will go towards funding 38 beds at a crisis accommodation centre on Flemington Road in North Melbourne.

The remaining money will be given to the Salvation Army to provide additional case workers to help homeless people.

The Age revealed on Monday that homelessness in central Melbourne had reached, with welfare agencies unable to meet surging demand for housing.

And Freedom of Information documents obtained by *The Age* showed more than 200 telephone and email complaints were made to Melbourne City Council about homelessness in the 15 months to April this year.

I was appalled at the amount of homeless people living on the streets within Melbourne city... When I return to my homeland this is what stands in the forefront of my memory of your city. *An email to Melbourne City Council from an international visitor*

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Homeless peoples' belongings in the City Square on Monday. Photo: Pat Scala

Mr Foley said the rise in rough sleeping was being driven by multiple causes, including family violence, mental health, drugs and alcohol and cuts to the social housing sector.

"Put all those together and you have almost a perfect storm of events of people placed in housing crisis and you are seeing more and more people sleeping on our streets," he said.

The increase in rough sleepers in the central city was confirmed in a council count in June that found 247 people living on the streets – up from 142 two years ago.

As a regular visitor to Melbourne I am consistently horrified by the presence of homeless beggars on the streets of inner Melbourne. I travel the world extensively and there is no other city in the world where this is tolerated.

Cr Doyle said the new funding would help deal with both the symptoms of homelessness, and its causes. He implored Melburnians not to give money to beggars on the city's streets.

"Do not give money to beggars - give it to a service provider like Melbourne City Mission, Launch Housing, VincentCare or the Salvos and they will make good use of it," he said. "Just know that that money is going to end up feeding [a] drug habit. And so if you give money to beggars you are not helping them out of homelessness, you are entrenching them in it."

Mr Foley said there had been some "very unhelpful demonisation of homeless people and rough sleepers" in the media that had caused some of those sleeping rough to move from hidden lanes and out-of-the-way places to more public locations.

But Cr Doyle said people should not romanticise homelessness. "There are some particularly challenging behaviours that can go with drug use or mental illness. ... Occasionally the only recourse is police. We are not misty-eyed about this problem."

Within two minutes of arriving at Flinders Street, a male approached me and said, have you got any money for me? I said sorry no I don't, to which he replied in an aggressive voice, then f--k off and die.

A report compiled last week by the Department of Health and Human Services showed that, while homelessness and rough sleeping were focused on the CBD, it was a problem across metropolitan Melbourne.

Agencies in the **Frankston** and St Kilda areas had observed an increase in requests for support and crisis accommodation, as had an agency, Anchor, in the city's outer east. Across the Moreland and Hume council areas there had also been an increase in support needed "roughly 20 per cent over the last two weeks - approximately 50 extra people", the report said.

It also noted a surge in support sought in the Melton and Brimbank council areas.

The report also noted that the department was "still investigating the feasibility of using empty office space across the CBD", although it noted there were issues with the idea - floated last month by a Launch Housing - and that it was "unlikely to provide an immediate response".

Had the pleasure of witnessing ... a woman carry out a woman carry out her excretion duties this morning. She ... walked across Swanston Street into the alley and carried out her duties. Enough is enough.