

Chapter 4: Rough Sleeping Beyond the Capitals

'I'm just the end of the line.' Assertive Outreach Pilot Filling the Gap in Services for People Left Behind

Glenn Kimberley, Uniting Vic.Tas Assertive Outreach worker and Paul (name changed)

Earlier this year, Uniting Vic.Tas successfully applied to utilise unspent funds to run a six-month pilot Street to Home modelled program in the Wimmera region. As the final month of the pilot nears, Assertive Outreach worker Glenn Kimberley has already identified 62 people rough sleeping and in need of assistance.

The 62 people identified so far range in ages from six to 69. They include a single parent with four children living in a tent by a lake, a couple in their early 20s sleeping in their car in central Horsham, and a middle-aged woman living in a tent on her own in a national park. But most commonly, they are lone men aged between 36-45, sleeping rough out in the open, without any form of dwelling.

'I'm mainly coming across middle aged men who normally don't seek help, they feel like they are a burden on family and the community. These men usually just accept that this is just how life is.'

The people I work with are often so embarrassed about rough sleeping that they live each day trying not to be seen. Even at our homelessness entry point, I've noticed that most rough sleepers will enter the building through the back door rather than coming through the main entrance.

For me, this is why the outreach work is so important, because meeting them where they are means we are starting in an environment where they feel safe. Even then, it can be a real challenge to get that initial engagement, sometimes it takes days, other times it takes months, but it's all about building that trust in the relationship.'

— Glenn

It has been said that it takes a special kind of person, with persistence and love for the role, to be an Assertive Outreach worker. Glenn certainly epitomises this, highlighting the critical need for innovative person-centred approaches to supporting people experiencing homelessness that go beyond simply addressing their housing needs.

'Even though I can't turn up with a house for them straight away, they know that I'm someone that will show up to have a chat. It's great to see rough sleeper 'crack a smile' when they see and engage with me. Hearing some of their stories is truly amazing, but at the same time heartbreaking. I just want to help. Sometimes I'll be able to bring them a coffee, food, vouchers, sleeping gear, whatever I have access to at that time. But they know that every time I turn up I will listen to their stories with an open heart. I'll walk in their shoes, and alongside them in their journey.'

— Glenn

'I know a lot of us are very grateful for what he's done. If it wasn't for him, I'd be... I don't know where I'd be.'

We'll just have a bit of a chat and that's it, but that's so important. Everybody is important. A lot of people don't want to deal with us.'

— Paul

Paul is a man in his 50s who has lived and worked in the Wimmera community for 23 years. After successive business closures in the region, work in the industry Paul has been employed in for most of his life has mostly dried up, and Paul has found his ability to gain steady employment has decreased rapidly in the past few years.

'I've tried to get another job, but most people don't want to hire me at my age, I'm too old... Everyone says, 'go out and get a job' but where from? Everything is closing down.'

— Paul

Paul has now been sleeping rough for three years while trying to obtain housing on his own through the private rental market. Paul mostly sticks to himself, staying out of sight and sleeping in disabled toilets to feel safe and secure during the night.

'Earlier this year I was sitting in the park, and (Glenn) introduced himself and asked me if I wanted a food voucher. Since then, we've been in contact. He's helped me out a lot. We need to get more people doing what he's doing. He's the only one doing anything in the whole district. There's just so many people, you can't do it all by yourself.'

— Paul

Paul first became connected with the Assertive Outreach Program by chance when Glenn began a conversation with him in a local park. Paul finds it hard to ask for help from others and has been slow to engage with Glenn. However, he is beginning to open up and recently phoned Glenn for the first time. During this phone call, he asked for help with a public housing application and is now on the register for housing for the first time in his life. This is an incredible outcome, and one that is hard to imagine without the Assertive Outreach support model.

We know that programs based on Housing First principles are effective in assisting people to recover from experiencing homelessness, to learn to live independently, and to connect

back into their community. Programs such as Street to Home are delivered by a supportive housing team who provide wrap-around support following the initial assertive outreach.

This support encompasses mental health, alcohol and other drug management, case coordinators, and crucially, lived experience peer support. Of the 180 people who received individual and targeted support from the neighbouring Central Highlands Street to Home team in FY22, 152 have so far been successful in gaining and maintaining long-term housing.

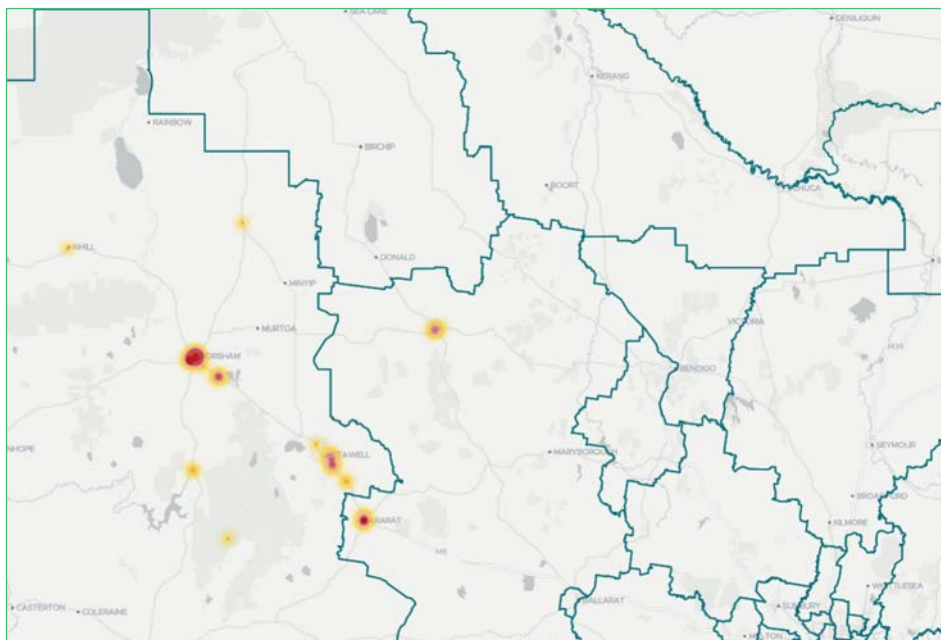
'When I receive referrals from the greater public, there is an expectation that I can follow up ASAP and be able to provide emergency accommodation or that immediate crisis response. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I can't get to everyone in a timely fashion; the Wimmera region covers four local government areas. I have driven 40-minutes in each direction from Horsham to go out and meet people. There is only one of me, and most of the time there are just no accommodation options at all to offer them when I get there either.'
— Glenn

The Wimmera Southern Mallee Service Area encompasses an area of 30,000 square kilometres. In the first four months of the pilot program, the first 61 people identified by or referred to the Wimmera Assertive Outreach worker were sleeping rough in approximately 31 different locations across the region.

'We (homeless people) could be anywhere. We could be up the street, by the river, the other side of town, you just don't know where we are. That's why you need people like Glenn.'

'If you could clone people, I wish you could have more than one of him. Everybody needs help at the moment. Get more people out there to do it.'
— Paul

Like most rural and regional areas in Victoria, the severe lack of crisis accommodation or longer-term housing options available in



the Wimmera has far-reaching implications for the wider cohort of individuals experiencing homelessness. Almost a quarter of the 733 people who were supported by Uniting Horsham Entry Point in 2021–22 have not had a permanent fixed address for six months or longer.

'The fact that there is no funded Street to Home team in the Wimmera really upsets me, given the number of rough sleepers. I lay awake at night trying to think of solutions, when the only real solution is housing and wrap-around supports. In the meantime, an Assertive Outreach Team can provide a crisis response to support those really doing it tough and sleeping rough.'
— Glenn

Anglicare's 2022 and 2023 Rental Affordability snapshots found that, during the period surveyed, zero per cent of rental properties advertised in regional Victoria were appropriate and affordable for a single person receiving Jobseeker, Disability Support Pension or Youth Allowance payments. For a single person receiving the Age Pension, 0.4 per cent reduced to 0.3 per cent of listings from 2022 to 2023.

'There is nothing around to rent. I know they're meant to be doing new housing but how long is that going to take? There is just no housing around here.'

'After Covid everything's changed, and you can't afford to do stuff.'

'The Government gives you a pay rise on your pension but then you're paying more for everything so you're still in the same boat. You can't do anything. By the time you've paid your rent, food, utilities, and if you have kids, you've got make sure they're all clothed and fed and in school. The Government's not really doing nothing as far as I'm concerned. They don't understand. As soon as they get into Government, they don't care about us anymore.'

'It's ridiculous that no one on Centrelink can afford to rent. Imagine if you had kids with you as well. They're going to look after the couples before they start thinking about single parents and then people like me. I'm just the end of the line.'
— Paul

Supporting a person to maintain long-term housing only works when there is suitable housing for the person to be able to maintain long-term. The lack of safe, secure, and affordable housing options severely limits the effectiveness of programs such as Street to Home. The ability for the growing coalition of services striving to reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria depends on a consistent federal and state government approach to expanding the availability of public and social housing that runs in parallel to a commitment to long-term investment in innovative responses to rough sleeping.