

Homelessness in Regional Victoria

Adam Liversage, Senior Manager Homelessness Ballarat, Barwon and Western region, Uniting

This year, as our homelessness teams prepared for Homelessness Week, there was a buzz of excitement as staff finally had the opportunity to create awareness around all things homelessness in our Ballarat community. What brought extra strength to the message this year was the voice of our consumers — their stories and photos displayed for the Ballarat community to see including artworks from our Street 2 Home Art Group, which were also showcased alongside a lived experience display from our Street 2 Home peer support worker.

We were lucky enough to have local MPs attend and speak, delivering a message that *'yes, homelessness is an issue within our community. And yes, it needs to be addressed.'* With this sense of enthusiasm and coming together of staff, key community stakeholders, consumers, local MPs, I felt a sense of pride in the work Uniting do, especially our homelessness

teams at Uniting and I'm extremely proud to work alongside them.

Homelessness Week was also an opportunity for reflection, not only on the work Uniting homelessness teams do here in regional Victoria, but the impact our workers have on peoples' lives. It's about the little battles, wins and losses, whatever the outcome. Workers have a sense of compassion; a will to be bold, show emotion, and have a willingness and optimism to get outcomes and assist those who are experiencing homelessness and those within our regional communities doing it tough. I have been at Uniting for almost 15 years, and I have never seen such a dedicated, heart-on-your-sleeve group of workers. Day in day out, our staff provide a service and the highest level of advocacy to those most vulnerable in our community. I keep telling staff that each day I drive to work with pride and drive home again proud knowing the work they do — going above and

beyond — and that is positively impacting lives, and our community.

Despite this, homelessness in regional Victoria is a significant issue and will continue to be unless something additional is done. At the National Homelessness Conference in Canberra in August, the opening keynote address advised the number of rough sleepers had decreased in Victoria — however in my experience of working in regional Victoria where we continue to see a growing number of rough sleepers across our region and ever-growing demand for service support.

In the 2021-22 financial year, the Ballarat Street 2 Home team, worked with up to 229 rough sleepers in Central Highlands and stretched into regions where assertive outreach is not currently funded just to try and support those in need. In the same period, a team of three in our intake service had up to 2,879 contacts with people needing assistance and continued to see an increase of rough sleepers right across the western corridor of Victoria. While rough sleeping numbers did decrease at the heart of the pandemic with the Government's hotel and motel accommodation initiative, this was only time limited and there are now a growing number of rough sleepers in the Wimmera for example, where there are no currently funded assertive outreach workers.

Much of the daily grind and often unseen work in our region happens at homelessness entry points in Ballarat and Horsham where staff do the initial intake and assessment. Our Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) workers are still some of the most in demand and under resourced practitioners in the community services sector. Minimal Housing



Establishment Funds (HEF) means only being able to service and provide crisis accommodation to perhaps one or two individuals or families each day.

We continually ask the question, how can there be an increase in presentations of those experience homelessness, a sharp increase in family violence presentations, the rental squeeze in regional Victoria, general increased cost of living, and yet no increase in HEF or funding for extra staffing for the entry points? Entry point staff are really at the frontline day in and day out.

In the last financial year, the Ballarat entry point had 8,590 contacts of which 533 were new supports, and a further 852 that presented more than once. The Homelessness Priority List continues to grow at an alarming rate here in Ballarat, with 178 Households (84 families) on the over 25s list, and 57 households (19 families) on the youth list. How do we manage staff burnout under these levels of demand and need in our community? For many years entry points have continued to just 'do the work' and exceed yearly targets by the 100s because they are dedicated and want to provide a service. However, we have to balance demand with staff wellbeing and we are currently working with our teams to develop different strategies to support them and their work. In Ballarat alone, if the Entry Point were to see all the of unmet demand, those who presented and couldn't be seen, we would have projected to have seen 2,500 people this financial year, we only have funding for just over 1,200 per year! So far this year the Ballarat entry point has turned away over 600 people seeking our service, surely someone must take notice of this and fix it, fund and resource all entry points appropriately?

Horsham, a growing regional town in the Wimmera mirrors many of the concerns in Ballarat. In the last financial year alone, the entry point covering Ararat, Stawell and Horsham saw 825 presentations following the height of presentations during the COVID lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 at 1,242 and 1,052 respectively. Uniting homelessness workers are also reporting a growing number of rough sleepers in the region. In recent times we provided tents, swags, sleeping bags and blankets instead of being

able to provide any accommodation options to the growing numbers in need in a region that does not have any funded assertive outreach response. Most concerning is a regional town with a population of around 20,000 has an estimated almost five per cent of its population experiencing homelessness or housing crisis. The real figure would be much higher if our entry point services could meet demand.

Increased rental prices have placed significant financial stress on renters across Victoria, but particularly for those in regional communities, who face both limited rental availability and increasingly unaffordable rental properties. In Ballarat, the Housing Affordability rate from the period of September 2019 to March 2022 increased from (medium) \$320 per week to \$370 per week and concerningly is currently sitting at \$419 per week, displaying another sharp increase. In March 2022, there were less than 950 affordable lettings, which currently sit at around a 0.4 per cent affordability rate. In comparison, Warrnambool — another regional town that has experienced population growth, saw that from March 2019 and March 2022, the medium rental price increased from \$328 per week to \$420. As of March 2022, there were less than 275 affordable lettings in Warrnambool, and 0.1 per cent affordability rate. Making things more difficult is the lack of movement in transitional housing and other community housing, coupled with the lack of social and public housing options.

How can we help people to get back on their feet when the rental market is no longer an option for low-income populations across regional Victoria?

To answer the above, we look towards some of the Victorian State Government initiatives that were implemented in response to homelessness during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. One particularly impactful program was the Homelessness 2 Home (H2H) Initiative, which was launched to provide housing to 1,845 Victorians experiencing homelessness and were residing in emergency accommodation. We optimistically welcomed this worthwhile initiative,

but were disappointed when Central Highlands, Wimmera and Southwest only received four per cent of the allocated packages. For the 1,300 eligible households, this was not nearly enough, and many Victorians in-need missed out. There have been some solid outcomes from H2H, with people finding employment, returning to education and more importantly families reunified. Much the same as Homes 4 Families, this initiative is also providing up to 250 families impacted by COVID-19 with rapid housing. The success of these programs already clear, with high levels of tenancy success rates due to implementing Housing First Principles and the provision of wrap-around intensive supports.

COVID 19 proved that that local, state and federal Governments can work together to provide an unprecedented, swift response to homelessness. Entry points were finally funded the appropriate amount of HEF to put anyone who was homelessness into crisis accommodation. To compare the spending, Ballarat's entry point receives up to 145,000 per year of HEF. During the height of the COVID 19 pandemic, Ballarat spent just under \$1,000,000 on crisis accommodation for the local community. The extra funding was welcomed with open arms by our consumers and demand increased significantly throughout the pandemic. With no extra staffing resources placed in our entry points, our staff did an incredible job supporting consumers and continue to do so with the limited resources available to them.

'To end Homelessness, we need a plan' — that was theme for the 2022 National Homelessness Week. We did our best to get the message out there. I hold some hope that the newly elected Commonwealth Government's commitment to focus and investment in social and affordable housing and the Victorian Government's Big Housing Build, that there will be a plan to address homelessness, and that the community service sector is funded appropriately to continue to provide the wonderful and ongoing support that people need to sustain housing and have a life that is full of meaning and purpose.