

MEDIA RELEASE

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'Place and purpose' critical in finding pathways out of homelessness

With the Federal Government's White Paper on Homelessness due for release in September, Catholic Healthcare says future policy must reflect the crucial role social and community connectedness plays in breaking the cycle of homelessness.

The White Paper was called for by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd earlier this year as part of a 10-year effort to tackle homelessness, after reports that 100,000 people are homeless each night in Australia.

According to Catholic Healthcare's Homeless and Housing Support Services Service Manager Susan McDermott, a focus on community connectedness needs to work in tandem with the provision of access to individual accommodation options for people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

With services in across Sydney, regional and rural NSW and south-east Queensland, Catholic Healthcare is the largest Catholic provider of residential and community aged services in Australia. Catholic Healthcare's Community Services works with in excess of 5,000 clients, including people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

"Homelessness is certainly a complex issue, but moreover it is a human rights issue," Ms McDermott said. "In our response to the Government's Green Paper on Homelessness earlier this year (on which the White Paper will be based), Catholic Healthcare highlighted that maintaining or regaining senses of place and purpose within a community provide a crucial pathway out of homelessness."

"Addressing homelessness will also require a collaborative approach from all service providers, ensuring that individuals have access to a continuum of support and positive housing, health and welfare outcomes. Above all, we must ensure that the voice and rights of those experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness are recognised."

Ms McDermott's comments came during National Homeless Person's Week (4-10 August). As part of the week, a theatre group comprising clients of Catholic Healthcare's Homeless and Housing Support Services – The Mercy Arms Players – staged two theatrical performances to raise awareness of the serious social issue.

"All the actors of The Mercy Arms Players are clients of our Community Connections Day Centre, most of whom have or are currently experiencing homelessness," Ms McDermott explained. "Here, they regain a sense of social connectedness, building relationships with people who share common losses, common experiences."

Herbert finds home with heart at Catholic Healthcare's Homeless and Housing Services

One of The Mercy Arms Players' key members – 76-year-old Herbert, a former humanities teacher, anti-apartheid movement member and revolutionary poet – has found a home at Catholic Healthcare's Community Connections Day Centre.

Herbert, who fled South Africa in the 1970s, said other than not being pursued by apartheid authorities, his life in Australia largely mirrored his years in South Africa: in and out of both good jobs and secure accommodation, regularly sleeping in hostels, boarding houses and at times, even cardboard boxes.

"When you become homeless, you honestly don't know what is going on. Everything falls apart and you can't see the ways you can get yourself out of it," Herbert said.

In 2006, Herbert was referred to Catholic Healthcare's Community Services, who helped him secure long-term accommodation and introduced him to the Community Connections Day Centre in the Sydney suburb of Waterloo. With The Mercy Arms Players, Herbert finds it both cathartic and inspirational to enact the journeys out of homelessness experienced by himself and other members of the theatre group.

"These are important stories to tell – and to hear," Herbert said. "Sometimes we all need to go a bit outside of our comfort zones to understand homelessness better and to find the best ways of dealing with it."

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About Catholic Healthcare's Community Services

Catholic Healthcare's Community Services works with a diverse range of people and communities to enable and maintain sustainable and vibrant lives. With a client base in excess of 5,000 people, Community Services works with the elderly, financially disadvantaged, people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, people with a disability, people with a mental illness, carers and children and young people with special needs or who are at risk of harm.