

COUNCIL TO HOMELESS PERSONS



The Peer Education Support Program

Homeless Victorians have a say

"Homeless people form one of the most powerless and marginalised groups in society. Responses to their needs should aim to empower them and to maximise their independence."

– Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Act (1994)

The Council to Homeless Persons Peer Education Support Program (PESP) is a team of people who have experienced homelessness and give those affected by homelessness a powerful voice in decision-making.

Starting as a pilot project in 2005, the Council (through its Homelessness Advocacy Service) developed the PESP to empower people who were experiencing, or had experienced, homelessness to share their perspectives, offer insights and participate in policy-making processes.

The program reflected a cultural shift in the homelessness service system towards an increasingly meaningful involvement of people who had experienced homelessness.

Guided by a team leader from the CHP staff, PESP members have developed partnerships with homelessness service providers and key government agencies, helping to bridge a communication gap between people who have experienced homelessness and policy makers. This has paved the way for them to share their perspectives and insights directly with the Council, homelessness support services, all levels of government and the wider community.

Their work also involves community education to break down negative stereotypes about homeless people, input into policy and practise, peer support, training and advocacy for systemic changes.

PESP members participate in conferences, forums, sector seminars, homelessness sector service reviews, focus groups and research projects, appear in the media, and are instrumental in developing education campaigns and materials, information packs, guidelines and standards including the Homelessness Assistance Service Standards, the Consumer Charter of Rights and Responsibilities, and the Department of Justice Equal Service Guidelines.

Their work is helping to create real improvements in homelessness service delivery.

The PESP is now integral to the Council's advocacy work and continues to evolve as a model for people who have experienced homelessness to participate in policy, decision-making and practise development, and in raising community awareness about homelessness from the perspective of those who have direct experience.

"Through PESP I have been able to convert what was a harrowing, and in many ways ongoing, experience into something that is positive and meaningful. I finally feel that I am more than a statistic or a consumer, I am a participant in this sector, not only helping myself to achieve the things in life that I deserve, but also paving the way for others like me to have better experiences and outcomes in the future."

– Zoe, PESP member (2005-06)

To date, 12 people have undertaken the program, and there are seven members on the current team, including:

Anthony

Anthony spent four years as a ward of the state at a boys' home in Queensland. Discharged at 17, he was given little advice or help about independent living and available services. He tried unsuccessfully to reconcile with his mother and found himself with nowhere to go. He moved to Melbourne and spent almost four years without a stable home, including a year

'sleeping rough' in squats and parks. His story typifies the difficulties faced by people who have grown up in the child protection system and are forced to live independently once they turn 18, but lack the support, advice and experience needed to do so.

Anthony, now 24, is living in shared private rental accommodation and studying to be a youth worker.

"I feel like I've missed out on a lot of experiences that teenagers should have. I've had to grow up and take on all this responsibility in terms of managing my life, and if something needs to be done I've generally had to do it for myself because no-one's been around to support me." – Anthony

Cassandra

Forced into the homelessness service system after fleeing a domestic violence situation with two young children, Cassandra moved into a refuge. While there in hiding, she was unable to maintain contact outside the refuge and accrued a private rental debt that later had to be paid back. She has a younger sister with a chronic and severe medical condition that requires constant support (which Cassandra's mum provides).

Cassandra has been with the PESP since its inception and has presented at two national

conferences and several launches. She has studied community development and aspires to work in human services. She has undertaken a wide range of activities during this time including being contracted by the Royal District Nursing Service homelessness outreach service to organise their annual festival, and engaged by major services including Hanover, Sacred Heart Mission and HomeGround to run peer focus groups and conduct consumer interviews.

Cassandra is a single mother with two children.

Lauren

Lauren grew up never knowing her father, who left when her mother was pregnant with Lauren. Her mother moved between coastal NSW and country Victoria, and was unable to find a home that was affordable, stable, and close to work. Lauren's school grades suffered and she was bullied and teased when she moved from school to school. At one school, she was regularly bashed by the 'tough girls'

and the bullying became so bad she was afraid to leave the house. She started using drugs to 'fit in' with the tough crowd. When her mother and step-father separated, her mother forced Lauren to move out and live with her step-father. Lauren left and spent the next years moving between her grandmother's house in Coffs Harbour, youth refuges in Sydney and sleeping on the streets.

Lauren, now 25, is a single mother with a young baby.

Tim

Originally from Sydney, Tim arrived in Melbourne in 2004 and joined the PESP team in 2005. Since then he has been involved in developing and implementing the Victorian Department of Human Services' Homelessness Assistance Service Standards, the Office of Housing Consumer Charter of Rights and Responsibilities and the Department of Justice Equal Service Guidelines.

He was an original member of the acclaimed Choir of Hard Knocks and currently volunteers for RecLink, works part time for Sacred Heart Mission, and is a regular contributor to 3CR's Rooming House Radio Program.

Tim works tirelessly to promote peoples' right to be treated with dignity and respect, and to have safe, affordable and appropriate housing.

"Being in the PESP gives me a chance to make the world a better place and the opportunity to address the power imbalances that exist in homeless services. It means representing those marginalised members of the community who are unable to articulate the issues surrounding homelessness, and breaking down the stereotypical view of homeless people." - Tim

Homeless Victorians speak

In June 2008, PESP members interviewed 70 clients / consumers of Victorian homelessness services about their views on homelessness issues. Interviewees included men and women, youths and adults, singles and couples, and Indigenous people; their responses were included in the CHP submission to the Australian Government's Green Paper on Homelessness.

Generally, those interviewed were positive about their experiences with homelessness service providers. However, they also highlighted the crucial need for more resources to curb chronic homelessness and argued strongly that services needed appropriate resourcing from governments.

Some of their responses:

How did being homeless impact on your life?

"It's really hard starting from scratch when you are still in crisis and trying to deal with the trauma of uprooting your children from their home, school, their pets, books toys and friends. I felt like it was all my fault and maybe I should have stayed with their father even though the violence was unbearable."

"I lie to people because I am ashamed to tell them I am in emergency accommodation."

"Being homeless had a huge effect on my life. I ended up in a psych hospital for four months. My husband had bashed me and I was staying with friends. Then I found out my mother and grandmother died in car accident. I felt the walls were falling in on me and I lost myself on the streets."

"Loss of everything, it's like the ground falling away. Our family broke up pretty much last year after my brother topped himself. I would be dead but I have to hang on for my mum, there's just no future for me."

"I've never been on a holiday but imagine everything would feel exciting and new. Homelessness feels terrifying and strange."

"You have to live it to understand how desperate people become, no family, no documentation to use as proof of identity, no income, no postal address, no Centrelink payment for eight weeks, no one to talk to... and exams start tomorrow."

"No one chooses homelessness as a career path. I accept responsibility for my situation but I don't want to be trapped in poverty. It starts with a home but I can't afford one because rents keep going up."

"Try to live in shared accommodation for two weeks with drug addicts, mad, angry and violent people, being told what to do where to sleep, when to eat by workers half your age. Impossible to maintain a sense of normality for yourself and your child. You feel completely powerless."

"I have just entered a refuge for the first time at the age of 64. In the past when I was beaten I would get in my car a drive away for a few nights until things calmed down. When I went to my doctor this time he threatened to go to the police to report my husband's abuse if I didn't. My husband was arrested and they took all his guns and weapons. I went out of my mind, I literally forgot who I was for 12 hours, and it was attributed to stress. The house is in my husband's name and I have no cash. I found out that the government has huge waiting times for public housing and I won't be housed in my lifetime. If and when I get a pension I will not be able to afford private rental. When did the government turn its back on people?"

"Being homeless makes me feel worthless and invisible."

What is needed to improve current responses to homelessness?

"More refuges, larger refuges, smaller refuges and much longer support periods."

"Long term housing, there is such a long wait and constant uncertainty."

"More places, there are many more homeless people than affordable places."

"I am in transitional housing and I am on a waiting list for public housing. The support worker is great but I have been here for three years with my two kids. My reality, I have received a notice to vacate, there is no public housing available, I cannot afford private rental, my kids will have to leave their school and I have no idea of where we are going to go. We slept for two weeks in my car before all this due to violence and now I don't have a car anymore so even that's no longer an option."

"More emergency places. I had to sleep in my friend's car for a month before I could get help with accommodation and support."

"Appropriate housing for people on a low income, that doesn't mean a slum or having to move 60 km away from schools, friends and services."

"There need to be a whole rethinking of the structures in society. Government needs to support parents and keeping families together."

"Are we a poor nation? Government needs to invest real dollars in housing to redress this disgrace where homeless people live and are treated like refuse."

"It should be mandatory that all facilities have private bathrooms and secure storage for possessions and food. I didn't mind sharing cooking facilities but because we shared a fridge I couldn't keep anything as it was always stolen."

"Affordable, appropriate housing for all Australian people, and stop rent increases."

"More houses, allow a bigger budget for government funded homes instead of pokies and road works that aren't essential or healthy for our society."

"People are individuals and their needs should be assessed on that basis. There will always be homelessness as some people cannot control their lifestyle. The government needs to truthfully answer the big question – is there enough housing in Australia, housing that poor people can afford? My experience says no."

About the Council to Homeless Persons

CHP is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness. Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development.

The CHP incorporates the Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS), a service aimed at securing and protecting the rights of people experiencing homelessness, and the Peer Education Support Program (PESP).

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