Communique from housing and homelessness agencies in Melbourne

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Media portrayal of homelessness

Representatives from Melbourne's leading homelessness services and welfare agencies are calling for a change in the portrayal of homelessness in the media towards a more balanced approach that respects people involved in coverage.

We want to end homelessness, a mission that is achievable with greater community understanding of the causes of homelessness and more action from government on homelessness and housing policy. Accurate representations of people experiencing homelessness in the media have the power to reframe this discussion and increase support for the changes we seek to achieve our mission.

Media coverage of homelessness

The media wields significant power when reporting on homelessness. It can help improve our understanding of homelessness, its causes and the impact it can have on a person's life.

People sleeping rough represent around six percent of the number of Australians experiencing homelessness: a small but highly visible proportion. They are among society's most disadvantage group and face significant barriers to participating in society and negative portrayal of their circumstances entrenches this vulnerability.

However, this is just one aspect of homelessness in Australia. Across the country, family violence and a lack of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness.

The media has the power to generate negative responses, perpetuate misconceptions and stigmatise people experiencing homelessness.

However, the media can help break down the misconceptions surrounding homelessness. It can report on the impact of homelessness on individuals (including children) and examine the broader structural causes of homelessness.

A balanced approach

The media can take a more balanced approach by resisting the reproduction of negative stereotypes of homelessness. It can also acknowledge that balanced and accurate reporting will help reduce stigma and increase the community's understanding of the real causes of homelessness and the political and social measures needed to increase affordable housing supply.

We call on the media to:

- Adopt a balanced approach when reporting on homelessness.
- Take into account the broader social and economic causes of homelessness.

- Report with concern and respect for individuals involved.
- Include the views of people with lived experience of homelessness.
- Seek the views of organisations providing services to people experiencing homelessness.
- Consider the context when reporting homelessness, the relevance and other associated factors.
- Avoid imagery that perpetuates stereotypes or reinforces opinions about people experiencing homelessness where they may not be accurate or necessary.

Facts about homelessness in Australia

We will endeavour to promote factual reporting on homelessness by making data and evidence available to the media. Many misconceptions persist around homelessness. The media can play a significant role in clarifying these, particularly around the causes of homelessness and people who experience homelessness.

For example, the perception among the public is that it is primarily lone adults experience homelessness, however data shows that 47% of people seeking support from specialist homeless services are families.

The causes of homelessness are also poorly understood, leading to unfair blame placed on individuals who find themselves homeless. People still believe drug addiction and mental illness are two of the leading causes of homelessness, when in fact housing affordability and domestic violence are the two leading causes.

> Some facts:
>
> **47%** of people seeking support from homelessness services are families.
>
> **6%** of people experiencing homelessness are sleeping rough.
>
> The main causes of homelessness is lack of affordable housing (**54%**) and Family Violence (**34%**)
>
> Most people experience homelessness for a short period of time, with **57%** of people homeless for less than **45 days**.
>
> Only **7.2%** of all rental properties in Melbourne are affordable for low income households.

Anyone can be considered homeless if they are:

- Sleeping in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out;
- Staying in supported accommodation for the homeless;
- Staying temporarily with other households;
- Staying in boarding houses;
- Staying in other temporary lodgings; or
- Living in severely overcrowded dwellings.