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Media release

International homelessness expert to reveal how Finland ended homelessness, and why Australia is failing

Professor Eoin O'Sullivan is available for interviews from Monday 11 September – Monday 18 September

Prof O'Sullivan will make the keynote address at the [Victorian Homelessness Conference](#) on Wednesday 13 September, 10.30am

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Visiting homelessness expert, Professor Eoin O'Sullivan, will on Wednesday warn welfare chiefs and policy makers that throwing money at crisis responses to homelessness (such as refuges and emergency accommodation), whilst ignoring social housing, is a recipe for failure.

Professor O'Sullivan, Editor of the European Journal of Homelessness, will make a keynote address at the [Victorian Homelessness Conference, hosted by the Council to Homeless Persons](#), comparing Ireland, Denmark and Finland, all of which set a target to end rough sleeping and chronic homelessness by 2016. Only Finland has succeeded, by building and buying permanent, rent-subsidised homes for thousands of rough sleepers and chronically homeless languishing in crisis accommodation – an approach called *Housing First*.

There are no rough sleepers in Finland, and the need for crisis accommodation has been almost eliminated, with just 52 shelter beds in the entire country, down from 600 in 2008. The success was achieved through major government investment in social housing, meaning people can be quickly moved off the streets and out of crisis accommodation.

In contrast to Finland's approach, Professor O'Sullivan will outline how Ireland's homelessness response invested heavily in crisis responses, and relied on the private rental market to house low-income earners, without boosting social housing. As a result, Irish homeless shelters have ballooned and are bottle necked; today there are 1,959 shelter beds, compared to 617 in 2008, with people forced to live in shelters and other crisis accommodation due to a lack of exit points into social housing.

The Irish Government has all but stopped building new social housing, and consequently, homelessness has risen to epidemic levels in recent years, a strikingly similar experience to Australia.

"There are striking parallels between the Irish and Australian homelessness crises. We're both playing the role of the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, instead of intervening at the top of the cliff to prevent people falling into homelessness," said Jenny Smith, CEO of Council to Homeless Persons, the organisation hosting the Conference.

"With our Federal Government brokering a new National Homelessness and Housing Agreement with the States, as a nation we need to commit to significant increases in social housing for low income earners so we can emulate the success from abroad, not continue with failure."

"In both Ireland and Australia, demand for emergency accommodation is at an historic high as people on low incomes find themselves homeless due to skyrocketing rents, with inadequate public and community housing safety nets. We won't end homelessness in Australia by building more crisis accommodation while neglecting social housing, and cannot rely on the private market to house our most vulnerable citizens."

“The take-out message is that to solve homelessness, we need enough housing for people on very low incomes. Until we have that, homelessness will continue to rise.”

“Having crisis beds for people that fall into homelessness is important, but the vital thing is to keep that stay as brief as possible by moving people quickly into permanent, affordable housing,” said Ms Smith.

Ireland vs Victoria: A tale of two homelessness crises

They might be oceans apart, but the Republic of Ireland and Victoria have a lot in common. There are valuable lessons to be learned from Ireland’s responses to homelessness.

In 2008, the Irish Government set a target to end chronic homelessness and rough sleeping by 2016. This plan didn’t succeed. Like Victoria, many of Ireland’s homelessness interventions have been ultimately thwarted by a lack of affordable housing.

	Republic of Ireland	Victoria, Australia
Population	4.6 million	5.7 million
Rising rates of rough sleeping in capital city	Dublin – 142 rough sleepers (an increase of 56% in 12 months)	Melbourne – 247 rough sleepers (an increase of 74% in 2 years)
Social housing shortages	61,000 Irish people waiting for social housing. 1-in-5 have been waiting 5+ years.	35,000 Victorians waiting for social housing. 200,000 Australians.
Declining home ownership	1-in-5 people renting today, compared to 10 years ago 1-in-10	1-in-3 people renting. At the last Census, for the first time, there were more renters than home owners.
Skyrocketing rents	The average Irish renter spends 34% of their income on rent	The average Australian renter spends 25% of their income on rent

About the Victorian Homelessness Conference

Wednesday 13 & 14 September, Melbourne Town Hall

The [Victorian Homelessness Conference](#) is hosted by the [Council to Homeless Persons](#) every two years. This year it will be attended by 350 homelessness workers, welfare chiefs, policy makers and people with a lived experience of homelessness who will examine topics including Aboriginal homelessness, LGBTI homelessness, rough sleeping solutions, NDIS and homelessness and young people leaving state care.

About Housing First

Housing First is an approach that gives rough sleepers and the long-term homeless permanent, subsidised housing, and then wraps around supports (mental health supports, addiction, healthcare, practical assistance with budgeting etc) so people don’t fall back into homelessness. Housing First does not rely on the notion that people have to be ‘well’ to be able to housed. It says they have to be housed in order to get well.

About Professor Eoin O’Sullivan (NB. Eoin pronounced Owen)

Professor O’Sullivan, Trinity College Dublin is the Editor of the European Journal of Homelessness. He has worked in homelessness for over 35 years. He is an expert on *Housing First* approaches to ending homelessness, and youth homelessness.

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