

Media release: Wednesday 20 June

Counting homeless deaths: Memorial to remember those who have died

The Council to Homeless Persons says scores of rough sleepers die every year, though very little data is recorded on the role that homelessness plays in causing premature death.

"Pneumonia contracted after months on the streets, untreated wounds that lead to septicaemia, a fatal head injury sustained from a violent attack - such deaths are all related to homelessness," said Jenny Smith, CEO, Council to Homeless Persons.

The peak body has raised the issue in the lead-up to today's Homeless Memorial, which will be held in St Kilda to remember the hundreds of people experiencing homelessness who died during the previous year.

Research shows that people who have experienced long-term rough sleeping have an average life expectancy of just 47 years. Research also shows that rough sleepers are 11 times more likely to be the victims of violence than those who haven't experienced rough sleeping, though very little is known about mortality rates among rough sleepers, says Ms Smith.

"We track our road toll, the number of women who are killed in family violence incidents, how many Australians die of skin cancer, but we don't know how many people die because they didn't have a safe, permanent home," said Ms Smith.

CHP emphasised that rough sleeping represents just five per cent of all homelessness, but despite being the smallest group, rough sleepers experience the most extreme disadvantage.

"All forms of homelessness have a detrimental effect on people's mental and physical health, but long-term rough sleeping exposes people to the most extreme physical and mental suffering," said Ms Smith.

CHP is advocating for Victoria to adopt a [Housing First](#) approach to solving rough sleeping. Housing First has been proven internationally to end long term homelessness. It involves buying and building enough homes to house every rough sleeper, and providing support to address the issues that lead to their homelessness.

"We still do not have the political will required to end homelessness in Australia. The question is not *how* can we solve homelessness, but rather *why* have we been unable to solve it when the solution is so clear?"

The peak acknowledges that Housing First is expensive, but emphasise its focus on a small group and underline the costs associated with supporting people while they are homeless.

"There is a huge cost attached to homelessness, both the cost to human lives and a very real financial cost. When people are sleeping on the street, they get sick, they're victims of violence requiring police and ambulance, they get caught up in the justice system and their mental health issues get worse," said Ms Smith.

A 2016 Sacred Heart Mission report estimated that for every rough sleeper who is housed and supported to get off the street, the cost savings to Government are \$17,591 per year, per person. There were 1,123 Victorians counted as sleeping rough on Census night in 2016.

"We must end rough sleeping because it is the right thing to do, because it saves lives and because having a safe home is a human right. It also makes economic sense," said Ms Smith

What: Homeless Memorial honouring the lives of people who died while homeless

This annual event is held by a group of people who have experienced homelessness first-hand.

150-200 people will gather at the event, with speakers, a candlelight vigil, a community choir of people who are currently and previously experienced homelessness, three young people from St Joseph's School who recovered from homelessness and now re-engaged with school

When: Wednesday 20th June

Time: Ceremony from 4.30-7pm

Where: Held at The Peanut Farm Reserve, Cnr. Chaucer St & Shakespeare Grove, St Kilda
(Next to Veg Out - behind Woolworths in Acland St)

[Ends]

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