



Submission to the City of Port Phillip Community
Safety Roundtable

4 April 2025

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sacred Heart Mission (SHM) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the City of Port Phillip's Community Safety Roundtable through this formal submission, as well as attendance at the Roundtable on 19 March 2025.

Sleeping rough is not a choice – it is a last resort for people with nowhere safe to go. Criminalising rough sleeping is not only cruel but also ignores the real issue: the severe shortage of social and affordable housing in Victoria and across Australia; and the lack of safe public spaces. 102,000 Victorians sought help from homelessness services in 2023/24; and Victoria had 30,660 people experiencing homelessness on Census night in 2021; 7.5% of them were sleeping rough.

More than 61,000 Victorians are on the public housing waitlist. Rents have risen 13.7% in a year and combined with the cost-of-living crisis, it is pushing more people into housing insecurity and homelessness.

At SHM, we are seeing this firsthand. Over the past year, around 1,100 new people have come to our Engagement Hub on Grey Street St Kilda – many experiencing homelessness for the first time. This is in addition to the hundreds of regular visitors who rely on our services, from housing support and health programs to women's services and social inclusion initiatives.

SHM has been involved with the Port Phillip Zero initiative since it began. We work closely with the City of Port Phillip and local services to identify and support people sleeping rough. Between February 2022 and February 2024, Port Phillip Zero achieved a 40% decrease in rough sleeping in the City of Port Phillip, indicating that the initiative is effective. This is the result of deep collaboration between Council and local community organisations and people with lived experience to achieve meaningful change for people sleeping rough.

We acknowledge the City of Port Phillip's historic sensitivity to this complex social issue. Over many decades, progressive approaches focused on the well-being of vulnerable people have kept the rough sleeping community safe, housed and treated with respect and care. We urge the City of Port Phillip to continue with compassionate, evidence-based approaches to support rough sleepers, rather than resorting to punitive measures including issuing fines. We believe such an approach will be ineffective, harmful to individuals and undermine the significant progress that has been made to decrease homelessness in our community. We further urge investment in real solutions: building more social housing and adequately funding homelessness and housing support services. This should include flexible specialist support services for people with complex needs, such as those related to alcohol and other drug (AOD) use and mental health challenges.

To solve the housing shortage in the City of Port Phillip and beyond, Victoria must deliver 6,000 new social homes each year. This will provide the more than 61,000 Victorians on the public housing waitlist with a stable foundation from which to rebuild their lives.

Beyond housing, people in crisis need the right support at the right time. Investing in wrap-around services – combining housing with mental health, substance use support and other essential services – ensures people don't just exit homelessness but stay housed.

With over 40 years of experience as a community services organisation, we know that when people are part of the decisions that affect them, the outcomes are always better. This is why we strongly advocate for First Nations housing responses – designed and delivered by First Nations people to meet the needs of their communities. Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework sets out the solutions and urges all levels of government to respond.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Family Violence & Housing Security

- Prioritise increasing crisis accommodation options for family violence victim-survivors and their children.
- Provide trauma-informed support services for women and children escaping violence, including case management, financial assistance and priority access to housing.

2. Housing Availability & Affordability

- Advocate for greater investment in public and social housing, including fast-tracking developments and repurposing vacant properties.
- Introduce rent caps or stronger rental protections to prevent excessive rent increases.
- Expand subsidised housing for vulnerable groups, including First Nations communities.
- Work within communities to prevent neighbour fatigue and address concerns in a timely manner.
- Advocate to the Commonwealth Government to increase income support payments, particularly JobSeeker, above the poverty line.
- Build more congregate housing models like Wellington Street Common Ground and tailor to specific cohorts such as older women.

3. Mental Health System Barriers

- Push for greater accessibility to mental health assessments to prevent individuals from falling through the cracks.
- Advocate for wraparound services that combine housing with mental health and substance use support.
- Increase funding for outreach mental health teams and develop a flexible, innovative service model able to reach individuals on the street who are undiagnosed and untreated.

4. Cultural Safety

- Work with First Nations organisations to create culturally appropriate gathering spaces within housing developments and elsewhere in the community.
- Support agencies such as Ngwala, which provides community engagement workers and Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) Workers for assessments and crisis intervention for First Nations peoples experiencing homelessness.
- Support other agencies' programs such as Better Health Network (BHN's) Indigenous Access and Equity Program, which provides culturally safe services to First Nations communities.
- Ensure First Nations housing is located within or near their communities to prevent social isolation.
- Educate law enforcement and policymakers on culturally safe policing practices to prevent unnecessary targeting of First Nations people.
- Provide housing equity for rainbow communities, who are among the most marginalised groups and at high risk of experiencing homelessness, poverty and social exclusion.

5. Public Housing Maintenance & Allocation

- Implement timeframe guarantees for maintenance so that people can move in without long delays.
- Hold housing providers accountable for prioritising safe and habitable conditions.

- Explore tenant-led maintenance initiatives where small repairs can be addressed with community involvement.

6. Discriminatory Housing Practices

- Adequately fund community housing providers so that they can equitably accept tenancy applications from people receiving JobSeeker, without compromising their organisation's financial sustainability.
- Ensure rooming house regulations are enforced to prevent discrimination against Job Seeker recipients.
- Provide support to housing providers to house vulnerable people with higher complexities.

7. Resource & Funding Shortages

- Push for increased funding for frontline homelessness and housing support services.
- Advocate for multi-agency collaboration to ensure services (e.g., housing, mental health, family violence support) work together rather than in silos.
- Improve Housing Establishment Funds (HEF) for people, to reduce rough sleeping episodes.

8. Safe Public Spaces

- Ensure there are safe community and public places in the City of Port Phillip for First Nations and vulnerable people to gather where they are safe and access resources and information.

9. Community Education

- Provide community education on homelessness that helps people understand its root causes and emphasises that solutions should focus on housing and support, rather than punitive responses.

10. Retain positive City of Port Phillip initiatives

- Continue with the current initiatives within City of Port Phillip, including the Zero Project, Homelessness Action Strategy and Growing Affordable Housing Strategy and public forums in the community.
- Maintain commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) demonstrated by City of Port Phillip – such as the Accessibility Action Plan, LGBTIQ+ Action Plan, Reconciliation Action Plan and Welcoming Cities.

3. OUR ENGAGEMENT HUBS

The courtyard of our Grey St Engagement Hub in St Kilda is a safe gathering place for all those who need it. SHM is experiencing a growing demand for support. Over the last year, we counted approximately 1,100 new people at our hub, many of them are experiencing homelessness for the first time.

In addition, we have hundreds of regular visitors who access our services, ranging from free meals to case management and long-term housing support. Around 10% of our participants identify as First Nations people.

In 2024, our Engagement Hub provided 3,800 episodes of support - appointments, emergency relief and crisis intervention. Of these, 80 were assisted with ongoing support for a period of 8-10 weeks and linked into longer term services. We also provided support to 37 people in our 'over 50s' targeted case management program in 2024. These people were

experiencing housing, health and premature ageing related issues, and required an average of 6-8 months of support.

SHM also offers wellbeing and inclusion activities, including a music group, art therapy, drug education, optometry, yoga, vaccination clinics, haircuts and off-site osteopathy at Victoria University. We had 2,038 presentations for these wellbeing activities over a 12-month period.

Our service receives referrals from a variety of sources, both formal and informal. These referrers play a critical role in connecting individuals in need with the Engagement Hub. Examples include NDIS workers, Launch Housing, The Salvation Army Crisis Centre and Access Health, Homeless Outreach Psychiatric Service (HOPS), Ngwala, a range of Community Housing Providers, Hospital Admission Risk Program (HARP, through the Alfred) as well as referrals through word of mouth.

At present, we are open from 8.30am-1pm. Our experience is that participants can best engage during the morning and early afternoon period, which is when other services and supports are also open. We currently operate the Engagement Hubs through a mixture of government funding and our own internal revenue stream. However, with additional funding, we could expand our services to offer longer opening hours and provide a safe space for vulnerable people throughout the day.

3.1 The impact of mental health and alcohol and drug use

SHM has an ongoing relationship with Alfred Homeless Outreach Psychiatric Services (HOPS) to provide enhanced pathways to treatment and secondary consultation. We conduct a daily check-in on weekdays with HOPS, usually focusing on 2–3 participants we know - a mix of new referrals and people receiving ongoing mental health support.

Broadly, we have found there has been a general increase in presentations involving complex behaviours, including untreated mental ill health and substance use over the last two years.

In our experience, people who have been rough sleeping for extensive periods of time have significant trauma, untreated mental health and substance use. This often leads to complex behaviours, including repeated evictions from previous housing and crisis accommodation. It is well understood that people's experiences of trauma can lead to adaptive behaviours that present as high-risk - aggression, difficulties with emotional regulation and paranoia.

While this is a small cohort of people, within an increasingly large cohort of people who are experiencing homelessness, we understand this behaviour does attract attention in the local community and it is not unreasonable for people to be fearful when exposed to or interacting with those presenting in this manner. However, punitive responses are the wrong lens to examine complex social issues, and more practical solutions are needed.

We believe that the community needs advanced collaboration on the ground with psychiatric, alcohol and other drug services and homelessness services, further resources and new, targeted approaches to supporting these individuals, including services that are co-designed with rough sleepers.

4. PORT PHILLIP ZERO PROJECT AND BY-NAME LIST (BNL)

SHM is actively involved in the Port Phillip Zero Project, a collaborative initiative supported by a range of local agencies. Its' primary goal is to move individuals experiencing homelessness in the City of Port Phillip closer to long-term housing, with weekly meetings across the involved agencies to discuss individuals identified as rough sleepers in the area

and categorise them into target groups using the By Name List (BNL), ensuring continuous tracking and assessment.

The BNL is used to:

- Track housing offers and updates on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR)
- Identify individual challenges, including mental and physical health decline
- Assess risks, including aggressive behaviours
- Document last known locations and housing outcomes

Agencies continue to assess individual needs, advocate for housing solutions and monitor the effectiveness of the initiative; and the project team shares information on rooming house closures and local housing providers.

SHM plays a vital role in identifying and supporting individuals who are newly experiencing homelessness through its Engagement Hubs. When new individuals present to us, staff gather relevant information, ensuring that informed and appropriate support can be provided. If consent is given, details such as the person's name, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, gender, age and last known location are recorded. In cases where consent is not granted, the individual may be documented as Jane or John Doe.

The coordinators continuously monitor new presentations and whether service users have accessed services three or more times. When this occurs, their details are raised at the BNL meeting for potential inclusion on the list. Additionally, pathways workers assist service users in completing a Victorian Housing Register (VHR) assessment, with these updates also being shared at meetings and reflected in the tracking spreadsheet.

SHM remains committed to understanding the accommodation circumstances of those experiencing homelessness. This includes tracking where individuals are staying, whether that be couch surfing, residing in squats, living in tents or staying in their cars. Furthermore, SHM ensures that appropriate program supports are in place, such as the Care Finder initiative and the Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) program, helping to create pathways out of homelessness in the shortest possible time.

For individuals who have been on the BNL for an extended period, SHM continues to monitor their progress. Updates on any challenges, safety concerns or new information are regularly documented and reviewed to ensure that service users receive the most relevant and effective support available. Through this ongoing process, SHM remains dedicated to facilitating sustainable solutions for those experiencing homelessness and ensuring that no one is left without the care and assistance they need.

5. INTENSIVE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

In addition, SHM operates several programs to provide intensive, long-term support to people who have experienced and are experiencing homelessness, to break the cycle of homelessness. Some examples are detailed below:

5.1 GreenLight – outreach program

We support people to move out of rough sleeping through our outreach program GreenLight, provided in partnership with VincentCare and The Salvation Army and funded by the Rough Sleeper Action Plan in 2018. We work with people who have obtained a long-term housing offer, to settle into housing and maintain their tenancy.

Since then, the consortium has supported at least 273 referrals per financial year. SHM has already met our targets for the current financial year, supporting 107 people from July 2024 to February 2025.

The funding is due to lapse on 30 June 2025. Together with sector partners, we have advocated strongly to retain this program and adapt our response to offer tenancy support to prevent homelessness.

5.2 Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI)

Our housing first program, Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI), successfully works with people experiencing long-term homelessness to secure and maintain stable housing and build community connections. It was the first service in Australia to apply the 'housing first' principles whereby participants are given housing in the first six months and then engage in intensive support over a three-year period. Four years after participants start the program, 90% of people maintain stable housing. J2SI also was the first Social Impact Investment in Victoria which subsequently became the first Payment by Results program. Since the pilot program in 2009, J2SI has supported 640 participants.

We are now rolling out J2SI across Victoria, supporting hundreds more people – in partnership with the Victorian Government, The Salvation Army, Uniting Vic.Tas, VincentCare Victoria and local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. This program will run between April 2025 and 2028, supporting 240 people across the consortium and SHM will support 60 of these people directly.

6. CONCLUSION

We acknowledge that there are people in our community who are frustrated and feel unsafe because of the public presence and behaviour of people rough sleeping in the City of Port Phillip. We believe it is vital that all people – including people who are rough sleeping - have safe places to gather and are supported to access resources and information as needed.

However, we believe that criminalising homelessness by undertaking legal action and issuing fines is not the answer. People experiencing homelessness have already been failed and traumatised by the system. Compounding that by then criminalising their suffering is cruel and does more harm than good.

Financial penalties will not be enforceable to people who cannot pay them but rather exacerbate their difficulties transitioning into stable housing. Furthermore, this will create additional burdens on the justice system, be costly to taxpayers and does nothing to address the root causes of these issues.

People sleeping rough are part of our community, but they experience a much higher risk of violence, complex physical and mental health issues, poverty, trauma and premature ageing and death than the rest of the community.

City of Port Phillip is known and respected for its commitment to being a socially inclusive, equitable and economically thriving community. We believe it is vital that the City of Port Phillip rejects any proposal that is punitive and instead, continue the positive and productive work it is already doing including Port Phillip Zero, Wellington Street Common Ground, housing and homelessness strategies and its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.