

Human Services Podcast – Homelessness transcript

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Voice over (female):

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Hank Jongen (HJ):

Hi, and welcome to the Human Services podcast. I'm Hank Jongen and today we're talking about homelessness. Did you know over 100,000 people in Australia are experiencing homelessness? Sixty percent of these people are under the age of 35, and 13% are under the age of 12. I'll be catching up with our Acting Secretary Grant Tidswell, he's taking part in this year's Saint Vincent De Paul CEO sleep out. But first, I'd like to introduce you to Phonethip Xaypangna who is a Community Engagement Officer with the department. And she provides direct support to those who find themselves homeless. Hi Phonethip, and thank you for joining us.

Phonethip Xaypangna (PX):

Thank you Hank

HJ:

So your role is very much an interventionist one, and steering people to appropriate services and support. Is that right?

PX:

Correct, yes. So we link people up with community services as well as our own departmental services.

HJ:

In my introduction, I talked about 100 000 people in Australia experiencing homelessness at any one time. These are pretty startling figures, and I don't think most people appreciate the extent to which homelessness permeates our society. Do you think that's a fair comment for me to make? Is it sort of a hidden condition?

PX:

Hidden homelessness is quite high. We do see a lot of people that come in and don't present as homeless. They're quite well looking. They can manage their own business. It's when we ask a few triggering questions that we identify they are homeless.

HJ:

So you may have someone whose couch surfing, for example, and they don't regard themselves as homeless. Is that what you're saying?

PX:

That's right. People that are couch surfing, because they have, they consider themselves to have a roof over their head, as well as people who live in their cars. I once had a gentleman that approached me at the out services that I worked at. He wanted to change his address, and it was only once I got into some conversation with him, and I asked for a new address did he say he didn't have an address to me and he looked down and he was quite embarrassed. It was quite alarming when he showed me a driver's licence, the picture in that licence I saw was a man that was well groomed, clean shaven, collared shirt. But the man that was sitting in front of me was very frail looking. He had a long beard, his hair was overdue for a cut and his clothes looked like they were about to fall off him. So I approached with a few questions, and at that point, that's when he identified, and said to me he was sleeping in his car. I asked him if he would like me to help him get some temporary accommodation. He said "No. No. I'm not homeless. I have somewhere to stay. It's my car. There are people worse off than me. I'd rather you go and help them".

So we can't push that, we have to respect what their wishes are. All I said was "Ok. My name is Phonethip", I told him where I worked and how he could find me if he ever needed help. I talked about how important early intervention was, to prevent chronic homelessness, and I left it at that. The following day, he came in and asked for me and asked for some help. So that allowed him the time to make his own decision overnight, about whether or not he needed that help. Once he put his hand up to ask for help, that's when we were able to help him. It took a little while, we got him into some

temporary accommodation. But to this day now, he's now employed, and he's a manager of a cleaning company.

HJ:

What do you think contributed to his homelessness in the first place?

PX:

He had been terminated from his job. He had some savings, and he thought he would be able to find another job quick enough, so that he wouldn't fall behind. He eventually fell short in his mortgage and that's when he was evicted.

HJ:

One of the important things that you probably need to establish very quickly is trust. The ability to build that trust with someone who is vulnerable. Someone who is defensive, scared, may not even totally acknowledge that they're homeless, for example. How do you go about establishing that trust?

PX:

It's a very challenging job. To build that trust it just feels like there are so many barriers to break down, because for any human being, any person, trust is a big thing. For these people that are vulnerable there's been a breakdown of trust somewhere along the line in their past. So it takes a lot of convincing but eventually it does work in most cases, we do eventually build that trust because we show them respect.

HJ:

Do you see many people living on the streets because of mental illness? I'd imagine that's a really tough situation is you think about the medical, social and financial implications.

PS:

Having worked in the community engagement space for quite some time it is evident, and I'm no doctor but some end up in hospitals because they become a risk to themselves or community and that's another avenue of how we get in touch with these people who are homeless, through the social workers of psychiatric units or mental health units.

HJ:

In my introduction I also said that 13 per cent of homeless people are under the age of 12. That's quite an alarming figure and what's your role in relation to those sort of cases?

PS:

Because they're considered minors, we generally don't have a great deal to do with that, the under 12s.

HJ:

So if you came across an instance like that of course your role would be to ensure appropriate connection.

PS:

Definitely yep, we would talk to our social work service, those who may liaise with family and community services and any other services that need to be involved in that situation.

HJ:

And with young people, is it largely an issue of domestic violence or what are the contributing reasons for young people?

PS:

It is a lot of the family and domestic violence as you mentioned Hank, and sometimes it's just a communication breakdown as well or a relationship breakdown with the family.

HS:

There's also been a really large national response to the issue of domestic violence, has that national response to tackle this terrible issue really triggered changes in your day-to-day work as well?

PS:

I believe it has. The community engagement officers have noticed an increase in family and domestic violence related incidents.

HJ:

Is that increase reporting?

PS:

Identifying.

HJ:

Is the primary issue here one of homelessness or is it also connecting them with payments? For example I can imagine a scenario where a woman quite suddenly finds herself out on the street, with dependant children and simply not knowing where to go. Do we become the first port of call because of the financial aspect?

PS:

Yes we do. Department of Human Services is considered a first to know agency hank, and what I mean by this is people often present to our department because they're in a crisis situation and they're in need of some financial support. The complementary service we have such as community engagement officers, Indigenous Services Officers, Social Work services, Multicultural Officers they're all fantastic services because these specialists have relationships with community providers where we can provide effective linkages with other services.

HJ:

So I guess your advice is that you don't necessarily have to come to Human Services as your number one access point. Any of those services should be interconnected to ensure that you get an attempt to resolve the issues that you're confronted with. Is that the case or would your advice be come to Human Services first?

PS:

Oh go to any service because where there's a service that will help a vulnerable person we would have a relationship with that person or that organisation.

HJ:

Not all of your work is in the office is it? A lot of it involves you going out of the office and deliver services. Do you want to talk a bit about that?

PX:

Yes, so we are on the road quite often, and some people say our office is our car because we're just on the go all the time. Wherever there is a vulnerable person we can be there.

HJ:

Thank you very much for joining us today.

PX:

You're welcome.

HJ:

It was really good to speak to Phonethip to get her perspective on the lesser known services provided by the department. It's a great insight into direct action and it's something we're all proud of. While on the subject of direct action, I'd like to introduce Grant Tidswell he's the Acting Secretary of the department. Welcome Grant

Grant Tidswell (GT):

Thanks Hank, great to be here.

HJ:

We're talking about St Vinnies CEO Sleepout that you're participating in. How are you getting involved this year?

GT:

Well look, you know we're aiming for \$20,000 I'd like to go well past that. I happen to have the opportunity as Acting Secretary across the department with 34,000 people, I hope everyone can at least contribute a dollar. So whilst we've set our target at \$20,000 I'm very keen to move beyond and above that.

I'm getting involved, preparing myself. I have to search for some thermals I think and I don't really have a sleeping bag that I suspect will be able to do much good in the colds of Canberra. It's getting cold in Canberra, we've had some minuses and generally when it gets cold in Canberra it's bone jarringly cold.

HJ:

Your commitment to this particular issue, is it driven by your experience in the department?

GT:

Look Hank, I've spent my working career in the social welfare sphere and I have a strong commitment to helping people in times of need and distress. I think our staff do an outstanding job, right across Australia, helping Australians every single day.

And we do touch the lives of people who are experiencing homelessness or are at the risk of homelessness. It's one of the things we can really in a tangible sense help people get payments and hopefully assist them also to get a roof over their head.

HJ:

Back in 2010 you were awarded in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for outstanding public service in leading then Centrelink's response in the Victorian bushfires and that saw 2,500 homes destroyed, I recall it well. Did that experience change your perception of homelessness?

GT:

Look Hank, it was a solitary experience not only the obviously unbelievable property losses but also the great tragic loss of life and I saw it firsthand. I was there a few days after the event with the then Prime Minister so I got a chance to see you know the disaster at close quarters and to get a sense of what people were going through when they lost everything. To see families and individuals completely destroyed by the event and also where they lost loved ones was a very powerful experience to me, and gave me a sense of just how important it is to have your own house, your own belongings, your own family around you.

HJ:

We were talking earlier about Phonethip who works directly in this field. From where you sit at the present time, do you see that the department's involvement and interaction with homelessness is a major part of our business.

GT:

Absolutely Hank, it's a really important thing we can do. We've got our specialist staff that do work in that field with organisations like St Vincent's de Paul, an outstanding organisation and we work with all varieties of stakeholders. Our approach is really is to try and get the service system connected to individuals, we can obviously help to get their payments to them but we need to do the out-servicing work to enable the connections to occur. Now I get the chance to travel Australia, I was in Coffs Harbour last week. I met our Community Engagement Officer in Coffs Harbour, you'd think sometimes that boy Coffs harbour nice part of the World isn't everyone on the beach having a good life? Well there are always people right across Australia that struggle getting a roof over their head for a whole lot of reasons and I'm really proud of the work our staff can do to help and assist.

HJ:

Well Grant, you've got a big night ahead of you. What are you expecting?

GT:

Well really I'm hopeful that I'll get some tips from those who have done it before, Kathryn Campbell (Secretary, Department of Human Services) has done this five years in a row, and I'm filling in for her this year. She's given me some tips. I also hope I get the chance to talk to staff and volunteers from St Vincent's de Paul to give me a better sense of understanding. It's always easy for me in my job to be a bit distant from the cold face, so it will be great for me to get that chance to talk to people who really do work hard on this topic. Often long hours, often on low pay, and they're there to make a difference.

HJ:

And what can people do to donate towards St Vinnies Grant?

GT:

Well it's very easy in this digital world, you've just got to go to St Vinnies Sleepout click on the CEO and you'll go to Canberra and you'll see a mugshot of me.

HJ:

Well Grant you've obviously got a long night ahead of you on the night. I'd like to wish you the very best of luck, and thank you for coming in.

GT:

Thank you very much Hank.

HJ:

For more information about the support the department provides for those who are, or are at risk of becoming homeless, can provide out more on our website human.services.gov.au.

And I'd also like to remind you, if you're in crisis and you need support you can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Goodbye for now.

Voice over (female):

You've been listening to a podcast from the Australian Government Department of Human Services. For more information go to HumanService.gov.au

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