

SUBMISSION TO HUMAN RIGHTS CONSULTATION

RE HOMELESSNESS

To who it May Concern

I believe there are three areas critical to addressing poverty:

1. Social triage:

Communities (Governments/ churches/business) identify the most vulnerable people in their midst and attend to their needs as a matter of urgency - as a priority;

2. Relational Poverty:

(See attached); and

3. Mainstreaming:

It is vital that mainstream Australia sees itself as a critical player in relieving poverty. For too long we've made working on the margins and attending to the needs of the 'poor' a special calling; a so called radical and heroic thing to do. Consequently, 'mainstream' people have tended to feel inadequate and, at times, out of their depth. After all, 'That's a special calling, not for me.' So they back-off.

A further consequence is that the few working to alleviate poverty/homelessness become exhausted and overwhelmed. This can lead to a sense of isolation and helplessness, so nothing really changes. It's as if welfare itself remains on the margins, disengaged from 'everyday' Australians.

The beauty of the mainstream is that it is full of talent; full of resources; and full of accountability, too.

Thanks for 'listening' to these musings.

Peace and regards,

Fr Peter Day

Co-chair

HOME in Queanbeyan – www.homeinqueanbeyan.org

Relational Poverty and Social Inclusion

By Peter Day

I write as just one of many concerned Australians seeking to relieve the plight of this nation's most disadvantaged people, particularly the homeless mentally ill.

Having spent much of the past 17 years living and working at the "coal face" (including 8 years in inner-Sydney, 1992-2000) it has become clear to me that the most crippling of all poverty is, what I call, *Relational Poverty*: an entrenched isolation in which there is minimal and, often times, no meaningful human contact. Amongst the homeless mentally ill, for instance, this is an all too pervasive reality; one that leaves people who are very sick fending for themselves on the streets, in refuges, gaols and public housing estates throughout the nation.

When people are confronted with *Relational Poverty* their capacity to engage; to find work; to get better; to 'get up'; and to live with dignity, is significantly diminished and, sometimes, extinguished.

Much of our approach to welfare and homelessness (governments, community, churches) is underpinned by 'impersonal charity' which focuses on relieving material poverty – e.g through the provision of low-cost housing, welfare benefits, soup kitchens, refuges, second-hand clothing bins, vouchers etc. This has its place and, in many instances, can provide much needed relief; but it has little, if any, impact on addressing *Relational Poverty*. More often than not, our 'impersonal charity' helps people survive/exist only.

In relation to accommodation, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the crisis approach tends to be reactive and superficial only – a "one-night stand" type of care that has little long-term impact. Within this milieu, relationships are not fostered or encouraged, so people become entrenched in a never-ending cycle of homelessness: bouncing from refuge to refuge and back again. Thus, the often complex issues that underlie peoples' crises are never properly addressed, so nothing really changes; we just *re-cycle* homelessness.

It is my belief that this approach tends to address 'houselessness' (physical needs), rather than homelessness (relational/spiritual/emotional needs).

In contrast, environments that foster relationships create opportunities for people to share what is at the heart of their predicament. This, in turn, means that more accurate assessments can be made and suitable paths/actions for recovery and long-term solutions can be mapped-out; and, critical to this is employment.

In a nutshell, people need people.

I am currently engaged as co-chair in a significant community initiative: **HOME in Queanbeyan**, which is seeking to provide 24 hour, non-institutional care for people with chronic mental illness (www.homeinqueanbeyan.org). It is an enterprise underpinned by a community's realisation that things have to change for our most vulnerable citizens, and that "we", not just governments alone, can be that change.

HOME recognises that the chronically mentally ill need not just a house and meals, but regular loving, human support – a HOME, too: **Social Inclusion**. This project, which started as a local enterprise, has drawn support from across Australia

including the Hon Sir William Deane, former Governor General, and the Hon Geoff Gallop, the former Premier of Western Australia.

Innate in all of us is a hunger to belong; to share with others; to not just be part of the "village", but to contribute to it as well.

Addressing *Relational Poverty* is central to creating social inclusion and reducing chronic homelessness.