

**STOP AND LISTEN ... DON'T ASSUME
WHY THE HOMELESS PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION
WAS FORMED**

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This idea came about because a group of people who had experienced homelessness got fed up with the attitude and treatment they were getting when applying for safe and secure housing that met their needs. This group asked for a meeting with people from different agencies in the community. It was to our surprise when 36 people turned up to hear what we had to say. Since that time we have struggled, argued and fought to establish ourselves as a force to be reckoned with in the community.

We must say in all honesty that a big thank you must go to Anne Emery who at that time worked as the Community Development Worker at St. Mary's House of Welcome which is a day drop-in centre. Ken Fernandez of Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions. Without his help who can say where we would be today? And last but not least The Council To Homeless Persons Victoria. How we pushed our luck with them, but they stuck with us and today you are reading our paper. It's good to be supported and encouraged, to be helped with writing and computers, to learn things, learning to talk about things and encouraging us to do things for ourselves.

It is a great thing to be able to have dreams, but what is even better is to have them acknowledged. We are writing to express our frustration regarding the homeless situation that does not seem to improve. We have met a lot of homeless people. Nobody really knows why people are homeless, it could be problems at home, we don't know. It hurts seeing people on the streets. One day it could be your kids. It is now time that you all heard a few home truths regarding these issues and bring you back to reality.

We understand that you may think you are doing your best but until such time as you stop and ask the people themselves what their needs are you will keep going round in circles and wasting money that could be put to good use. We are continually being told to get experience so that we are prepared for job offers and in that way we can get off the dole which is fair enough. Now the same must be said for yourselves. Practise what you preach. From our experience with housing we have been there and done that. We in the community are the key to help you solve these housing matters if we teach and you listen.

What we mean is the treatment and the attitude of some people in the government sector and some agencies. One instant involved an episode with one of the offices of housing. This is my own experience. It took two years to get the housing office just to listen to me and even then in the end I had to have a social worker to talk on my behalf. They just kept saying we understand Anne. The Social Worker thought I was telling stories but when she started dealing with the housing officer she was shocked. My papers were given to their office as required and when I was not contacted I went to enquire to see what had happened. I was told that my papers were lost and I had to do them all over again including all supporting letters. Please tell me how professional people such as yourselves can lose all my papers? "Oh that must have happened when they were being transferred," was all I was told. No apology or nothing. Mind you in the mean time I was not that far off a nervous breakdown. All I could do was cry when I was spoken to and was quite prepared to take what I could carry in a bag and walk out back on to the streets. It would have been better than where I was living. When it finally came to my turn to have a look at the place it turned out not to be what I had applied for. It was a bed sit in a high rise. I thought well it was better than nothing but I was wrong. The housing rep did not even so much as say sorry. All that was said was take it or leave it or go back to the bottom of the list. So for two years I fought to get my needs met and now I have a one bedroom stand alone place that I can call home and am very happy. I can write and give you a taste of how we are spoken to but then I would just be degrading myself and taking me down to their level.

What we would like to see in the community is both sides of the counter working together to meet the needs of the homeless. If nothing else that is our right as a human being and that is just what we are, human beings with a need to be heard. The agencies and the government take it for granted

that they know what our needs are, well they do not. You do not. For the most simple of reasons. They/you have never stopped to ask us what our needs are and what's more they/you have never taken the time to listen to what is being said, they/you are always assuming.

The goals of the HPA are to see that everyone has an equal chance to have a dream or two come true. We believe that it is important to give back a person's dignity. Just because we went astray, does not mean that we are not worth the effort. Just because we sleep on a bench, does not mean we are homeless. Four walls does not make a home, but they/you assume it does and there is the problem. What the HPA would like to see happen is that they/you do not feel frightened to talk to the people in the community. We sometimes may smell or look a bit odd, but here is a news flash!!! People do have brains between their ears and would like to have the opportunity to use them. So what we are asking of them/you all is to include us in your discussions when it concerns our welfare.

We do not bite even though some people may think otherwise. Have any of them/you ever stopped to think that we may be just lonely and because the trust is not there, find it very hard to once again be a part of society?

It is also important to look at the flexibility of Centrelink. Now there is a problem. The biggest issue here is the training and attitude of some of their workers. Some of these workers evidently find it very hard to put to good use the knowledge and training they (hopefully) get when they are employed by Centrelink. They do not inform people of any issues that could bring about a better understanding to all parties and so when a mistake is made because of us not knowing any better we are penalised. Next thing we know BOOM, the explosion has begun. Now we have people screaming at each other and next thing you know you have to get security in to keep us in line.

What a joke.

If and when we are lucky enough to get any work at all, we would like the decency to be told if we have enough payment left to pay our rent. Many a time our full rent has not come out and we have not been told, next thing we know we are in trouble with housing. Some of these problems come about because the worker has not done the paperwork and therefore the person on the other side of the counter pays the penalty once again. These are only some of the challenges that are faced.

Believe it or not, we have had some great successes along the way. There are now some agencies listening to and working with us. With everyone's pushy attitude (and I mean that in the most nicest of ways) we are now starting to put the pieces of the puzzle together, which is not an easy job. One of our group proudly came to us one day and said he was going back to school to learn to read and write. By no means should he feel ashamed. If anything, his example of stop whinging do something is enormous. Another of our group is now learning to put his thoughts forward. This in itself is an achievement for the reason that he always just accepted what was told to him. So you see, a major achievement to us is this, we did something for ourselves with the help of others. Just imagine what could be achieved if we all worked as a team. We are proud to say that achievements like these are a very good starting point towards building a most solid foundation towards a better understanding of the needs of the people in the community which is sadly lacking. As the saying goes, there is no i in team.

The dreams and visions for the future of the HPA are really quite simple:

- Stop assuming you know everything.
- Be honest with us. By this we mean let us know what the hell is going on.

- Do the job that you are being paid to do, which is to find safe secure homes for those who are seeking them.
- If some of your workers don't enjoy working with people with problems then let them find another job.
- A smile now and then does not go astray.
- Let the Office of Housing be monitored. What we mean is, inform us of what housing is available and do so on a regular basis.
- Let us know in what suburbs, what is being lived in and what is vacant and update this information very three months. Then we can go from there.

We know that you may have done something like this before but you did not have the HPA on board then. That is the key. Maybe even think about letting us help to do this. If we need teaching then take the time to teach us. We are willing to learn.

Agencies and workers can put to good use the experience of the people in the community. This is one of the ways they can help. You can do as much research as you like but until you actually involve the community you will just be wasting time and money. No one said this is all going to be easy but at least working together is a huge start.

We will have to prove to the community that we will try our best to earn their trust and earn it we definitely have to. Can you blame them for how they feel? I certainly don't. I still feel that way today. But unless you show us a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel and make an effort with the people in the community, we are pushed aside once again and can only keep saying yeah yeah another kick in the teeth at someone's expense.

Sadly the voice of homeless people often gets drowned out by the cries of empowered property owners (protecting their rights).

There is still a lot of work required to have the wider community accept the needs for higher level of social housing (public and community) and to overcome the negative response social housing invoke amongst many sectors of society.

Not In My Backyard.

There are a lot of unused buildings out there and it looks to me like nobody is doing anything with them. Give them to us. We want them and can put them to real good use. Also we are going to approach the state housing to request the donation of some empty houses or some land that we can build on, to show you all what we are capable of doing if given half the chance.

So if you are really serious about fixing the housing problem, let us start with a bit of trust first and see where that takes us.

We have people in our community screaming out to let them do something for themselves. HPA would like to see anybody who is interested in keeping our community together by working together and sharing the knowledge they have learnt over the years with others. Pick each others brains (in the nicest of ways of course) and see how we can put it all together to come up with a way to build cheaper, affordable, safer and secure homes that meet the needs of the people in the community. What must be remembered is the need of still being able to have access to things like public health, transport and even somewhere we can go just to have a chat if and when we are feeling down and lonely.

You know maybe, just maybe, the rest of the world will look at what we are doing and believe that if the Aussies can get their governments to work side by side with the people like the homeless, why the hell can't we. I know this sounds a bit far fetched but you never know can happen when you try. There is a rumour that people on the bottom rung of society are lazy, but you know that is just a myth. We are very talented people. It is just that we have never had the chance to show you all what we can do. Dreams can sometimes come true you know. Believe you me. I have seen it happen.

This is what the dreams and visions are that we see for the future of the HPA and the people in the community.