WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Council to Homeless Persons Victoria defines a homeless person as someone who ‘is without a conventional home and lacks the economic and social supports that a home normally affords. She/he is often cut off from the support of relatives and friends, She/he has few independent resources and often has no immediate means and, in some cases, little prospect of self-support.’

There are varying degrees of homelessness ranging from people living in insecure, unsafe or unaffordable housing who are at risk of homelessness to people living on the street, parks or in squats who are in a state of outright homelessness. ‘Homelessness may represent a single acute episode in a person’s life, or a condition into which individuals enter and exit repeatedly over the course of their lives’ (Neil et al. 1992:8).

People may become homeless from time to time as their income, mental and physical health or ability to maintain social networks change. The number of Australians experiencing long-term homelessness is relatively small. Homelessness is not just a lack of shelter. Homelessness is also the lack of a safe and nurturing home environment—a private place where people feel comfortable and settled and where they feel they belong.

WHO ARE ELDERLY HOMELESS PEOPLE?

Only a small proportion of homeless service users are elderly people despite public perceptions that homeless people are elderly. (Homeless people often appear older than they are due to poor health and harsh living conditions.) Elderly homeless people are predominantly single, male, and often in frail health. They have usually lost contact with family and are unlikely to raise problems with landlords due to fear of eviction.

Some elderly people are at risk of becoming homeless as their housing tenure is insecure and the cost of their housing is not consistent with their ability to pay.

Other common characteristics of frail elderly people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are:

- the absence of a carer or friend/relative who could assist in accessing services;
- little or no prior service usage;
- poor health and nutrition;
- a history of long-term private renting, boarding or homelessness;
- little knowledge or understanding of community care services;
- may consider themselves undeserving;
- may have a strong sense of independence (DIFHS 1996:x; CACH 1997:1)

HOW MANY ELDERLY HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE THERE?

It is difficult to count elderly homeless people accurately as many live in inappropriate or insecure housing, and even on the streets. However it is estimated that across Australia there are 250,000 people aged 60 and over who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. These are people who either rent, live in boarding houses or are homeless, with an annual income under $12,000. War veterans account for 10 per cent of this group (HFS 1996:7-11).

In 1993, 140,000 people aged 60 and over, living on a pension and renting or boarding, expressed the need for some kind of assistance (HFS 1996:7-11). Twenty-eight per cent of people in public housing in Victoria rely on the aged pension (15,000 people) while a further 10,000 aged people are on the public housing waiting list and at risk of homelessness.

Another way of measuring homelessness is to count the number of people using homeless services. The largest State/Commonwealth Government program that provides emergency housing to those in need is the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). Most of the figures used below are based on the use of SAAP services. Elderly homeless people (55 years and over) are only a relatively small proportion of SAAP service users (5 per cent or 5000 people), however their homelessness is more visible in the community due to their complex needs (NDCA 1997:28). SAAP services do not specifically target older people. Elderly people are also less likely to use available services, preferring to stay in inappropriate housing than to make a fuss.

WHAT IS THE PROFILE OF ELDERLY HOMELESS PEOPLE?

Access to affordable rental housing is particularly difficult for single aged pensioners who could only afford 6.4 per cent of advertised rentals in March 1997.

Single elderly pensioners living in Melbourne would still have to pay 30 per cent of their income in rent after receiving rent assistance for a one-bedroom flat at the lower end of the market. To access a median priced one-bedroom flat, elderly pensioners would have to pay 41 per cent of their income (Office of Housing...
Q. WHAT IS BEING DONE FOR ELDERLY HOMELESS?
A. The following key programs are designed to assist elderly people with housing problems.

Assistance for Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) is a Commonwealth program providing support workers to assist low income frail elderly people in insecure housing to remain living in the community by reducing their social isolation, putting them in touch with services and, where necessary, arranging housing relocation.

Home and Community Care (HACC) program offers support to frail aged people to enable them to live independently in the community. These services include home nursing, home help, food services, personal care, transport, respite care and home maintenance.

Housing Linked Aged Care Packages (HLACPs), funded by the Commonwealth Government, provide a range of assistance, including accommodation and personal care, to elderly people in the recognition that insecure housing and social isolation contribute to elderly homelessness.

Wintringham Hostels sets internationally recognised standards in the provision of specialised long-term residential care, housing and outreach services for elderly homeless people in inner Melbourne. Their model recognises the rights of elderly people and caters to the specific needs of homeless men and women in a nurturing environment. It was developed to provide an alternative to inhospitable and dangerous night shelters for people who were not accessing mainstream aged care services.

Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) provides specialist tenancy advice and referral, support and advocacy services to elderly people with housing problems in Victoria.

Q. WHAT CAUSES ELDERLY HOMELESSNESS?
A. The two predominant causal factors of aged homelessness are: a lack of affordable housing appropriate to the needs of elderly people; and a lack of sufficient income to maintain an adequate standard of living.

The upgrading of private hotels for tourist accommodation and the popularity of inner city living have reduced the amount of affordable housing in the inner city (HAAG 1997:3), while new housing rarely suits the needs of elderly people. Investors develop high cost rental housing, and often evict long-term elderly tenants so they can refurbish existing housing or build new housing which will bring in higher rents. The loss of social networks and support is also a strong contributing factor for elderly homelessness. As their partners die and elderly people lose touch with their families and friends due to ill health or not wanting to be a burden, elderly people may lose access to those who may have provided a traditional caring role and become socially isolated.

There is a lack of access to generalist aged care services for severely financially disadvantaged people, including homeless people. Homeless people cannot afford entry fees to residential care and must compete with those who are wealthier but still within the official threshold of financial disadvantage as designated by Commonwealth Government aged care services (CACH 1997:2-3). The culture of aged care services often does not suit homeless people. Most aged care services are only available to those aged 65 and over, while it is generally recognised that homeless people age prematurely and may need services at a younger age than the general population.

Elderly people identified the following issues as the main reason for their use of homeless services: long-term homelessness (7 per cent); financial difficulty (15 per cent); domestic violence (12 per cent); substance abuse (8 per cent); and eviction (7 per cent) (NDCA 1997:140).