Out From Behind the Glass: The Case for Assertive Outreach

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In the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA),[1] the use of assertive outreach services to engage rough sleepers is consistently named as a critical service component of the specialist homelessness system. Yet under normal policy settings, our sector tends to perform this service in isolated bouts, if at all. This was never more evident than during the intense period of assertive outreach performed by the sector during the hotel emergency response to the Covid pandemic. As services have returned to normal, assertive outreach has once again become a sparsely performed activity. The difference in approach is simply resourcing and collaboration.

The Salvation Army (TSA) operates one of two homelessness access points in Melbourne's Metro West, a geographical region with growing rates of rough sleeping, homelessness, and deepening housing precarity. As an access point team, we collaborate with other organisations on the deeply understood assumption that we alone cannot eliminate rough sleeping. As a service we depend on adequate resourcing to meet the goals of the NHHA, but alongside that we rely on multi-agency collaboration to realise just outcomes for clients of the homelessness sector and those who we fail to engage, such as rough sleepers.

Our Initial and Assessment Planning (IAP) team are made aware every day that we must foster a more holistic and flexible service delivery in supporting people sleeping rough to access homelessness services through the access point. The continued lack of funding opportunities for initiatives and programs for an assertive outreach

IAP program in the West has challenged the Western Metro service. Our IAP team, like many others, operates from behind an acrylic glass wall, disengaged from rough sleepers who require access to crisis resources. We know, just as the 2018 *Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Action Plan* states, that we need to get out from behind the glass and bring the coalface to clients:

> Assertive outreach is the most effective way to find and engage people who are sleeping rough. Ultimately, we need to find, engage, and assist people who are sleeping rough more rapidly to prevent any escalation of their situation and minimise risk of harm.[2]

If Covid provides a precedence for a sector-wide assertive outreach program, then the work of others in the sector demonstrates how we can provide such a service now. Launch Housing's Assertive Outreach Program operates in the City of Yarra, providing rough sleepers with emergency accommodation, housing support and other homelessness services. People in crisis who are disengaged from the system are offered and provided case management, referrals to healthcare services, mental health, counselling, drug and alcohol support, and aged care. The program breaks down the barriers that trauma and isolation erect.

Unfortunately, resourcing at levels that ensure we meet the aspirations of the NHHA, the Rough Sleepers Action Plan and the entire Specialist Homelessness Sector have not been adequate to date. Our focus has therefore turned to reimagining an IAP program that streamlines an assertive

outreach approach that would enhance rough sleepers' engagement with the access points. In the West we have a strong Assertive Outreach Network (AON) that brings together service providers to realise pathways to closing the gap in service provision for rough sleepers. These include assertive outreach teams at IPC Health (Brimbank), Melbourne City Mission (Melton), and the IAP team at the Salvation Army (Brimbank-Melton) who are attempting to challenge the paradigm in coordinating support for rough sleepers in the West.

Through our collaboration we have understood the barriers to rough sleepers engaging access point services. Whilst a fear of leaving belongings behind is one key issue, our observations, as well as leading research, suggest that the inherent power imbalance of interactions that occur at the coalface (the acrylic glass and the phone line) reveals a 'bureaucracy characterised by processes of silencing and subordination' which inhibits the realisation of rough sleepers as service users.[3] Frontline workers aim to create inclusive spaces for clients, and that can take a toll on their own wellbeing; but that care and inclusivity is hamstrung by a system that isolates those resources from the people that need them most.

IPC Health, Melbourne City Mission, Brimbank City Council, Melton City Council and the Metro West Salvation Army continue to build a strong and proactive working relationship to implement a holistic service provision that meets rough sleepers' increasingly diverse and complex needs. Meeting those needs requires a diverse and specialist skillset as well as knowledge in housing, homelessness, and allied health supports. To implement a holistic outreach IAP service delivery, these partnerships are imperative to promote a client-centred and strength-based approach. This is no less than reimagining the geography of the IAP program, taking us out from behind the glass and responding to the context provided by our collaborators.

Our proposal includes local government (Melton and Brimbank) Rough Sleeper Response Teams identifying the location of rough sleepers and notifying the IPC or Melbourne City Mission, depending on location, to respond with an assertive outreach support and response for crisis accommodation. We work with clients to apply for lodging in a rooming house, refer them to appropriate wrap-around services in the network, and provide immediate material aid such as food, hygiene packs, mobile phones access and transport vouchers. Through collaboration we will realise a modest but impactful engagement with rough sleepers, in the process overcoming the barriers of trauma and isolation. With adequate resourcing and enough exits out of the system, we could realise a functional zero homelessness.

Endnotes

1. Department of Social Services, *National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*, Canberra, *https://www.dss.gov.au/housing-support-programs-services-homelessness/national-housing-and-homelessness-agreement*

2. Victorian State Government 2018, *Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan, https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201802/Rough%20Sleeping%20Action%20Plan_20180207.pdf#:~:text=The%20action%20plan%20also%20focuses,to%20ensure%20that%20our%20responses*

3. Gott H B, Mackie PK and England E 2023, 'Housing Rights, Homelessness Prevention and a Paradox of Bureaucracy?', *Housing Studies*, vol.38, no. 2, pp. 250-268, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2021.1880000