

# Homelessness on the Peninsula : Operation Concern

## A Targetted Letter-Writing Campaign

At the October 2010 meeting, members of the Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group sent the following letter, individually signed and addressed, to one hundred churches and other community bodies on the Mornington Peninsula. It was accompanied by a Homelessness Information Sheet. Members undertook to follow up the letter with a telephone call to ensure that the letter had been received and to enquire about the organisation's response.

## Homelessness on the Mornington Peninsula

**To:**

**From:** The Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group

On behalf of our Human Rights Group, I ask for your support in confronting the growing problem of homelessness on the Mornington Peninsula. It is a serious human rights issue that on any one night some 600 people are without a home here on the Peninsula and many of them sleep rough.

On present indications homelessness will be an issue during the coming State elections, with both sides offering to spend large sums of money. However, experience shows that without community understanding and support little will be achieved.

We were disturbed to learn at a recent meeting of our Group, for instance, that a supported housing project on the Peninsula had to be abandoned because of various fears held by the local community. We then learned that similar cases are not uncommon. On the other hand, we also learned that property values in an eastern suburban street actually increased when the council implemented an imaginative housing project and maintained it. When citizens are assured that housing projects will have efficient, on-going management their fears are allayed.

The need for housing projects on the Peninsula for people who are not able to provide housing for themselves is well established. It is recognised by our Shire Council's **Triple A** Housing Policy, which aims to have **affordable, appropriate** and **available** housing for all Peninsula residents. This is a worthy aim but, as the above examples indicate, achieving it requires the strong support of the whole community.

As part of our Group's **Operation Concern**, we are writing to 100 community organisations across the Peninsula asking them to tackle one or more of the following:

- (1) Report to the members of your organisation the seriousness of homelessness on the Peninsula and the need for community support to overcome it.  
(See the attached Information Sheet.)
- (2) Write to the Shire supporting its efforts to ensure affordable, appropriate and available housing for all Peninsula residents.
- (3) Invite a speaker from an organisation active in assisting homeless people to address a meeting of your people.

On behalf of our Human Rights Group I ask you to support our Operation Concern.

Sincerely,

# HOMELESSNESS INFORMATION SHEET

## **Adequate housing - a human right**

Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) states that:

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.*

## **Homelessness in Australia**

A major report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth, tabled on 26 November 2009, recommends the enactment of new homelessness legislation which enshrines "the right of all Australians to adequate housing". The report, *Housing the Homeless*, contains fifteen recommendations aimed at preventing and addressing homelessness in Australia. It notes that, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there are over 105,000 people who experience homelessness on any given night.

## **Homelessness on the Mornington Peninsula**

According to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics Census figures, 590 Mornington Peninsula residents were homeless on the night the last census was taken in 2006. If these figures are related to the increase in population on the Peninsula since then, there are now 630 people living rough or living in temporary accommodation. Of course many people sleeping rough are not recorded in statistics because they have no address.

The Report, *Speaking Home Truths: Homelessness on the Mornington Peninsula 2008* tells of people who *live in unsafe and inappropriate housing - cars, tents, benches, dilapidated houses, housing where family members can be subjected to the violence of others, housing that is insecure and unaffordable.*

In November 2009 all Housing Services operating on the Mornington Peninsula reported an increased demand for housing related assistance in the last twelve months.

## **Action by the Mornington Peninsula Shire**

The Shire is currently reviewing its Triple A Housing Policy which aims to have affordable, appropriate and available housing for all Peninsula residents. This review will give up-to-date information about the Peninsula's housing market, particularly as it relates to lower income residents. It will assist the Shire in providing the leadership which takes all the community with it as it pursues its housing initiatives. The Shire has recently appointed a permanent Housing and Social Justice Officer.

## **Community bodies concerned with homelessness**

- Abbeyfield Frankston Inc (9776 6956)
- Anglicare Victoria (9412 6133)
- Brotherhood of St Laurence (9483 1183)
- Fusion Youth Housing Services (5974 1442)
- Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service Inc. (5971 9454 or 5971 9444)
- Habitat for Humanity on the Mornington Peninsula (5986 4827)
- Tipping Foundation (9564 1000)
- Uniting Care Harrison (9871 8700)

## **Operation Concern**

Members of our Group are writing to 100 community bodies listed in the Shire's Community Information Directory 2010. The member who writes to your organisation will follow the letter with a telephone call to enquire about your response. We are calling this *Operation Concern*. Why? We believe that attempts to provide supported housing will not be effective unless local communities are consulted, are assisted to see the benefits of such projects, and are given information about the management of housing projects. We hope that your organisation will join us in building community support for eliminating homelessness on the Peninsula.

# Operation Concern : A Report

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

## Introduction

The work of the Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group in raising human rights issues has been acknowledged and encouraged by Shire Officers. In August 2010, Mr Joe Cauchi, Director-Sustainable Communities, wrote:

*With respect to your concern with the level of homelessness in Australia generally and here on the Mornington Peninsula, I believe it is true to say that the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council shares your concern and supports the right of all Australians to adequate housing. Council continues to respond to the housing affordability issues faced by low income groups on the Peninsula, but has limited resources to tackle this growing problem.*

*We have recently confirmed that the position of Housing and Social Justice Officer becomes a permanent position and the officer in this position will continue to be a contact with and for the Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group.*

In November 2009 all Housing Services operating on the Mornington Peninsula reported an increased demand for housing-related assistance. It was estimated from the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census figure of 590 homeless residents, that in 2010 some 600 plus men, women and children were without a home on the Peninsula, with many sleeping 'rough'.

## Operation Concern

After considering how we could work alongside the Shire in promoting adequate housing as a human right, and also aware of the limitations on how much our small voluntary group could accomplish, it was agreed at the September 2010 meeting to conduct a targeted letter-writing campaign throughout the Peninsula. The aim was to raise awareness of the homelessness issue and to encourage positive attitudes to tackling the problem and to the ways of doing so.

One hundred groups were selected from the Shire's Community Directory 2010, including Churches, Religions and Philosophies, Country Women's Associations, Freemasons, Lions, Rotary and Senior Citizens, as well as a variety of social, sporting and multicultural clubs. Signing the letters was shared among the fifteen members at the October meeting who included their personal telephone numbers together with an Information Sheet. Follow-up telephone calls were planned.

## Responses

One month later, at the November meeting, signatories to the campaign letter reported on their experiences. The most rewarding aspect of the responses was the prevalence of support for the campaign. At the same time the wide-ranging attitudes of respondents illuminated the need for community education. Much time was given to answering queries, following up messages left but not responded to, changed or cancelled addresses and telephone numbers, locating new office-bearers and coping with the timing of meetings over the holiday period. Attitudes ranged from the positive to the negative, with some unaware of the problem. However, the follow-up conversations and subsequent meetings yielded much valuable information.

What follows is a summary of the campaign so far:

- Letters sent - 100
- Follow-up conversations - 47
- Messages left - 28
- Telephone numbers cancelled - 17
- Offers of support - 24

- Requests for a speaker - 4
- Letter to be discussed at the organization's next meeting - 34

Generally, community welfare groups reported concern about the issue of homelessness even though some groups indicated that with the number of volunteers dwindling some groups are now too small to tackle major issues, even though there was mention of amalgamations. One of our Group members was invited to a meeting of a Greek citizens' group, where friendly concern and interest was expressed, and a request made for a speaker to attend a combined Shire meeting of similar groups. A speaker was also requested by a CWA group. One person pointed out that land values had risen in a street where a local metropolitan council had taken over a formerly run-down property and had turned it into a well run social housing unit.

Most church groups expressed concern and commended our program; some already run their own projects, such as an ongoing relationship with 'Fusion', an organization which provides accommodation for homeless youth. Two parishes have decided to write to the Council supporting the Council's affordable housing program. A network of Uniting Churches has land they would like to see used for accommodation for elderly people. Follow-up visits to some parishes have been organised. Three groups not on our list heard of Operation Concern and stated that they would be writing to Council. Three groups indicated that issues such as homelessness are not part of their programs; one group suggested applying for campaign funding from their peak organisation and provided an application form.

#### **Adverse Comments**

One response was that 'the disadvantaged have only themselves to blame'. Another person contacted was concerned that some young people on alcohol and drugs don't seem to care whether they are homeless or not. There is some fear that social housing will bring declining land values. There is also fear of exploitation and violence when privately-owned rooming houses, some government subsidised, are over-crowded. There have been some cases of strong objections to 'high-rise' projects with their possible effects on community social and environmental life.

#### **Additional Comments from Discussion at the November Meeting**

It was pointed out at the November meeting of the Group that the Shire needs to appreciate the importance of starting the consultation process with the neighbours right at the beginning of a proposal to establish a social housing project. This was proved to be successful in Warragul and Drouin. If consultation occurs after the design for a housing project is made known, for example, for a 'high-rise', opposition will follow almost immediately. Another concern was rooming houses. Should the relevant authorities survey the increase in rooming houses, many with sub-standard conditions, and the legality of exploiting the homeless in these places?

#### **Conclusion**

Operation Concern has shown that while there is a range of opinions about the problem of homelessness, it has also shown that there is a majority of people who would like to see action taken. Some indeed are already taking action themselves. It also suggests that, if time is taken to carefully consult with people over projects to meet the needs of the homeless and if the procedures that can be put in place to protect the interests of all citizens through well-managed projects are explained, then community support can be mustered for such projects.

February 2011