

JUST IN TIME



Volume 5, Number 3

September 2011

Making homelessness history

Working in social justice can take a heavy emotional toll. Often we encounter issues that have been with us for many years, and little progress seems to be made. This leaves us feeling that there are certain injustices that are unsolvable. But it doesn't have to be this way. The work being undertaken by the Mercy Foundation, under the direction of CEO Felicity Reynolds and Business Manager Sue Mowbray, proves that chronic homelessness is an injustice that we can end. We spoke to Reynolds and Mowbray to find out more about the Mercy Foundation's uplifting work.

The Mercy Foundation was established by the North Sydney Mercy sisters in 1990 as a means of extending their social justice work. Since then it has funded many worthy projects in various communities across Australia, particularly focussing on the needs of women and children in the tradition of Catherine McAuley.

In 2008 the North Sydney Mercies reviewed the work of the Foundation and decided to direct their efforts towards one particular goal: ending chronic homelessness in Australia.

Sometimes people may find themselves without a place to call home, and for these people the many emergency housing and food services that operate in Australia are a blessing. With a little bit of help some people can find housing again after only a brief period of homelessness. However those who are chronically homeless - experiencing homelessness for 6 months or longer, or multiple episodes of homelessness over a 12 month period - need a different approach.

The approach taken by the Mercy Foundation, under the direction of Felicity Reynolds and Sue Mowbray, is to treat the cause of chronic homelessness - the lack of affordable housing. Reynolds says, "People seem to forget that housing ends homelessness. It really is that simple".

The "housing first" approach taken by the Foundation recognises that chronically homeless people need a place to call home first and foremost. Services to assist with other issues

such as substance abuse and mental illness can then be more effectively delivered to those who need them.



Ed - a man who experienced chronic homelessness in Los Angeles, USA.

Those who suffer from mental illness or substance abuse - issues that can be both a cause and effect of chronic homelessness - are often those who have missed out time and time again on housing programs, because of their complex needs.

The Mercy Foundation, however, recognises that these are the most vulnerable people and have the most to gain from housing assistance.

In order to be able to target the most vulnerable people on our streets, the Mercy Foundation carried out a Vulnerability Index Project. Calling on volunteers, they set out into the streets of Sydney to interview those who were sleeping rough. Out of the 262 people they interviewed, 53% were classified as vulnerable under the

Vulnerability Index - which measures each person's experience of illness and exposure to violence.

Reynolds says, "I'm a great believer that we need to look at the evidence, look at what works, and implement it". It is through effective research such as the Vulnerability Index Project that the Mercy Foundation is trying to steer the homelessness sector away from myth and conjecture and towards factual information that really measures results. And results are something that Reynolds and Mowbray are good at delivering.

Various locally-targeted programs funded by the Mercy Foundation's **Grants to End Homelessness** have succeeded in ending chronic homelessness in certain areas.

Now is an exciting time for Reynolds and her team, as the **Common Ground** housing project they advocated for is close to opening in Camperdown. Common Ground is a building specifically designed to provide 52 units of permanent housing for formerly chronically homeless people and 52 units for people in need of affordable housing close to the city.

This is the culmination of years of work by Housing NSW, MA Housing and corporate and community partners, with support and advice from the Mercy Foundation and the Australian Common Ground Alliance. Not only will this building provide low-cost housing, so desperately needed in Sydney, but it will also act as a centre for services required by formerly chronically homeless people.

It is through achievements such as these that the goal of ending chronic homelessness in Australia draws nearer and nearer.

When Reynolds speaks about her work with the Mercy Foundation, her passionate resolve to end the injustice of homelessness - and the injustice of society's acceptance of homelessness - is clear. But Reynolds can also argue the

economical - not just ethical - rationale for ending chronic homelessness.

Reynolds looked into the cost to society - through trips to the Emergency Room and crisis services etc. - of keeping someone chronically homeless in Sydney. She came to the informed estimate of \$34,000 per year. Reynolds believes that if this money and effort was redirected towards *ending* homelessness, rather than servicing it, chronic homelessness in Australia could end within a year.



Ed - the same man from page 1 - after benefitting from supportive housing for a year.

Reynolds' and Mowbray's hope, enthusiasm and determination are inspiring. Above all, their success in getting things done proves that those working in social justice are not fighting a losing battle. When you look at the transformation to someone's life (as demonstrated in the image above) that permanent supportive housing can provide, you know that it is a battle worth fighting.

At this rate, it is not hard to imagine that in several years' time the Mercy Foundation will have achieved their goal of ending chronic homelessness in Australia. We look forward with hope to that day, and with excitement to the day that the Mercy Foundation choose their next mission.

Reflection

Father, in your house there is room enough for everyone. We pray for those who have no place to call home.

Father, this was not your intention. It is we who allow this to happen to your people. It is we who must arm ourselves with your courage, love and compassion, so that we can build the Kingdom of hope where people can live in dignity, comfort and security.

Amen

Prayer adapted from *The Trampled Vineyard*



Cut and place under your CLRI(NSW) fridge magnet

Web links



MERCY FOUNDATION

www.mercyfoundation.com.au

Follow the link for more information about the work of the Mercy Foundation and for links to further information about homelessness.

Donations make up an important part of the Mercy Foundation's grant work.

Donate online and get real bang for your charitable buck!

Your donation will help to end homelessness, rather than maintain it.

JUST IN TIME is an occasional publication of the Social Justice Committee of CLRI (NSW).

Web: www.clrinsw.org
Email: clrinsw@ozemail.com.au

CLRI(NSW)
PO Box 259,
Rosebery NSW
1445

