

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VICTORIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM**SUBMISSION BY THE PORT MELBOURNE CONFERENCE, ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY**

I write on behalf of the Port Melbourne Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society to register OUR members' concerns regarding the provision of support and accommodation to people with serious, persistent mental illness.

The Port Melbourne Conference provides practical and pastoral support to over 300 disadvantaged people and families in Port Melbourne and surrounding suburbs. People who request help through the St Vincent de Paul call centre are visited at home and offered help in the form of food vouchers, furniture and white goods. Our members spend time listening to clients' stories and understanding their situations.

Most of the people we visit have enduring disabilities, very commonly as the result of mental illness. Virtually all of them live in social housing of some type. Many have links to the local public mental health service. Others are supported by general practitioners, mental health organisations and the local municipality.

We are prompted to write to the Royal Commission to express our fears concerning the plight of small numbers of severely mentally unwell people who for various reasons are profoundly isolated, live in filthy, dangerous accommodation and have appalling mental and physical health. Clinicians from the local mental health service administer treatments but a 30-minute visit once a week or fortnight is totally inadequate.

We have been impressed by two local residential facilities for people with serious mental illness. Sacred Heart Mission provides ongoing accommodation to about 70 people who tell us that they have conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. MIND runs a smaller facility offering accommodation for up to a year to people who describe problems with anxiety and depression. Both places offer a reasonable standard of accommodation coupled with clinical and social support to promote physical and mental well-being, social engagement and where practicable a return to independent living.

In situations where people are too unwell to access this level of care, a community care unit linked to the mental health service would certainly be beneficial. None of the people we encounter report ever having lived in the local care unit, or being offered a place there, suggesting that provision is totally inadequate.

We believe that decent accommodation, coupled when required with on-site care, is fundamental to the well-being and dignity of some of our most vulnerable citizens. We request that the Commission recommends a significant increase in mental health community care units and facilities run by competent non-government organisations.

We acknowledge the importance of seeking to prevent mental illness and provide early treatment – but not at the expense of neglecting those with chronic, disabling mental health conditions.