



Council
to Homeless
Persons

Too short a lifeline:

Mapping assertive outreach across Victoria

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Council to Homeless Persons is the peak body representing organisations and individuals in Victoria with a commitment to ending homelessness
Our vision is to end homelessness in Victoria. We work towards this goal through leadership in policy and advocacy, building the capacity of Victoria's homelessness sector, and working in partnership with people who are or who have been without a home.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the land and waters on which we live and work. CHP's office is in Collingwood, on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations. CHP's work is focussed across all Victoria – the lands of many different Aboriginal people across thousands of generations. CHP acknowledges the pride, strength, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we pay our respects to Elders, past, present, and emerging. Always was, always will be.

Recognising Lived Experience

Council to Homeless Persons thanks people with lived experience of homelessness who bravely share their perspectives to inform our work. Their knowledge and expertise are vital to understanding homelessness and what it takes to end it. We must hear their voices and act.

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Introduction

Assertive outreach is a vital component of the specialist homelessness sector's (SHS) support for people sleeping rough. Outreach workers go out into the community, meeting people where they are at and taking time over weeks and months to build trusting relationships and connect them with the SHS. The goal of this work is to help people sleeping rough through the process of finding a home, and provide them with the supportive services they need in the meantime.

Assertive outreach extends the specialist homelessness system beyond the shopfronts and phone lines, offering a human face to connect with people. The model is 'assertive' in that it is persistent in trying to engage with people, including those who might initially refuse to engage. This could be because they are not aware of services available, have had negative experiences engaging with the homelessness system before, or are unable to access a service. Assertive outreach flips the typical expectation placed on the service user to remain engaged in the service, by recognising that it is, in fact, the responsibility of the service to continue engaging with the user.

Across Council to Homeless Person's engagement with lived experience experts, we have repeatedly heard from people formerly sleeping rough that assertive outreach played a determinative role in the path back to stable housing. As one lived experience expert, Adam told us:

"The [assertive outreach team's] support was transformative. It provided not just a home, but a foundation for a new beginning. Their approach was different from other charities I had encountered. They didn't impose; they didn't judge, they simply offered help and respected my dignity. Their consistent presence in the bush, their willingness to assist with practical needs, made a massive difference."

A patchwork of support

In Victoria, the state government funds assertive outreach in nine regions, established through the 2018 Victorian Rough Sleeper Action Plan (RSAP). Each location employs between 1.6 and 9.4 effective full time (FTE) staff. Most of these assertive outreach programs have an annual target of 120 support periods (some clients might return to the service and are counted twice), although nearly all programs reported supporting more people to address the significant demand that outstrips their capacity. On average, an assertive outreach worker has an annual caseload of 60 people sleeping rough, but this

figure changes depending on the geography of the region and the local situation of people sleeping rough.

In total, current Victorian Government-funded assertive outreach has the capacity to support around 1,330 people. This is little more than 10 per cent of the number of people sleeping rough who sought support from the SHS in 2024/25 (10,626). And the total number of people sleeping rough in Victoria overall will be even higher, as the 10,626 figure does not count people who are *not* engaging with services. For calculations in this report, we have treated the total number of people rough sleeping in Victoria, conservatively, as 11,000 people.

In the absence of government-funded programs in many areas, there are also assertive outreach programs funded by local government, philanthropy, or from organisational reserves.

These programs are vital and life-changing, but they only have the capacity to work with a small fraction of people sleeping rough. Together, government and non-government-funded programs have limited funding compared with demand. Consequently, many people sleeping rough are not seen by assertive outreach workers at all, meaning they may not engage with the SHS, prolonging their experience of homelessness. The existing programs' geographical limits also mean that most of Victoria has no assertive outreach.

Goals and methodology of this report

CHP undertook this assertive outreach mapping report to understand where assertive outreach services are currently provided in Victoria, how much there is, who misses out, and what additional capacity is needed to meet the scale of the challenge.

We surveyed the SHS and consulted with key stakeholders to understand the reach of existing programs. This included contacting the Victorian Homelessness Network and the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) who funds assertive outreach programs in various parts of Victoria. We also spoke with local governments and service providers across the state. However, there may be additional non-government-funded assertive outreach programs in operation that are not captured here.

Findings: a shortfall in support

Our survey estimates that Victoria currently has a total equivalent of 41.9 full time workers to support a population of people sleeping rough that exceeds 11,000 people. This equates to 1 worker for, conservatively, every 272 people sleeping rough.

Of these, 25.9 FTE are workers in programs funded by the State Government, with the remaining 16 FTE in locally funded programs.

These workers are servicing 28 Victorian LGAs. This leaves 55 LGAs with no assertive outreach at all.

For example, there is no funded assertive outreach across all of Gippsland, which covers more than 41,000 square kilometres and almost a quarter of Victoria and has experienced significant increases in the number of people sleeping rough in the region.

One assertive outreach worker for every 272 people sleeping rough is not enough to provide the support they need, particularly in the context of a homelessness crisis that has seen a 25 per cent increase in the number of people sleeping rough coming to the SHS over the past five years.¹

Based on the ratio of people sleeping rough to assertive outreach workers in existing programs, Victoria's current assertive outreach programs can engage just 17 per cent of the number of people sleeping rough who sought support from the SHS in 2024-25 (10,626). And this number belies the fact that geographical boundaries of programs mean that, as stated above, in reality people sleeping rough in many parts of Victoria have no access to assertive outreach at all.

We estimate that to reach all people sleeping rough across Victoria, the assertive outreach workforce needs to expand to at least 177 full-time workers. This is an extra 136.6 FTE, a nearly 600 per cent increase on the Victorian Government's existing investment.

A State Government obligation

CHP welcomes commitments made by community-based organisations, local governments, and philanthropic funders to support assertive outreach. But these initiatives are a stop-gap, necessitated by an absence of state government investment. Responsibility for investing in expanded assertive outreach should lie with the state government rather than local councils and philanthropic sources.

While the local focus of non-government funded programs is positive and means they can effectively respond to local service needs, reliance on local initiatives can create a fragmented service offering. In contrast, state government funded assertive outreach programs are designed to align with the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Action Plan

Assertive Outreach program guidelines (the Guidelines) and have pathways for accountability and transparency.²

Consistent government funding also creates a minimum service offering that makes assertive outreach viable. Our survey found most non-government funded assertive outreach programs have less capacity and fewer FTE staff. This means that programs can see fewer clients and also limits the support they are able to provide.

If, for these reasons, the State Government were to take over responsibility for funding current community-funded programs, this increases the additional FTE required to 151.2 FTE.

Complementing assertive outreach with other responses

Assertive outreach is not, by itself, a solution to homelessness. It works by connecting people with the broader housing and homelessness system.

Currently, that system is under strain in a context of limited affordable housing options in the private rental market and a severe lack of social housing. The stress within the SHS more broadly undermines the effectiveness of assertive outreach. As such, any investment in assertive outreach must be accompanied by a complementary uplift in resources for the SHS, supportive housing, and social housing.

Recommendations

Based on our analysis of existing programs and demand, we recommend the Victorian Government:

1. Expand assertive outreach programs to fund at least 177 workers across the state to meet overall need by:
 - a. Expanding existing Victorian Government-funded programs
 - b. Resourcing existing community-funded programs and expanding them
 - c. Establishing new programs across the state
2. Provide long-term funding for all assertive outreach programs to ensure staff consistency, address turnover, and support skill development, and enable long-term engagement with people sleeping rough
3. Ensure assertive outreach programs have priority Housing First access to social housing
4. Build more social housing, with dedicated places for people sleeping rough
5. Pilot assertive outreach programs for young people sleeping rough

Defining assertive outreach

Our discussions with the SHS and other allied sectors showed that there is significant interest in assertive outreach, but there are some inconsistencies in understanding.

“Assertive” and “outreach” are colloquial terms that carry meaning and baggage, especially within the homelessness sector. Many organisations are doing outreach of varying scope.

The technical use of the term “assertive outreach” draws on international examples and similar program models in the health and aged care systems.³ Public debates about rough sleeping are growing in a context of increasing numbers and controversial punitive responses. In this context, it is important to distinguish assertive outreach from other models of outreach.

Assertive outreach is a persistent and purposeful approach used with people who do not present to, and/or have difficulties engaging with, housing, homelessness, or health services.⁴

A range of resources from Victoria and beyond share common commitments to the following key aspects of assertive outreach:

Target cohort:

Assertive outreach targets **people experiencing primary homelessness**, meaning they are currently unsheltered, sleeping rough or in improvised dwellings. These people have generally been previously let down by the system, which can make it more challenging for them to engage with services.

Purpose:

The primary aim of assertive outreach is to **put people on an accelerated pathway to permanent and appropriate housing**.⁵ Assertive outreach workers provide people with various supports they need, but always in the context of an overall goal of supporting them to move into stable housing. This focus ensures assertive outreach is a key part of a broader, integrated, and intentional system that aims to end homelessness in Victoria with a Housing First approach.⁶

Hallmarks of practice:

Assertive outreach operates as a mobile Intake Assessment and Planning (IAP) service, bringing people into the specialist homelessness sector (SHS). It is defined by **persistent**,

consistent, street level service where workers actively search for clients and offer practical services at the point of contact.⁷ They employ creative methods to engage and build relationships with people sleeping rough. The program is resilient and flexible, committing to the long-term engagement and intensely relational work required.

Assertive outreach is an important part of the broader SHS, and is designed to align with the Housing First approach. The program supports people sleeping rough to access safe and stable accommodation. It removes some barriers inherent in the SHS and shifts the onus for engagement onto the sector, rather than the client: it is our job to engage them, not their job to engage with us. Importantly, assertive outreach requires access to suitable housing – either affordable private rentals or social housing. Without this, assertive outreach workers are simply adding vulnerable people into a system that can do little to help.⁸

Mapping assertive outreach across Victoria

Our survey documented 18 existing assertive outreach programs across Victoria, some funded by the state government and some funded by other sources.ⁱ Many areas of the state have no assertive outreach while other areas do not enough capacity to reach everyone who needs it.

Our mapping of existing programs and reach was done by surveying the SHS and consulting with key stakeholders. These included the Victorian Homelessness Network and the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) who funds assertive outreach programs in various parts of Victoria. We also spoke with local governments and service providers across the state. However, there may be additional non-government-funded assertive outreach programs in operation that are not captured here.

Assertive outreach funded by the Victorian Government

The Victorian Government funds assertive outreach in nine areas across Victoria. The programs are operated by a range of non-government organisations, which use the same Guidelines and program requirements. The 2018 Rough Sleeper Action Plan included a commitment to assertive outreach, which incorporated the Rough Sleeper Initiative which had been operational for some years prior.

Since 2018, the program has supported hundreds of the most vulnerable Victorians by connecting them with case management, physical and mental healthcare, and supporting many into appropriate and sustainable accommodation.

Some of the teams delivering assertive outreach include Bolton Clarke nurses, providing much-needed health care directly to clients. This aligns with the principle of assertive outreach delivering practical support to people with the aim of strengthening trust and engagement.

Our analysis suggests that the nine programs have an annual target of 1,330 people across Victoria, though some programs are reaching more people in response to significant demand. Staffing of approximately 25.9 FTE workers are employed to deliver this support across 12 LGAs.

ⁱ The survey excluded programs that did not fit the definition of assertive outreach outlined earlier

Location	Delivering organisation	Annual target of clients	Staffing level
Central Highlands	Uniting Vic.Tas	120	2.6 FTE
Central Melbourne (Yarra, Stonnington, Melbourne, Port Phillip)	Launch Housing	450	9.4 FTE
Frankston	Launch Housing	120	1.6 FTE
Greater Bendigo	Haven Home Safe	120	1.8 FTE
Greater Dandenong	Launch Housing	120	1.6 FTE
Greater Geelong	NAEMI National	120	2.4 FTE
Mallee (moving from Swan Hill to Mildura)	Haven Home Safe	120	2 FTE
Maroondah	Wellways	120	2.5 FTE
Warrnambool	Brophy	120	2 FTE
TOTAL		1,330	25.9 FTE

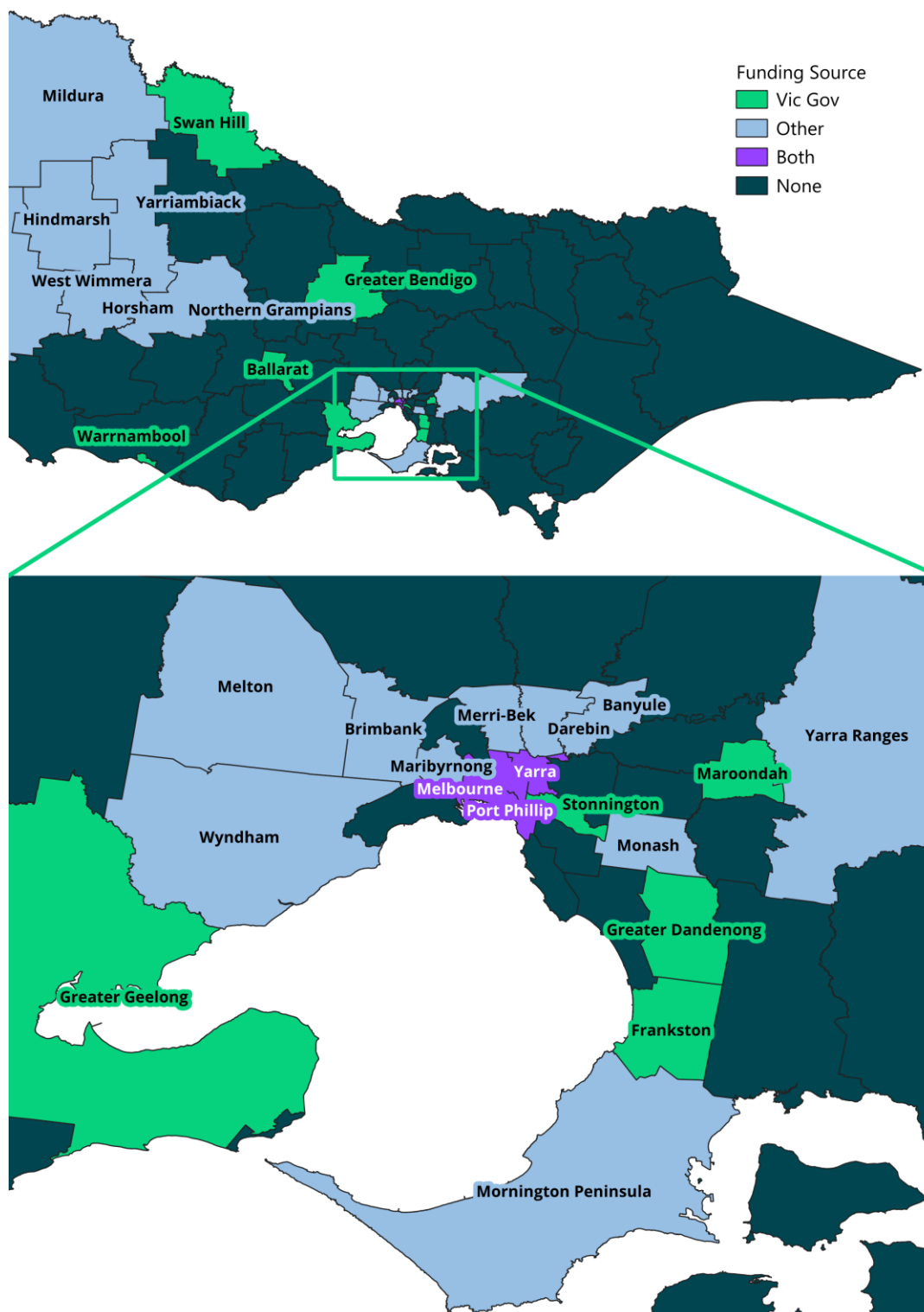
Assertive outreach funded through other sources

Across Victoria, rough sleeping is on the rise. The Victorian Government-funded assertive outreach programs outlined above are insufficient to reach every Victorian sleeping rough, so agencies and local governments are stepping up to fill the gaps. Their programs are operating in new areas, where government-funded assertive outreach does not reach, and in some areas where existing government-funded initiatives are in place to bolster demand.

Our survey recorded nine programs funded by non-state government sources, employing approximately 16 FTE workers to deliver this support.

Location	Delivering organisation	Funding source	Staffing level
Banyule	Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS)	Banyule City Council	1.2 FTE
Darebin	MOSS	City of Darebin	3 FTE
Melbourne	Launch Housing	City of Melbourne	3 FTE
Merri-bek	MOSS	Merri-bek City Council	1.2 FTE
Mildura (and Balranald and Wentworth in NSW)	Mallee Accommodation & Support Program (MASP)	MASP organisational reserves	1 FTE
Monash	City of Monash	City of Monash	0.8 FTE
Mornington Peninsula	Southern Peninsula Community Support	Community donations	1.4 FTE
Port Phillip	Launch Housing	City of Port Phillip	1 FTE
Western suburbs (Melton, Brimbank, Maribyrnong)	MCM	MCM fundraising	1.8 FTE
Wimmera (Horsham, West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Northern Grampians)	Uniting Vic.Tas	Philanthropy	1 FTE
Wyndham	Uniting Vic.Tas, cohealth, H3 Alliance, and Bolton Clarke	Early intervention and generalist housing program budget	10 hours per month
Yarra	Launch Housing	Yarra City Council	0.4 FTE
Yarra Ranges	Anchor	Yarra Ranges Shire Council	0.2 FTE
TOTAL			16 FTE

Coverage of assertive outreach programs in Victoria by funding source



Total assertive outreach across Victoria

Combining all assertive outreach programs results in an assertive outreach workforce across Victoria of 41.9 FTE workers.

Based on the ratio of people sleeping rough to assertive outreach workers in state government-funded programs, **these workers can reasonably be expected to engage with and support a total of 1,700 people per year.**

This leaves thousands of Victorians behind. The current scale of assertive outreach covers just 17 per cent of the number of people sleeping rough who sought support from the SHS in 2024-25 (10,626).

Additionally, there are likely to be hundreds more Victorians sleeping rough who have never accessed the SHS and these are precisely the people that assertive outreach are best placed to support.

The limited reach of current assertive outreach

There are people sleeping rough right across Victoria. But currently programs are limited to locations that were identified in the 2018 Rough Sleeper Action Plan as having high rates of rough sleeping, as well as those places where local governments have committed resources to respond in the absence of state funding. This leaves vast swathes of Victoria without any funded assertive outreach at all.

The following 55 LGAs have no funded assertive outreach at all:

Alpine	Golden Plains ⁱ	Murrindindi
Ararat	Greater Shepparton	Nillumbik
Banyule	Hepburn	Pyrenees
Bass Coast	Hobsons Bay	Queenscliffe ⁱ
Baw Baw	Hume	South Gippsland
Bayside	Indigo	Southern Grampians
Benalla	Kingston	Stonnington
Boroondara	Knox	Strathbogie
Buloke	Latrobe	Surf Coast
Campaspe	Loddon	Towong
Cardinia	Macedon Ranges	Wangaratta
Casey	Manningham	Wellington
Central Goldfields	Mansfield	Whitehorse
Colac Otway	Mitchell	Whittlesea
Corangamite	Moira	Wodonga
East Gippsland	Moonee Valley	Wyndham
Gannawarra	Moorabool	Unincorporated Vic
Glen Eira	Mount Alexander	
Glenelg	Moyne	

Temporary assertive outreach initiatives

ⁱ The Geelong assertive outreach team visits one campsite in Golden Plains and the small Borough of Queenscliffe

Excluded from the assertive outreach programs documented in the survey is at least one temporary assertive outreach program that responds to local needs and housing opportunities. Homes First Inner Gippsland did some assertive outreach upon program implementation, but this activity has since ceased. There may be more examples of this temporary assertive outreach occurring to connect people with limited housing opportunities.

Temporary assertive outreach programs may operate using the right principles, but their time-limited nature means they are not a sustainable response for a community. While they can support some people sleeping rough, they cannot provide ongoing support. Given the entrenched nature of homelessness among many people sleeping rough, and their distrust of services, long-term and persistent engagement is necessary to bring people into the specialist homelessness system.

Increasing assertive outreach to meet the scale of Victoria's rough sleeping challenge

In 2024-25, there were 10,626 people who were sleeping rough at the time they first became a client of the SHS. This number has increased by 25% over the past five years. In addition to this number, there are hundreds more Victorians sleeping rough who are not connected with services at all.

The SHS should be connecting with every person sleeping rough through assertive outreach. This approach would accelerate their entry to the SHS and minimise the time they spend sleeping rough, effectively limiting the negative effects on their physical and mental health.

At the worker-to-client ratio of existing programs, it would take at least 177 full-time assertive outreach workers across the state to connect with every Victorian sleeping rough.

This requires an additional 135.2 FTE.

If, as we recommend, the State Government were to take over responsibility for funding current community-funded assertive outreach programs, it would require funding an additional 151.2 FTE. This is an expansion of the existing state government-funded assertive outreach by nearly 600 per cent.

Number of people sleeping rough accessing the SHS in 2024-25	10,626 people
Number of people sleeping rough funded to receive support from Victorian Government-funded assertive outreach	1,330 people
Number of Victorian Government-funded assertive outreach workers	25.9 FTE
Number of assertive outreach workers needed to reach all Victorians sleeping rough	177.1 FTE
Required additional Victorian Government-funded assertive outreach workers to meet demand	151.2 FTE

In every location where assertive outreach is happening, workers report that the need is greater than capacity.

For example, Yarra Ranges Council funds the local SHS provider, Anchor, to do a small amount of assertive outreach on top of their work running the entry point. Anchor representatives responded to the survey, saying they could increase the program by 1000 per cent and still not be able to see everyone. They have a “large geographical area that we cover, and we know that many people do not reach out for assistance and are not visible to the public so remained unconnected to any supports”.

In the Wimmera, one worker at Uniting Vic.Tas travels alone across five Local Government Areas covering nearly 34,000 square kilometres, to connect with people sleeping rough.

Limited funding undermines the effectiveness of the assertive outreach model. For example, an assertive outreach team in Melbourne’s northern suburbs responds to referrals, but limited capacity combined with the transience of people sleeping rough means that when workers are finally able to respond to a referral after a few days, the person has moved on. Another program in the same area is resourced at 3 FTE, but safety protocols that require two workers on all outreach calls mean the team can only be in one place at a time. An additional worker, bringing the team to 4 FTE would effectively double the capacity of the program, allowing two teams of two workers to operate safely.

Every program we spoke with highlighted the lack of appropriate and affordable accommodation as significant barriers to conducting their work.⁹ Frontline workers do everything they can to establish trust and support people to connect with the homelessness system, but this work is undermined when there are extremely limited housing options. For people sleeping rough who have been let down by the system before, experiencing another setback like this simply confirms their fears and can lead to long-term rejection of support.

Young people excluded from mainstream assertive outreach

The model of assertive outreach that is implemented by state government-funded organisations intends to engage with all people sleeping rough, no matter their gender or age. The model is also designed to include people with complex and intersecting challenges like health, mental health, alcohol and drug use, or disability.

However, all-inclusive models of social support programs can inadvertently exclude some people. Mainstream models of assertive outreach risk excluding young people who are sleeping rough alone (i.e. not part of a family unit).

Young people tend to have different patterns and experiences of sleeping rough compared with older adults. They are usually not part of existing, long-term communities of people sleeping rough. Capacity issues faced by assertive outreach teams can undermine workers' ability to do creative and labour-intensive client finding that is required to connect with and support young people.

Working with young people requires a unique skill set which recognises their unique experiences and support needs. The best placed workers to engage with young people are dedicated youth workers. Mainstream assertive outreach workers are open to engaging with all people and may need to adjust the way they work with young people to respond to their unique experiences and support needs. In an assertive outreach context, the risk of inadvertently alienating young people who are already reluctant to engage with services is significant and could have negative ongoing effects.

Recommendations

Assertive outreach is an integral part of supporting people sleeping rough and putting them on a pathway to stable housing. It should be available to every Victorian sleeping rough, no matter where they are. The program has been running for several years with Victorian Government funding, and proved its effectiveness. Now is the time to expand the program to meet the scale of Victoria's evolving homelessness crisis.

Drawing on the success of the program and lessons learnt in its delivery to date, the Victorian Government should:

1. Expand assertive outreach programs to fund at least 177 workers across the state to meet overall need by:
 - a. Expanding existing Victorian Government-funded programs
 - b. Resourcing existing community-funded programs and expanding them
 - c. Establishing new programs across the state
2. Provide long-term funding for all assertive outreach programs to ensure staff consistency, address turnover, and support skill development, and enable long-term engagement with people sleeping rough
3. Ensure assertive outreach programs have priority Housing First access to social housing
4. Build more social housing, with dedicated places for people sleeping rough
5. Pilot assertive outreach programs for young people sleeping rough

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Together we can end homelessness.

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