

Paul Nicolaou



Make getting the homeless off the streets a priority

Sydney has crossed an invisible line in relation to homelessness in our city. We have become used to it. Seeing people living and sleeping on our streets has lost its shock value. It is disturbing to think that we could have become accustomed to it.

Living on the street is now normalised but it wasn't always this way, an effort was made by various authorities and charities to offer a haven from life on the street.

Something has gone wrong. If the approach to homelessness was going well we wouldn't have groups of people sleeping rough under the Wentworth Park light rail viaduct.

One resident tells us she has lived there for five years. It says something about the long delay in getting access to public housing.

If the approach was working, we wouldn't see used bedding lying on the footpath or in building alcoves on some of the city's busiest streets.

Now, more than ever, Sydney needs a homelessness commissioner to coordinate the response to homelessness in our city.

This is especially urgent with the ranks of the homeless likely to increase under the weight of high interest rates, high energy and consumer prices and the soaring cost of living generally.

As I discovered participating in the

Vinnies CEO Sleepout last winter, no one chooses to be homeless but it can take just one adverse life event and life on the streets becomes a harsh reality. I will be joining the CEO Sleepout again this year and it would be good to think there is a real prospect of life improving for the homeless.

Some obvious solutions are there for the taking. In addition to appointing a homelessness commissioner, we know there are government and council-owned buildings that are sitting vacant. They could easily be repurposed as emergency housing.

As a society, we could also get behind energetic organisations such as Will2Live, which already operates a food truck delivering meals to homeless encampments around the city. Will2Live takes an holistic approach at its Redfern centre providing pathways to employment for people who are homeless, among the long-term unemployed or living below the poverty line.

Their program seeks to train, employ and transition the homeless and long-term unemployed into mainstream employment over a period of up to 12 months.

As a society, during the Covid emergency, we managed to house the homeless. It helped to save the lives of some of our most vulnerable people.

Other countries have applied imaginative solutions. Finland has



A homeless person in Belmore Park near Central Station. Picture: Richard Dobson

made headlines around the world with its Housing First policy.

It did away with night shelters and short-term stay accommodation. Authorities acquired housing stock and made them livable for immediate allocation. Homeless people were given proper housing, which provided a solid foundation while their other pressing issues were worked on.

If we could do it during Covid, and Finland has proved it can be done by government design in a comprehensive way, surely we can do it in Sydney. Societies are judged by the way they look after, or fail to look after, their most vulnerable groups in the community. We have reached that point in Sydney.

Some people say the homeless prefer to sleep rough because they believe it is safer for them than in shelters that have long operated in the city. This is not an acceptable position for Sydney as a global city. We have numerous charities and social welfare organisations that are

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doing an excellent job in their own individual way.

It appears that these organisations are open minded about the appointment of a homelessness commissioner who could act as an advocate for the sector by coordinating the combined effort.

Some people might think that addressing the issue of people sleeping rough is a matter for the police. We know that the police feel

powerless to act. They in turn look to the same government authorities and welfare agencies to act but there is clearly no unified effort.

To use business terminology, a homelessness commissioner could be appointed to the job with a set of key performance indicators.

One could be reducing the population of homeless people living on the streets from hundreds to a handful and then hopefully none.

A longer-term approach is to get very serious about a change to the planning process so that social and affordable housing becomes a significant part of the city's overall housing stock.

If societies are indeed judged by how well they look after their most vulnerable, we are clearly failing the challenge. If having people living on our CBD streets is a barometer of how well we are doing in this respect, we really are not doing that well at all.

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