



## CONTINUED CALLS FOR INVESTMENT IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING STOCK

A massive government investment in social and affordable housing is needed urgently in 2020, Ballarat welfare organisations say. The loud calls for increased housing stock come as the priority waiting list for housing in Ballarat continues to grow and services report increased requests for support.

Centacare Ballarat Chief Executive Officer, Tony Fitzgerald said studies show there was between fifty and one hundred people sleeping rough every night in Ballarat. "The issue still remains that there is a chronic shortage of housing stock at the social and affordable end of the housing market," he said. "There has been a few additions but not enough to solve the shortage problem... We just don't have enough stock for the people who are suffering homelessness."



*Centacare CEO Tony Fitzgerald and Centacare co-ordinator advocacy programs Jan Armstrong are calling for increased assessment in housing stock.*

Centacare supported more than 598 people/ families during the last financial year to obtain housing or manage their existing accommodation through its advocacy service and crisis and transitional accommodation programs. At any point last year there were up to one hundred and fifty households on Uniting's priority housing wait lists, including around one hundred and thirty children.

A new report *Homelessness* in the Central Highlands released in December showed housing services in Ballarat reported a 43 per cent rise in requests for long-term housing assistance and a 31 per cent rise in requests for short-term housing assistance from 2015 to 2018.

It also reported 41 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in the Central Highlands in 2016 were aged under 25, higher than the Victorian (39 per cent) and Australian (37 per cent) rate.

Last month, the state government officially opened five new townhouses built in Mount Pleasant in partnership with Uniting, as part of an election promise to increase the housing stock. Mr Fitzgerald said he was expecting further additions to the housing stock in Ballarat in 2020, but not enough to meet the need. "We will be involved in a couple of projects that will hopefully add to the stock," he said. "The government needs to do more."

In Victoria, only 3.5 per cent of the current housing stock is public housing. To keep up with current population growth, Victoria must build 1800 dwellings per year to maintain its stock at that level - far below the 20 to 30 per cent recommended by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

"There has been research that showed there was not one person in any of the capital cities who could afford to rent solely relying on Newstart," he said.

National housing campaign *Everybody's Home* is supported by Uniting and Centacare in Ballarat and asks for federal and state governments to:

- Increase public housing levels to 10 per cent of all housing stock
- Develop a national housing strategy for more low-cost rental properties to meet the demand for affordable housing
- Provide a better deal for renters to stop unfair rent increases and evictions, and give all renters the security they need
- Give immediate financial relief to Australians by increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance
- Commit to a plan to end homelessness by 2030
- Make home ownership more achievable to reduce pressure on the private rental market

Centacare Coordinator Advocacy Programs Jan Armstrong said she had seen an increase in the number of people requesting housing support leading into the Christmas and New Year period. "The level of competition for rentals being advertised is increasing dramatically," she said.

"On a daily basis I am having people go to inspections and they are saying there is 50, 60, 70 people going for inspections. That combined with how they are perceived in the rental market and if they present with associated issues like mental health puts them out of the running straight away."

Mr Fitzgerald said he expected stable, safe and affordable housing to be a priority outcome of the royal commission into mental health currently underway in Victoria. "It has been said in the mental health royal commission that one of the key solutions is stable accommodation to provide a base which mental health issues can be addressed," Mr Fitzgerald said. "If you are going to address mental health issues that is one of the key things you need to start with, having your own place that is not under threat and that you get help and support to maintain that."

Both Ms Armstrong and Mr Fitzgerald agreed the government needed to review the rate of Newstart and create a national housing strategy between the federal government and state and territory governments to address the housing and homelessness issue.

Mr Fitzgerald said the national housing strategy should include consideration of taxation and incentives for people to invest in that affordable end of the market. Ms Armstrong said investment in support for people to maintain housing was also important.

The Central Highlands Regional Partnership, the group behind the *Homelessness in the Central Highlands* report, hopes community will become more aware and engaged in the issue of homelessness in the region this year. The report suggests examples for community action to address homelessness as building skills and awareness, building inclusion and encouraging more construction of housing.

Mr Fitzgerald said homelessness was an issue everyone should care about for both social and economic reasons. "It is about helping out your fellow citizen... but there are also economic reasons as well," he said. "If a person has got a stable place to live in a supported way, health improves so there is less drain on the health system, and they are less likely to have an interaction with the justice system because they probably have a job and have a safe place to stay. The payback for an investment in housing and support is tenfold."

*Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text and photo by Rochelle Kirkham*