

It's hard to imagine braving the Toowoomba cold without a house, a unit or place to call home – but that has been the experience of a family over the past month. They spent three weeks living in a car. All of their belongings were kept in the vehicle until an unkind passer-by smashed a window with a brick and made their one semblance of a shelter insecure. As a result they took to hiding their belongings in nearby bushes each night while they huddled together to keep warm. Each week they would gather money to find two to three nights in the warmth of a motel room – before they were forced back to the car.

This is National Homeless Persons Week. Hardly a thing to celebrate – but at the same time – something that is way too important to be ignored or denied. A number of myths surround homelessness in Toowoomba. The first is that there is no homelessness and the second is that a homeless person is the derelict wino that you may see under the bridge. The theme for this year is that a diversity of our society are affected by chronic homelessness.

On any given night, there are nearly 105000 homeless people in Australia. These people come from every neighbourhood and every age group. Close to half of all people experiencing homelessness in Australia are under 25, and nearly a quarter are younger than 18. Almost as many women as men are homeless. Every day, half the people who request immediate accommodation from overstretched homelessness services are turned away. Anybody who knows the people involved on the frontline know that this response is not due to a lack of will – the resources simply aren't there.

In our region there are at least 1300 people homeless with the South West having a much higher rate than Toowoomba City. Mayor Ray Brown of the Western Downs Shire is right to stress the importance of affordable housing in the wake of the predicted resource boom in the region.

When you talk to Lana Luxford, Manager of Crisis Accommodation Services for the Salvation Army in Toowoomba you start to realise that the issue of homelessness in Toowoomba is complex and hidden. She describes the level of 'couch surfing' as horrendous and stresses that this is not a lifestyle choice – but a situation borne of necessity. Lana has been involved in addressing this crisis in our city for so long that she is now starting to observe inter-generational homelessness. Daughters who were children in the 1980s searching for a home with their parents are now looking for a home for their own families.

In the first week of Kevin Rudd's prime ministership he sent every ALP federal member to their local homeless shelter. It would be easy and tempting to see this as a stunt or perhaps echoes of Bob Hawke's forlorn promise that no child would live in poverty by 1990. I've no doubt the media was always a target for Kevin – but there may yet be fruit born from a raised awareness of this blight on a rich nation. In South Brisbane a new public housing project has become home for a number of long term homeless people. This building includes space for support workers and case managers who provide long-term support to ensure that the cycle of homelessness can be beaten.

Here in Toowoomba there is a group of organisations – both government and non-government gathering together to create a community action plan to address the issue of homelessness. These organisations are focused on more than crisis accommodation – they include professionals working in the areas of mental health, substance abuse, community development, youth support, corrections and multicultural affairs etc. As Lana Luxford points out we need to move beyond a crisis approach to a long term strategy to break the cycle of homelessness. We need long term

support and better education. I dare to believe that this action plan might be more than just another policy document.

Lana reckons that miracles do happen – because she eventually found a house for the family living in the car. Remarkably her response is full of hope and not despair. She says the family are now getting on well and she believes that very soon the parents will be employed. She comes from a position of dignity where people who are doing it tough can get back on their feet if they can just get access to safe and secure housing. It should be after all a right and not a privilege. There will be a National Homeless Persons Week BBQ today at 11 am next to the Toowoomba City Library. For more information go to [www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au](http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au)