

HOT AND HOMELESS IN MELBOURNE

Tuesday, 3 February 2009

While many Victorians complained about the heat, or lack of power and air conditioning last week, this was a taste of daily life for any one of Melbourne's 10,000 homeless people – the only thing that has left them cold is the latest Rudd stimulus package.

In record high heat, being homeless in Melbourne was at least as miserable as it is in the depths of winter. The clients of our Hosier Lane Centre, the Living Room, have painted a very unwelcoming picture of our central business district in a heat wave.

Despite their very high risk of dehydration and exhaustion, clients reported being moved on or turned away from anywhere air conditioned: Melbourne Central, the State Library, fast food outlets and public toilets. Even in shaded areas, they said they were harassed by hot and cranky passers-by and questioned by police. Fountains and many taps in the city are turned off or the water is hot, so even access to cold water is difficult.

Those with a room in a hostel reported paying around \$160 a week for a room with no fan or windows.

Basic human needs can be defined according to Maslow as air, water, food, sleep and shelter. Not a computer controlled, one-touch air conditioner as smart as your average teenager.

For the homeless, there is no such luxury. Our homeless population do not have their basic needs met let alone the comfort of modern technology. Instead, the homeless rely on under-resourced and under-funded centres such as ours for temporary respite from a potentially life threatening situation.

But our centre was stretched to beyond capacity last week, as we offered disadvantaged or homeless people health care, food, water, clothing toiletries, shower and laundry facilities.

With 30 heat-related deaths reported, one of which occurred in the same rooming house as a Youth Projects' client, it's important that the homeless and disadvantaged are not forgotten.

While the federal government's white paper on homelessness released before Christmas sets clear goals to cut homelessness by half and to eradicate all rough sleeping by 2020, one can't help but wonder if it will be too little too late; particularly now the global financial crisis has taken precedence on the public agenda.

The federal government's new \$42 billion stimulus package states that 2,500 social houses will undergo maintenance, but this is not enough to address burgeoning homelessness.

Instead, why not build environmentally sustainable, public housing and community centres, creating jobs and providing shelter for the homeless and disadvantaged. Economic stimulus? Check. Environment? Check. Homelessness? Check.

Next time you're sweltering as you briefly tolerate the heat dashing between your air-conditioned workplace, car and couch, spare a thought for those without air conditioning, a home or any shelter at all.

Melanie Raymond is Chair of the not-for-profit agency Youth Projects Inc. which runs the Living Room Primary Health Clinic in Hosier Lane, Melbourne.