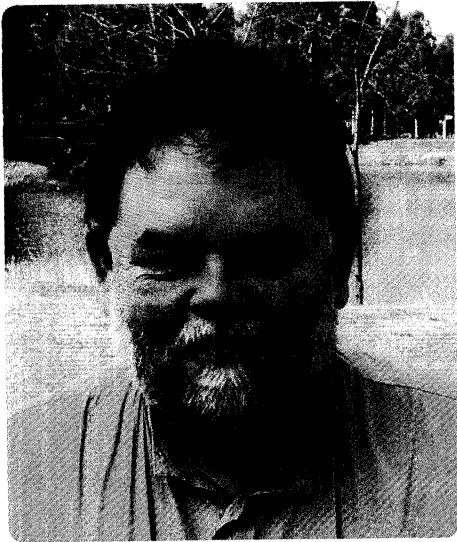


Opinion

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If you believe, as I do, that the sources of our social inequalities are imbedded in our economic, legal and social structures, then it is easy to be seduced into thinking that the solutions to homelessness exist solely at a macro governmental and institutional level.

This would however miss the point that for the foreseeable future, that is, that homelessness is in the here and now. High quality services particularly outreach case management services and assertive outreach case management services are our most effective methods for pathways out of homelessness and keeping people out of homelessness.

While it is self-evident that our efforts at the macro-level need to be doubled and doubled again to begin to alleviate and eventually rid ourselves of the circumstances under which the obscenity of homelessness is produced, we also need to keep a focus on the continued development of our outreach methods, techniques and services.

Not just any old service will do, the best are those that continually adapt

and improve, through research and evidence, daily experience, consumer feedback and the willingness to question moribund systems. This often takes courage as orthodoxy does not like to be challenged.

It is hard to pinpoint accurately when the outreach case management revolution began in our services — but it certainly was the preferred method of service delivery by the end of the 1990s with the further refinement of assertive outreach in the early 2000s.

For many it came as an epiphany. It was almost like we woke up one day and realised that not all people experiencing homelessness or those at risk of homelessness are either highly visible or likely to walk off the street and into our services. They existed in a hidden, almost parallel, world out of the public eye and the public interest.

The very circumstances of their homelessness meant that they were excluded from mainstream services; they distrusted services that had treated them poorly in the past, they were unaware of assistance available, they lacked the financial resources, they were too traumatised, they didn't have or were losing the skills required to navigate an often complex service system and they were ashamed or indeed had just literally given up hope. With this realisation it was clear that to effectively work with the homeless and those at risk of homelessness, we had to take our case management services to the world in which they existed.

Of course with this realisation came the need to develop and refine new models of service delivery — going forth into new, highly variable and

uncontrolled work environments, required attention to a myriad of issues. Engagement techniques, worker safety, professional boundaries, transport, toolkits, research and testing, team case management, among others, all had to be road tested, refined and worked up into policy and practice. This process continues today, with learning how to use emerging digital technologies to improve the efficiency of the outreach case management experience being the obvious exciting new development. One unforeseen, almost serendipitous, outcome of these new service delivery models was that that outreach case managers had access to a richer context surrounding the circumstances of our consumers lives — and this has led to more practical, targeted and meaningful assessments and case plans, that is, a process of moving from a cerebral and theoretical world at the office, into the day to day real world of the consumer. This is a bonus in achieving long-term positive outcomes for people experiencing homelessness and particularly those at risk of homelessness.

Contemplating the mature, highly skilled and professional outreach services that exist across Victoria today it is hard not to be impressed by the hard yards and achievements of the hundreds of people from all stakeholder groups that have contributed.

Unfortunately all I can say... is the work is not done! There are more hard yards ahead, as homelessness continues unabated.

It is time those people at the macro-level got their act together don't you think! Maybe I'm just 'Blowin in the Wind'.