

ADF veterans on frontline of homelessness

Government can build true legacy by fixing state's lack of housing, writes John Hardy

Homelessness is a pressure most people will feel and fear in their lifetime, whether through housing stress in the rental market or the rapid increase in mortgage rates. This fear is a reality for an estimated 2350 people in Tasmania as indicated by the shocking ABS figures published in the Mercury (March 23). These are statistics that none of us can be proud of, after all without the stability of a home, it's hard to do anything, and that's before we start talking about wellbeing.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute conducted a study on the Australian Defence Force, and its findings are very concerning. The figure among our veterans is disgraceful – as the study found 5.3 per cent of recently transitioning ADF personnel experience homelessness.

Without sounding alarmist, the ADF rate is 178 per cent higher than that of the general population.

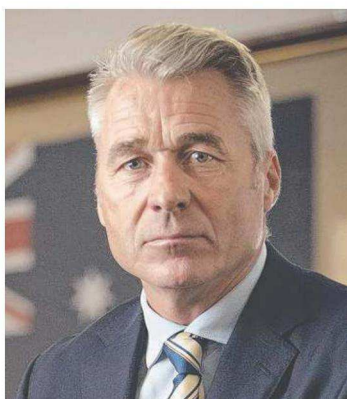
May I ask you to pause and think about that for a second.

That is, 178 per cent higher in a group that has a 127 per cent rate of suicide in females and 27 per cent higher in males than the general population. If there was ever an example of compounding an issue, I do not believe you would need to look much further than this situation.

After much hard work and lobbying by RSL Tasmania, we are thankful to the Premier Jeremy Rockliff and the Minister of Veterans Affairs Guy Barnett supporting that veterans are now listed as a targeted action group within the Tasmania Suicide Prevention Strategy 2023-2027.

Homelessness is associated with elevated suicide risk, and both must be tackled head-on if we don't want people to become a statistic.

An article in The Black Dog Institute of Australia's publication titled – What can be done to decrease suicidal behaviour in Australia? A call to action – (October, 2020) concludes, that social determinants such as homelessness are risk factors for suicide. Furthermore, US-based Tsai and Cao suggest a unique link between homelessness and suicide as they observed that US veterans with homeless histories were 7.8 times more likely to have attempted suicide than veterans with no homeless histories.



RSL Tasmania CEO John Hardy.

(Association between suicide attempts and homelessness in a population-based sample of US veterans and non-veterans – J Epidemiol Community Health. 2019)

RSL Tasmania works very closely with the Salvation Army in this area, and we have 30 veterans on our books for whom we are actively looking for homes.

Over the past 14 months, we have housed or helped house 17 people.

Please do not consider the above success, we don't.

We are trying, but it would be fair to say this does keep some staff and our members awake at night.

After all most of us are in a relatively privileged situation where we have food on the table, and shelter over our heads. RSL Tasmania believes we have an obligation to help those who are suffering, who are in pain, who aren't as fortunate.

Fundamentally what RSL Tasmania is doing, or is trying hard to do with great financial risk, is to ease that pain and suffering, to help with the day-to-day wellbeing of those who were prepared to sacrifice everything for us, our servicemen and servicewomen.

Homelessness is going to be one of the significant issues of our time. It is only fair to say the state government cannot do everything, and strong leadership is never easy. However, we would say to the state government if it really wants to build a true legacy, then we would ask them to build houses and homes that our communities and veterans can thrive in.

John Hardy is chief executive officer of RSL Tasmania

If this story has raised any issues for you call LIFELINE: 13 11 14 or BEYOND BLUE: 1300 22 4636.