

UnitingCare challenges Tony Abbott to spend a week homeless

Executive Director of UnitingCare NSW.ACT wants Tony Abbott, Leader of the Opposition, to better understand the challenges experienced by vulnerable Australians before making glib comments about people choosing to be homeless.

Reverend Harry Herbert responded to comments made by Mr Abbott in which he stated the government "...can't just stop people from being homeless if that's their choice or if their situation is such that it is just impossible to look after them under certain circumstances".

Reverend Herbert said Mr Abbott would be less inclined to make such statements if he had a better understanding of the difficulties of everyday life for Australians at risk of homelessness or already homeless.

"The word 'choice' is completely inappropriate in this context. There is a very small percentage of the population who may choose for lifestyle reasons to be homeless but for the vast majority, the factors leading to their situation are beyond their control.

"Mental illness, addiction, domestic violence, an inability to meet basic living costs and issues related to employment can be all contributing factors. Mr Abbott is clearly out of touch and needs to talk to service providers and the people themselves to gain a clearer idea of the various disadvantages and vulnerabilities that not only cause homelessness but serve to perpetuate it."

Reverend Herbert has challenged Tony Abbott on the eve of World Day of Social Justice saying that it was important to remember that while Australia was more blessed than other countries, there were still many issues which needed to be addressed to close the gap between disadvantaged Australians and the rest of the population.

“We need to advocate for better conditions and access to resources for those Australians who experience inequity. While Mr Abbott acknowledged emergency accommodation is required, this is a bandaid solution for a long term systematic issue.

“Homelessness is symptomatic of a variety of causes and addressing these causes will ensure you are helping people at their most vulnerable to achieve a better life.”

Mr Abbott is currently under pressure to meet the Rudd government’s pledge to halve homelessness by 2020.

World Day of Social Justice is Saturday 20 February 2010.

END

For more information or for an interview with Reverend Harry Herbert please call 0419 224 130 or email harryh@nsw.uca.org.au.