

Bringing them in from the cold

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Optimistic ... American pioneer Rosanne Haggerty is in Australia to share common ground. Photo: Ben Rushton

A simple but successful philosophy to offer the marginalised safe havens is finding favour in the halls of power, writes Russell Skelton.

Fresh-faced, eager and edgy. Dimitri was like any other kid with emotional problems when he turned up at Hanover's emergency accommodation centre, a short walk from Melbourne's Crown Casino.

He gravitated to Hanover because he knew that when he had an episode, such as shouting randomly at office towers at 3am, there is somebody to listen,

somebody to talk him down. But over the past four years staff have noticed Dimitri become sicker, thinner and more psychotic than ever.

These days he looks discernibly older than his 20-something years. Apart from his increasingly frequent psychotic episodes, staff suspect a serious drug problem. Like the tens of thousands of the nation's chronically homeless, Dimitri bounces between crisis centres and the street because he has no permanent place to live. Australia's crisis centres are funded to provide temporary accommodation only, which means every six weeks or so people like Dimitri are back on the street.

This is a situation Rosanne Haggerty - a New York policy pioneer on homelessness - is sadly familiar with. She says the Dimitris of the world are not the hidden people of society because their circumstances are obvious to anybody who takes a stroll in a city park late at night.

"They are in fact well known to the people who staff the systems of care: the police, the emergency wards of hospitals, psychiatric services and the organisations that feed them and provide them with temporary shelter," she says. "That is also what makes the possibility of getting on top of the homeless problem all the more plausible. ... The solutions are less complicated than you may think."

Haggerty, the founder and president of the New York organisation Common Ground, is at the centre of a radically different strategy to home the homeless. Her approach departs from soup kitchens, crisis centres and dormitories that are not only costly to maintain but also carry no permanent solutions. What she advocates for people like Dimitri is well-designed permanent housing that is safe and secure and where mental health, education, employment and welfare services are either on-site or easily accessed.

In New York the approach has led to a dramatic fall in homeless numbers despite the ravages of the global financial crisis that have increased the number of homeless families by 25 per cent. Haggerty says her approach was shaped and defined in the 1990s when the city's depressed property market left scores of buildings vacant. At the time, its homeless numbered about a quarter of a million over any given five-year period.

Haggerty spoke to Franciscan priests who ran a soup kitchen in Queens and found that conditions were worsening. "The Franciscans realised that the new homeless were being kicked out of cheap hotels, turned out of institutions or released from jail. Some suffered from schizophrenia."

She found her solution in an empty hotel in Times Square, an area notorious for street crime. With the help of

the city, private institutions and care providers, she turned the vacant high-rise into permanent secure accommodation for 650 people, an alternative for those sleeping rough on the footpath, under bridges or on subway grates in winter. "Common Ground's innovation was to redefine the model, to create a secure mixed-use environment where the homeless people lived with working people, where life went on much as it had before they became homeless."

Rather than push the homeless through the revolving door of crisis centres, Common Ground provided permanent residence for as long as it was needed, with on-site access to psychiatric counselling, drug treatment programs, education and job training. Tenants with addictions were admitted, but if they were caught dealing or their behaviour impinged on others, they were removed. Haggerty says a central aspect of her approach was the 24-hour security - trained staff monitoring who came and went, dealing with emergencies and sorting out the unexpected.

The objective was to keep the "worst of the street out" while providing a lifeline to "a cohort of people" with profound mental and physical health needs. "We wanted them to settle, be less fearful and focus on getting their lives back together."

The impressive results have been widely recognised in and outside the United States. Since 2005 the number of people living on the city's streets has fallen by 47 per cent and the number of chronic homeless (defined as people who have lived rough for nine months or more) has fallen from 4395 to 2328. Street homelessness in the Times Square neighbourhood has fallen by 87 per cent, and by 47 per cent in surrounding blocks.

Common Ground has spread to other US states including California and this year will open housing unit number 3000. The organisation has embraced other innovative programs including Foyer, which targets homeless youth, and "scattered housing", which involves renting apartments in privately owned buildings. It has assisted some 4000 people.

For Haggerty, who is in Australia to speak at this week's National Housing Conference in Melbourne, it has been an extraordinary personal journey that began in the suburbs of Hartford, Connecticut, growing up with her school teacher parents who believed in offering a hand up to the needy. "My parents befriended people living alone in hotels who became part of our extended family. These were lovely people who had such hard lives. My parents believed in old-fashioned good neighbourliness," she told the *Herald*.

It was a small philosophical jump to Common Ground. "The supporting housing concept is profoundly simple: affordable housing and social support for those who need it. A lot of what makes our programs work is that people are living in a place where they are noticed and included. They have substitute family. It is about taking responsibility for and looking after each other."

Haggerty, a PhD student with a graduate degree in real estate finance from Columbia University, developed her property expertise working with a team managing disused buildings for a Catholic charity in the New York boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. "There was a lot of church-owned property that was out of use that we converted to affordable housing. A large part of that was figuring out what to do. It was seven years working in 20 different neighbourhoods and 23 different projects."

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On her 10th visit to Australia, Haggerty is something of a celebrity philosopher among social housing organisations and governments who are steadily embracing the Common Ground concept. It has been adopted in all states except Western Australia.

Victoria's Housing Minister, Dick Wynne, and the federal Housing Minister, Tanya Plibersek, have visited New York to investigate Haggerty's pioneering methods. Therese Rein, wife of the Prime Minister, is Common Ground's patron in Australia.

In Victoria Stephen Nash, chief executive of the affiliated Home Ground, has put together a multi-storey Common Ground-style project with 161 self-contained units on a site near Melbourne University. Built with government funding, Daniel Grollo's construction team and his organisation's social housing expertise, the

complex is due to open next year.

Nash describes Haggerty as "impressive and inspirational" but says Australia and the US are not identical. "In the United States philanthropy plays a big role and there are far more tax incentives to encourage investment. We need a similar investment approach."

Nash says homelessness remains a social and economic problem in Australia. The most recent data, recorded in 2006, show more than 100,000 Australians are homeless and the situation is likely to worsen as interest rates rise.

There are signs that the old crisis model, so much a dominant part of Australia's traditional policy response, has become costly and outdated. Felicity Reynolds, of Sydney's Mercy Foundation, says chronic homelessness represents a small share of the overall homeless population, but chronically homeless people use up more than 50 per cent of the services.

A California study found that 15 chronically homeless "inebriates" ran up medical bills for emergency care that averaged several hundred thousand dollars each. Hanover's chief executive, Tony Keenan, believes Common Ground not only allows people to re-enter society in a meaningful way, but also is cost effective.

"Crisis responses are costly and ineffective for people like Dimitri," he says. It means all the resources are devoted to housing and stabilising people for six weeks, only to have them fall over again and end up back in crisis for another six weeks or in an even more costly acute hospital bed. While we are incredibly proud of what we provide, we do it in the confines of a broken system. We are rearranging deck chairs instead of providing long-term homes and support."

Plibersek, who visited the Time Square complex this year with Rein, described Haggerty's approach as "terrific" and says it fits with the direction the Rudd Government is moving in to develop alternative housing models. She believes there will always be a need for crisis accommodation in the social housing system, especially for domestic violence cases and mental health emergencies, but its role is likely to diminish as new strategies evolve.

Asked what approach the Rudd Government should adopt, Haggerty is emphatic. "This is an entirely solvable problem in Australia. The numbers here compared to the US make it manageable. The Government is right to tackle it with funding and innovation. They can beat it."

She says Australia has an advantage over the US because the welfare and medical safety net is so strong - it catches many of the people from falling into homelessness. "In the US there is nothing like it; the backlog is enormous. But the big difference between Australia and the US is that in Canberra you have the political will and the capacity. For years we have had nothing."

It would be extraordinary for Australia to eradicate chronic homelessness, she says. "What a phenomenal thing to imagine that as a community you can get to a position where people no longer think it is OK for people to be living and dying on the street."

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