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**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY AND LEGAL AFFAIRS INQUIRY INTO
HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA**

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BUILDING BACK BETTER FROM COVID-19

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Homeless persons are among the most vulnerable of the vulnerable groups affected by the threat of COVID-19, those sleeping rough, especially women, even more so. Stay-at-home directives are a cruel joke played by the haves upon the have-nots when applied to the homeless. Earnest official advice frequently to wash your hands cannot be followed by those without ready access to the means of doing so.

Yet homeless people possess the full dignity of their humanity and have the same human rights to life and health as everyone else. Just as governments are obliged to protect those with a home from COVID-19, it is obliged to protect those without a home. Human rights law is as universal as the air that we all breathe. We do not need to go through the door of a home to find a person with rights. If we have eyes to see, outside that home there may be a person sleeping rough on the street. That person is not a welfare case but a rights bearer.

The person roughly sleeping there is one of the many thousands in Australia and many millions in the world doing so every evening. People without a secure and ongoing home number at least in the tens of thousands in Australia and the hundreds of millions in the world. Before COVID-19, homelessness in all its dreadful manifestations was a pressing concern everywhere. It has been the subject of frequent condemnation by United Nations human rights bodies and mandates for decades. COVID-19 has underscored how vulnerable the homeless are and how pressing that concern is. It has not created homelessness as such, although it has increased domestic violence and therefore probably the number of homeless women. But, unexpectedly, the pandemic has made it possible to imagine how it might end.

Like most countries in the world, Australia has largely heeded the calls of the United Nations to protect all people everywhere from the threat of COVID-19 (the exclusion of temporary migrants from certain measures of support is a lamentable exception). The human right to equality and non-discrimination requires that homeless people be equally protected, especially because of their greater vulnerability. More than that, it requires positive action to ensure substantive equality. Rightly, the stay-at-home directives have not been applied to people without a home. It would have been discriminatory to do otherwise. Also, millions of dollars of government funding have been made available to ensure that homeless people have shelter where they can experience protection from COVID-19 like most other people. This has been vital for ensuring substantive equality as far as possible. It may have taken a pandemic, but Australia has very few people without a roof over their head in June 2020. Terrible hardship, including homelessness and destitution in some cases, is being endured by temporary migrants to whom government assistance has been denied. But most homeless people are not to be found sleeping rough in motor vehicles, on the streets or in squats. They are in boarding houses, hostels, unused student accommodation, hotels and other such temporary housing at government expense.

Contemplate the significance of this for a moment. We generally have difficulty knowing who the homeless are. They are an excluded, transient and disempowered group of people. They are the stigmatised other from whom our eyes avert or the invisible other whom our eyes look through. Only the community workers operating at the street level and a few others have frequent contact with the homeless personally. Remarkably, this does not apply in the present situation. We know who the homeless are. For however long or short a time, they have been included in the community of the sheltered. They have an address to correspond

with, a door to knock on and (often) a cheap government-issued mobile telephone to call. They are no longer socially invisible.

It is not only that we know who the homeless are in terms of identity that is significant. We are in a position to know them as human beings, as members of our society and people with personal stories, with families and with hopes and dreams. Each of them is an individual possessed of a personhood which enriches our community and is within our ken to understand. Only a little effort stands between us and knowledge of their health and social needs and what is necessary to build up their life skills and resilience. It is a strange paradox, but the threat to life and health posed by COVID-19 has led to a situation in which our communities and those everywhere might actually overcome the threat to life and health posed by homelessness.

We have not achieved this yet. Our homeless are sheltered during COVID-19 but they will remain homeless until they have a home – until their human right to housing is respected, protected and fulfilled. For that, we need to build back better from COVID-19. While maintaining the measures needed to protect the community, including the homeless, from life-threatening disease, the foundation for a long-term plan to end homelessness can and should be laid. In the context of homelessness, this is building back better from COVID-19. Governments have obtained invaluable information about homelessness through COVID-19 responses the people and how they became and remain homeless; how well they have fared in temporary shelter and why; their health, social and other needs; and how they may be transitioned to a real home and to where. This should be the subject of careful research. Our history of excluding the homeless themselves should not be repeated because participation is their right, they have so much to contribute and we need their help. Then we must address our appalling historical under-investment in social housing, including housing for the homeless, which is a national problem that is especially severe in Victoria. The case for a significant scaling up has surely been made overwhelming by what we have learnt from the COVID-19 response. Homelessness is not an unsolvable welfare problem for the which the homeless are to be stigmatised and blamed; it is a human rights breach for which our governments are responsible and, we now know, they can resolve and must resolve.