# **Good For The Homeless Discussion**

This paper contains:

* Original article regarding the purchase of goods for the homeless
* An open letter from PP Sue Mills of Rotary Club of Glen Waverley
* Response to Sue’s letter from DG Alma Reynolds

**Do Not Purchase Goods for the Homeless (from “Open Doors” # 7 28 September 2020)**

One of the projects I hear about often in Rotary clubs involves purchasing goods for the homeless. Items such as swag beds, blankets, clothing, tents sleeping bags and so on are regularly on the list. I have long had doubts about this form of assistance and so decided to do some research on the issue.

I recently spoke to Commanding Officer of the Salvation Army in Victoria, Major Brendan Nottle. In our discussion he made these points;

* The purchase of goods for the homeless runs counter to State and Municipal government policies which are all directed to reducing the numbers of people living on the streets to zero.
* Purchasing goods for homeless people only serves to normalise and entrench the issue.
* Most goods purchased for homeless people provide benefit for little more than a few days. In the Melbourne municipal area more than one tonne of such goods are collected off the streets as rubbish each week.
* Clubs that really want to help the homeless would provide real benefit by supporting programs which help homeless people to find secure accommodation and provide services to re-establish them in the mainstream of society.

I also spoke to Anne Mitchell, the CEO of Steps Outreach, which is part of Concern Australia. Ms Mitchell made very similar points regarding the provision of goods and the alternative approach. She also stated than in some isolated cases the provision of goods may be appropriate but only specialised providers of services to the homeless are equipped to make such recommendations.

The bottom line for clubs in D9810 is that purchasing or collecting goods for homeless people is not a productive use of club funds. Any activity directed at the homeless should only be undertaken with the assistance of those with expertise in the area and preferably in partnership with an established service provider.

Clubs wishing to discuss this further should be in touch with me.

**Dear Alma,**

**I believe the above article is very negative toward the work being done to help the homeless in our community. I also do not believe it is in the interests of Rotary to have an official Rotary publication exhorting Rotary members to “not purchase goods for the Homeless” irrespective of the rationale.**

**The RC of Glen Waverley has been running a very successful program during my Presidency in 2019-20 to help the homeless with Food and Swags, a project that was both funded by District 9810, the Bendigo Bank and our Club.**

**For the last 2 years we have worked closely with Monash Council Homelessness Officers who are experienced in this area to deliver this very vital project.  In fact it was during this time that we learned more about homelessness, in particular what it means, the pitfalls, the lack of services, and of Government (both State and Federal) failure to provide enough public Housing, as well as the need for food.**

**What people may not understand is that sleeping rough is not illegal. If people are sleeping rough, it means they do not have the ability to find shelter (for financial reasons) or possibly for mental reasons, and they choose to sleep Rough. By providing them with water proof and comfortable Swags, they get a chance to have a good sleep, so that they can have a little more dignity. During winter in Melbourne, it may be necessary to assist with blankets as it’s cold out there.**

**The Monash Council Homelessness Officers do not just carelessly give out the swags or the food that we have provided. They use them to engage with each person, to reach them and try to build a relationship with them to help them get medical aid, maybe Centre Link assistance, and possibly temporary accommodation.**

**The big picture is the lack of accommodation for people in crisis who have nowhere else to go. Homelessness is just not sleeping rough. It’s sleeping in cars, on people’s couches, wherever they can. Governments may have taken an interest and got people off the street during COVID-19, but this problem will get bigger and uglier post COVID-19. The issue is lack of suitable public housing for everyone, both women and men in crisis, and it will take a huge effort by all to try to fix this problem. It won’t be solved easily, nor is it a short term proposition. Rotary will not be able to solve this problem itself.**

**However, if I was a homeless person and someone offered me a swag and some food with some assistance, I would not knock it back. We should not as you say “Stop buying goods for homeless as this is not a productive use of club funds”, but actually make a difference and get involved and start helping the homeless by raising funds for food, food packs, swags, money for rental assistance (like the Magpie Nest Program) and petition Government to do better in this area.**

**I invite you to come to a Homelessness Meeting at Monash Council and sit and listen to the heart-breaking stories of the agencies in our area trying to make a difference. These are people in crisis, not those that are sitting around waiting for government to provide housing. In most instances they need the assistance immediately. Rotary is all about making a difference.  Clubs should take some action in this space, raise some funds and help deliver some good will in the form of food and comfort, and not just sit back and do nothing!**

**IPP Sue Mills**

**Rotary club of Glen Waverley**

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Sue Mills

Immediate Past President,

Rotary Club of Glen Waverley 30 September 2020

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your letter in response to my article in the Open Doors newsletter. You raise many points and display a knowledge of, and real sympathy for, the situation of homeless people.

The opinions in the article were garnered from experts in the area of caring for the homeless.

I have not suggested that Rotarians cease to invest in helping homeless people. I do, however, point out that buying goods such as swags sleeping bags and blankets may not be the most productive use of club funds. The caveat I added was that providing such goods through specialised providers of such assistance may still be appropriate.

The article in “Open Doors” did not mention food. Providing food to homeless people and those in need is a time-honoured method of assistance. It provides comfort, nourishment and a sense that there are those who care.

The main problem with buying goods for those who are sleeping rough is that they often provide assistance for only a very short period. The items are left behind, lost, stolen, sold or traded often within a few days. As noted in “Open Doors”, in the Melbourne CBD alone the council has to pay for the collection and disposal of more than one tonne of such goods abandoned each week. My contention is that the purchase of goods of this nature may not be the most effective use of Rotary funds.

Should you wish to prove or disprove the major point of the article, perhaps you could work with Monash Council Homelessness Officers to keep track of swags to see where and when they are used and the for how long the recipient maintains possession. The club can then decide if that period of time and level of usage translates to a worthwhile project.

Your invitation to a meeting at Monash Council implies that I am ignorant of the plight of the homeless and lack sympathy for their situation. This is not at all true.

I agree that homelessness is a difficult issue; that the homeless need to be helped; that Rotary can be active in this space; and that care and comfort is required. The article I wrote suggests that in providing assistance Rotary clubs need to ensure they are mindful of the real situation, aim to provide help that is of a longer term nature and work with experts in the field.

I hope my article leads you to think deeply about the nature of assistance to homeless people. If your consideration leads to the conclusion that what you are doing is the best way for the Rotary Club of Glen Waverley to help the homeless then all involved can be happy and satisfied with their efforts.

Thank you for your letter. Thank you for your passion in helping others.

Regards,

Alma

Alma J Reynolds

Governor, District 9810

2020-2021