

Domain RENTAL KATH DOLAN

Taking steps for young homeless

Agents and landlords help needy youth secure rentals, writes **Kath Dolan**.



The program helps to get youngsters off the streets and into safe housing.

GROLLO staff have done it and so has Melbourne's lord mayor Robert Doyle. Members of the Property Council of Victoria were so moved by it they made the host organisation their charity of choice for two years running.

It's a walking tour of homeless Melbourne, initiated and hosted by formerly homeless young people under the auspices of Melbourne Citymission (MCM), Australia's largest provider of support services to homeless young people aged 12 to 25. The aim is to give decision makers in the corporate sector, philanthropy and government insight into life in the city's squats, second-class backpacker hostels and makeshift shelters.

The director of homelessness and justice at MCM, Sherri Bruinhout, says the idea for the tours came from a group of young people who came to the organisation via its innovative Frontyard program, which offers services to homeless and at-risk young people under one roof in King Street, Melbourne.

The tours began in 2008 and are driven by demand.

The itinerary varies depending on the host but the realities shared are invariably confronting.

"There's one group of young people who will go down to a local squat and talk about how you live in a squat, how you get into a squat, what's the etiquette, who runs the squat ..." Ms Bruinhout says. "Other young people will go down to some fairly well-known backpacker [hostels] and talk about how scary it is to be sleeping in a room with five strangers in bunk beds and the fact that you never know when you wake up whether your bags are still going to be there."

With about 7000 young people homeless on any given night throughout Victoria, MCM is tackling the problem on multiple fronts.

One highly successful program teams MCM staff with real estate agents and landlords to help about 96 people a year into stable share houses and long-term private rentals in Melbourne's north-west. The Youth Focused Housing Placement program offers landlords initial rental subsidies and ongoing problem-solving support and helps tenants with everything from bond

and furniture to budgeting and understanding the Residential Tenancies Act. In four years, not one participant has been evicted or defaulted on their agreement.

Ms Bruinhout says candidates are selected carefully by MCM staff. Many come to Frontyard in search of accommodation and are assessed as not requiring the level of support offered by places like refuges. "They've got their act together, they could probably maintain a tenancy with some support but obviously housing for young people is really hard," she says. "Which real estate agent in their right mind wants to give an 18-year-old a property when they've got ... competition from lots of other people?"

Staff build links with real estate agents, offering \$2000 worth of rental subsidy throughout the first six to nine months of a tenancy and ongoing support to resolve any problems with tenants as they arise.

Small local companies have shown support, as have some mum-and-dad landlords, who enjoy the savings on advertising and screening costs. Larger companies such as Run Property are involved, too. The latter offered a home three years ago to an 18-year-old single mother named Sam, whose parents kicked her out when they learnt she was pregnant. She had no money, no experience in the private rental market and had applied unsuccessfully for more than 20 properties when she came to Frontyard for help. After initial support from the program, she has now "graduated" with flying colours. "She's been a tenant in that property for three years now, has never missed a rental payment and ... she doesn't need our support any longer," Ms Bruinhout says. "What we show is that young people can be really good tenants."

For more information, see melbournecitymission.org.au.