

# Submission to City of Port Phillip

## Community Amenity Local Law Amendment 2026

The City of Port Phillip has a well-earned reputation for being a welcoming and inclusive community, where people from all walks of life have a chance to thrive. As an organisation with strong roots and a 40-year history in this community, Sacred Heart Mission feels a deep responsibility to speak out about the proposed amendment to local law that is currently under community consultation.

**Our message is simple. This amendment is pointless cruelty. It encourages aggression, makes our community less safe, and diverts resources from actual solutions to end homelessness.**

We stand united with Southside Justice, the Southern Homelessness Services Network and many other organisations who do the hard yards, every day, to support people who experience homelessness in this community.

We understand, also, the strong desire of Port Phillip residents to feel safe in their streets and enjoy community facilities. As people who come to work every day in St Kilda, we feel the same. But we know that community safety can never be achieved by antagonising people and confiscating the things they need to survive.

So we welcome this opportunity to not only explain how this proposed amendment creates harm, but also to offer viable alternatives for Council.

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## What are we seeing right now?

Our programs have shown that the way to end chronic homelessness is to get people into safe housing and provide wraparound support, so they can re-establish their lives.

But right now, there's no housing for people to get into. There's a three-year wait for social housing and, when it's available, it costs more than someone on Jobseeker can afford. Meanwhile, the cost of living crisis and family violence are pushing more Australians into homelessness – with women aged 25-39 becoming the fastest-growing cohort.

So our approach is to help people navigate an increasingly complex system of housing, family violence, legal, healthcare and employment services – each with their own set of hurdles that can be impossible to jump when you're homeless.

Rebuilding trust in the system is the critical first step. Our engagement hubs on Grey Street are places where people can come for essentials like a hot meal and a shower, connection to health and wellbeing services, and – as people often tell us – the only chance they might get all day to have a conversation and feel part of a community. Over time, our case workers build trust and help people start the long process towards finding a home.

By providing places of safety and connection, access to everyday essentials, and pathways out of homelessness, these hubs make an important contribution to community safety and crime prevention in Port Phillip.

They are also places where the wider community can show their support for people doing it tough – from the volunteers who serve meals to the Short Back and Sidewalks crew who offer free haircuts.

The proposed amendment has the potential to undermine all of this progress.

## Why the amendment will make things worse

### It needlessly provokes aggression.

As Southside Justice has said, no evidence supports the idea that removing people's belongings improves community safety or amenity. In fact, waking people up and confiscating their blankets and sleeping bags will do nothing but provoke confusion, anger and despair. Council workers, police and social services staff will be left to deal with the fallout – making all our jobs harder and more dangerous.

The Southern Homelessness Services Network has pointed out that the amendment sends a message that it's okay to harass people sleeping rough. We will see needless confrontations and violence as a result.

### It can cause direct harm.

A blanket is a survival item for someone sleeping on a street or in a park. Taking it away is more immediately harmful than issuing a fine, especially as the weather gets colder.

It takes people time and effort to collect their survival essentials. When these items are taken away, the loss can feel far more immediate and devastating than any fine.

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Catherine is a member of our lived experience advisory group (EAGLE). She has volunteered to share the personal impact of having her belongings taken by a council when she was experiencing homelessness.

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*“One day, the council took all my things away. By the time I worked out where to go to get them back, they’d already destroyed them. Those were all my worldly possessions at the time. That was where I was sleeping, where I was laying my hat. When they were taken from me, it affected me mentally.*

*“I had to start all over again in a new area. I had to work out where to get food, clothing, a sleeping bag again. It was all new, and I couldn’t trust people again.”*

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Many women tell us they sleep in publicly visible places because it helps protect them from rape. Forcing them into secluded places at night greatly compromises their safety.

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*“I was sleeping in Fitzroy, near the local legal service. Yes, it was a public place. And that’s because it’s not safe for a woman on the street. I got robbed, I got my ID stolen, I got beaten up, I got threatened by men who wanted me to sleep with them. So I needed to sleep somewhere where other people could see if something happened to me.”*

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## **It makes homelessness worse by cutting people off from help.**

People sleeping rough have lived through years of being shunted from housing offices to police stations to hospital emergency rooms. It takes a long time to rebuild trust in the service system, and this can only be restored through positive experiences.

But if council workers are seen to harass them and take their things, people lose trust in any social service – and so they remain on the street, with untreated physical and mental health issues, and almost no chance of escaping homelessness.

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*“By confiscating someone’s bed or clothes, you’re taking everything they have. Having nothing to wear, nothing on your feet – it’s demeaning. You lose your mind.”*

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This amendment could therefore result in a growing population of people in Port Phillip who are deeply distrustful of what they see as a punitive system. They will be less likely to seek the help they need, more easily provoked into aggression, more likely to challenge authorities, and more likely to remain homeless.

# What will actually make things better?

The alternative to this cruel amendment is not to do nothing. **It's to do more of what's already working.**

## Implement the practical solutions in your Homelessness Strategy.

Released just last year, the Homelessness and Affordable Housing Strategy presents a range of practical measures to make homelessness in Port Phillip rare, brief and non-recurring.<sup>1</sup>

Sacred Heart Mission strongly supports these measures, which were designed with community organisations and people with lived experience. They will be far more effective than knee-jerk punitive responses like the current amendment.

Here are five highly effective measures within the strategy.

### 1. Assertive outreach

What if Council outreach workers went to where people were sleeping rough and offered them help instead of taking their belongings?

Assertive outreach helps connect people to the services they need, instead of assuming they have the means to find those services and apply for support. This engagement takes time – sometimes weeks to build connection and trust between outreach workers and people sleeping rough – but it's proven to help people access services that would otherwise have excluded them.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to any attempt to remove people's belongings, we call for a clear and binding process for Council interventions, with each visit and offer of support recorded.

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***“There's lots of services now – Sacred Heart Mission, Salvation Army, the St Kilda Crisis Centre. But you have to learn where everything is. So maybe do some outreach, help people find those services, instead of taking their things and forcing them to move on.”***

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### 2. More safe hubs and day programs

Council has also committed to developing more safe daytime social spaces where people sleeping rough can get everyday essentials and longer-term support.

Sacred Heart Mission's Dining Hall and Central engagement hub have been providing this function for almost 40 years now. We have seen countless instances of how the hub brings people together – initially for a hot meal or a shower, then for companionship and a feeling of community, and then a pathway to vital health, legal and housing services.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Port Phillip, Homelessness and Affordable Housing Strategy, December 2025

[www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/media/edcnr1x1/final-homelessness-and-affordable-housing-strategy-pdf-kb-711.pdf](http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/media/edcnr1x1/final-homelessness-and-affordable-housing-strategy-pdf-kb-711.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Stambe et al. Seeing, Sharing and Supporting: Assertive Outreach as a Partial Solution to Rough Sleeping, *The British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 54, Issue 2, March 2024 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad251>

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As the cost of living forces more Victorians on to the streets, these hubs become a lifeline. This is why developing these hubs are key actions for objective 5b of Council's homelessness strategy.

### 3. Practical help with storage

As Catherine points out, it takes immense time and effort to amass survival essentials – and there is nowhere safe to store them. Secure storage lockers could help people keep their belongings safe, while also providing a place for people to collect items impounded under Council's existing laws.

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*“If you don't want people to leave their belongings in the street, give them lockers where they can store them. I've had my ID stolen because I had nowhere safe to keep it.”*

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### 4. Access to social housing

Enabling faster access to safe and affordable housing is the single most impactful way to reduce homelessness in the City of Port Phillip.

The waitlist for social housing is 18-36 months, even for people considered high priority. This is why objective 2 of Council's homelessness strategy supports ways to make social housing more accessible: from advocacy with the Victorian Government to develop housing in Port Phillip, to exploring options such as rate exemptions or reduced planning fees for social housing projects.

### 5. Community education

Most people who have expressed support for the amendment are concerned about community safety. But many comments we have seen are grounded in fear and unjustified assumptions about people who are homeless and why they are unhoused.

Council's strategy calls for an anti-stigma campaign to reduce fear and encourage understanding of people experiencing mental health, substance abuse and homelessness issues. This campaign would go a long way towards improving perceptions of community safety and building support for measures that genuinely end homelessness.

**None of these measures are quick fixes. But homelessness in Port Phillip is a complex problem that requires insight, collaboration, trust and community goodwill to solve. It will never be achieved through knee-jerk punitive measures that can further harm people in their most vulnerable moments.**

## Work with local community organisations

Sacred Heart Mission would be pleased to support Council in exploring practical alternatives to the proposed amendment.

We can offer:

- 1-1 briefings for Councillors
- Visits to our Central engagement hub and Women's House
- Opportunities to hear from people with lived experience of homelessness
- Workshops with members of the Southern Homelessness Services Network to progress the solutions in Council's homelessness strategy

Contact Hang Vo, CEO, at [hvo@sacredheartmission.org](mailto:hvo@sacredheartmission.org)

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