



Ian Narev (CBA) with Stephen Porges (Aussie), Ellie Comerford (Genworth) and Sam White (Ray White)

CEOs sleep rough for the homeless



A piece of cardboard, a sleeping bag, a pillow, and a willingness to combat homelessness – industry CEOs sleep rough at the 2012 Vinnies CEO Sleepout

The next time executive chairman of Loan Market, Sam White, passes a homeless person on the street, he will likely think differently about walking straight up and having a chat.

Having only just participated in the 2012 St Vincent De Paul Society CEO Sleepout, which saw over 1000 CEOs nationwide sleep rough one night in June, White says he is now much more aware of the problems of homelessness – and motivated to do something about it.

“It’s a national problem, and as a country it is a blight on us all that this problem continues,” White told *Australian Broker*. “If we fix the issue, society as a whole will be stronger.”

Having raised \$16,000 for Vinnies as part of the fundraising Sleepout event, White said that the Ray White business was looking to do more for homeless as a result of the experience.

“On the real estate side of the business we are looking at how we can potentially start a program providing short-term crisis accommodation, and looking at how to fund that.”

Soup and stories

White was not alone when it came to Australia’s finance

and mortgage broking fraternity. The Commonwealth Bank’s Ian Narev, Aussie Home Loans’ Stephen Porges and Genworth’s Ellie Comerford all took part in Sydney, with Westpac chief executive Gail Kelly another high profile participant, receiving plaudits after raising \$122,000, second only to Ian Narev’s \$166,000.

► Homelessness in Australia

- 99,900 houseless people in Australia (105,304 in 1996)
- 54% adults over 24 years of age
- 10% under the age of 12 years
- 36% young people between 12 and 24 years
- 42% of homeless people were female
- 58% were single (58,116)
- 19% were couples (18,840)
- 23% were families (22,944 people or 6,745 families)

Source: 2001 Census Data





For most of the CEOs present, the event was not just about the one night – it was about gaining an understanding of homelessness, in the hope of doing something to change it.

CEOs arrived at about 6pm, and were presented with dinner at 7pm – a bowl of soup. After that, it was in to the challenging sessions organised by Vinnies for the evening.

“They had a number of speakers; people who were either homeless, or were and now aren’t. For example, there was a lady who had left an abusive husband with two small kids, and had been forced to live on the streets – those type of stories,” White said.

CEOs were then formed into groups, where they brainstormed the issues and how they – and society as a whole – could do more to help the homeless.

Then, it was on to the concrete floor at about 11pm (of the Carriageworks in Sydney’s suburb of Eveleigh for those Sydney-based CEOs such as White) with only a piece of cardboard, a sleeping bag and a pillow to see them through the night. “It was really just one night of slight discomfort compared to what these guys go through 365 days a year,” White said.

Breaking the cycle

Over 100,000 Australians are out in the dark sleeping rough each night of the year, according to Vinnies. However, for White, the most shocking statistic is that 12,000 of these homeless people are under 12, and 34,000 under 18. “I didn’t realise before this data came out,” he said.

Other statistics showed the problem is not just mental illness. Often something has displaced a person causing homelessness, such as a divorce, a job loss or domestic violence.

“What we need to do is figure out how to get these people into work – that is fundamentally important – employment and education are the silver bullets to get people out of that cycle,” White said. “When you realise people go through this 365 days a year, you can understand why there is substance abuse, crime, and all those things that are so bad for society.”

So for White, the next time he passes a homeless person he might just go up and say hello. “It’s all about not forgetting these people, and building that connection.” he said.

► **Ellie Comerford, Genworth**



Q: Why did you get involved?

“I haven’t had a lot of time to spend putting back into the community, so this is an opportunity that I reached out and grabbed, because the Sleepout achieves on a number of fronts. Money donated this year is over \$5 million, and it creates greater awareness of homelessness:

across Australia 1,046 CEOs got involved and connected with hundreds of thousands of people with close to 33,000 people donating to date.”

Q: How did you find the experience?

“With only a couple of hours sleep there was plenty of time to reflect. Why are there homeless people in this lucky country Australia?”

“We were privileged to hear first hand some of the very poignant stories direct from people who are or have been homeless; teenagers, women with children; men, people who have lost everything and are now giving back.”

Q: What can the housing/finance industry do?

“I and others have made a commitment to continue the journey of raising awareness of homelessness. Genworth also works with a number of community partners, with whom we are involved in initiatives to address the issue of homelessness. Genworth’s mission is to get people into homes and help keep them there. On that front we work closely with over 100 lenders in Australia by offering hardship assistance programs.”