

End the homeless heartache

Paul Nicolaou



It's heartbreaking and more than a little disturbing to see so many homeless people living in squalor in the heart of the CBD.

George St has become an almost continuous encampment from Wynyard Station to the QVB building. No one is more distressed by this than the Rev Bill Crews who has been caring for the homeless for 55 years.

Bill was recently sitting in Hyde Park enjoying the sunshine over a coffee, remembering the homeless he's rescued there since 1971. He still finds it hard to believe that a young Nepalese man, a former international student fallen on hard times, lay dead in the park, unnoticed for weeks.

As Bill said, thousands of people walked past his body every day. If he was noticed, passersby

assumed he was just asleep.

When I met Bill near where the young man died, his memories of desperate people he's encountered over the years returned. Like the 11-year-old girl living in Hyde Park on her own. No wonder Bill is heartbroken.

To quote him, 55 years on, the homeless crisis in Sydney just gets "worse and worse and worse".

Why has homelessness in Sydney become normalised, seen but not seen?

I agree with Bill that the homeless should not be left to live in the street.

He worries about the homeless living in despair and also officiates at their funerals. The people he buries are 20 years younger than the general population. Homelessness is a killer.

The response to homelessness is hopelessly fragmented. If we

are to believe the annual CBD sleeping rough headcount, the number fell to 296 this year. On what we see each day, this would seem an underestimate.

The CBD attracts the homeless because it offers access to services, food programs, transport, hospitals, charities and public facilities. It should also offer hope.

Bill Crews agrees, there must be an advocate for the homeless, a commissioner in the Minns government to better co-ordinate the response of agencies and charities. Let's end the nightmare for the homeless.

Paul Nicolaou is executive director of Business Sydney