

Where's our compassion?

Paul Nicolaou



Sydney sees itself as a confident, vibrant and compassionate global city yet, every night, hundreds of homeless men and women sleep on our streets, in doorways, parks and railway stations.

It is heartbreaking to know the number of people living on what was once called "skid row" just keeps growing and can only become worse unless strong action is taken.

As a society, we should not look the other way when every day we see in our midst people living the nightmare of homelessness.

You'll find encampments everywhere on George St outside the QVB, at St James and Circular Quay railway stations, Milsons Point and under the light rail viaduct at

Wentworth Park. Looking the other way shouldn't be an option but that's what the official protocol for government agencies suggests when dealing with homelessness.

Government agencies and charities are told not to interfere unless a homeless person is a risk to themselves or to others. End result? No one "owns" the plight of the homeless. The protocol has outlived its usefulness. It was developed 25 years ago in preparation for the Sydney Olympics.

It's past time to update and replace a policy that no longer meets the needs of the homeless and the community in 2026.

Let me be clear. There are numerous organisations working hard at the frontline of homelessness offering meals, services and encouragement. More must be done.

Business Sydney has crafted a policy response that we would like to see embraced by government

agencies and community organisations. We have repeatedly called for the appointment of a homelessness commissioner within the state government to lead and co-ordinate the overall response to rough sleeping.

Our initiative comes in the wake of the most recent street count that showed nearly 350 people, a staggering 24 per cent increase are sleeping rough in our city.

These are not just numbers. They are in fact human beings who are entitled to dignity and a roof over their head and to be known by name.

Our policy agenda focuses on two distinct areas. Freeing up under-utilised CBD buildings that can be repurposed for affordable housing with some devoted to crisis housing.

A repurposed older building in the CBD could provide immediate shelter while the longer-term issues that have led to rough sleeping can be addressed.

Each person left to sleep rough is a disturbing symbol of a broader failure of systems and policy.

In 2026, we are faced with a perfect storm of problems that can only make homelessness even worse. This week's interest rate increase and the prospect of more to come adds to an already intense cost of living crisis.

The line between people having a roof over their head or sleeping rough on the street is very thin indeed, just one personal crisis away.

Policy change including a new protocol to address homelessness is needed now.

The choice facing the government is stark: Continue managing homelessness at arm's length, or act decisively to end rough sleeping as a tolerated feature of city life.

Delay is not a benign condition. It has a harrowing human cost that we should no longer accept.

Paul Nicolaou is executive director of Business Sydney