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WHEN WORKING IS NOT ENOUGH

TASMANIA'S RENTAL CRISIS IS
CREATING A NEW WAVE OF
HOMELESS - ORDINARY PEOPLE
WITH ORDINARY JOBS

FOOD EAT, DRINK AND PLAY TRAVEL FLAT OUT AND FABULOUS ART OPEN TO INTERPRETATION



The working homeless

These are the latest victims of Tasmania's deepening rental crisis: ordinary families in ordinary jobs. But some can no longer live on their wages alone. They are struggling to feed their kids, and desperate to reclaim their dignity

WORDS TRACY RENKIN

Emily* grew up in Tasmania but says she can't afford to live here anymore. We meet in a Hobart city coffee shop to chat and, after a few minutes, she points out her \$1 tip shop dress pants to illustrate some of the things she's gone without since the Tasmanian rental surge. Not that you'd know it, because this mother-of-three is beautifully groomed and blends in easily with all the other coffee shop customers. She's got a radiant smile — but sad eyes that well up a little as she quietly shares her story of homelessness.

She's just walked up from her Salamanca workplace that has provided her with consistent work for the past six years. She's so grateful for her casual position and often works full-time hours in the fancy shop in one of the iconic, sandstone buildings.

Her day involves serving well-heeled tourists who enjoy splashing out on trinkets and items of clothing that often cost more than Emily takes home each week. Seeing that kind of wealth every day can be hard to take when you don't have a place to call home.

It's been exactly two years since Emily had the security of a

roof over her head. She has spent half of that time living in her run-down camper van car — often parked outside the two-bedroom, West Hobart cottage she was renting before it was sold and turned into an Airbnb.

Taking showers sporadically at friends' places is something that's become the norm. She's seen Tasmanians sleeping in sand dunes, in cars, under trees and in doorways. Emily is currently house sitting, which she's pleased about because the wood fire is a comforting luxury that she really appreciates after "almost freezing to death" in her car last winter.

Emily is just one of the many thousands of Tasmanians who have a job but can no longer find or afford a place to live. She's joined by many other working families who have managed to keep the roof over their head but who are making big sacrifices each week in order to do so. It's an embarrassing narrative for a wonder state in the global spotlight that attracts cashed-up tourists from all around the world.

The many agencies that look after our most vulnerable Tasmanians have confirmed the story is true. They all say more and more working families are reaching out for emergency relief because the extra money they are forking out each week for their rent — and sometimes mortgage — means they now can't afford to live.

Aaron Kropf runs Loaves and Fishes, a charity that makes 4500 nutritious, ready-made-meals a week and delivers \$1 million kilograms of fresh fruit and vegetables to Tasmanian emergency relief suppliers every year. He says demand is so high now that agencies have to take it in turns to receive their goods.

He says he could easily hand out twice as much as they are currently producing. "It's really tough keeping up with the demand because it has increased so dramatically," Kropf says. "And it's just growing and growing and growing. We've heard lots of stories of working parents trying so hard to make ends meet. These mums and dads are working hard for a living and paying taxes and the least we can do is support them in trying to do so."

Many of the state's emergency relief agencies have also admitted they don't really know just how widespread the problem is in Tasmania because there are no official statistics for the "new working poor" because they aren't officially in "the system." They do know though, that these families are not the same welfare-reliant-families joining the massive Tasmanian public housing queue. These men and women work hard for their money.

Among others, they are our casual hospitality and retail staff, whose hours fluctuate depending on the tourism season; some



couldn't afford to rent anywhere close by, so he's sleeping in his car. I also washed for a Hobart charity manager who had not been able to secure a new rental after her lease run out. She had no alternative but to sleep in her car and couch-surf until she found somewhere. She said to me 'I hope this is all right, I know I'm not the type of person this service is intended for'."

It takes time for the effect of rapid and unprecedented increases in private rentals to wash through a community, says UTAS public policy professor Richard Eccleston, who has spent the past few years extensively researching Australian housing markets. He says the 30 per cent rental price increase in the past three years is a massive impost on lower income working families. The most recent census data shows the sometimes impossible challenge facing the 25,000 households in greater Hobart in the private rental market.

He points out that given most of these families are now paying an extra \$6000 dollars in rent a year for a three-bedroom home and the median income is still \$65,000, "that's a massive increase." It also explains why Emily has no choice but to live in her camper van when she's not house sitting given she earns an annual income of around \$35,000.

But of course the rental spike is not just a Hobart crisis or challenge. In some parts of the state, like St Helens, there are no rentals currently available. And then there's the issue of social displacement: more and more families are being forced to uproot their children and move away from their communities of support they've often been a part of for many years to start a new life in suburbs further out — just so they can afford to eat.

Sorell Mayor Kerry Vincent says he is devastated his municipality is losing working families who can no longer afford to live there. But it's not just the satellite cities of Hobart that are experiencing these issues. Taroona, for instance, is also losing long-term families. Up in the North and North-West emergency relief agencies are being run off their feet. They are running just to stand still, says TasCOSS chief executive Kym Goodes. "Right around the state emergency relief organisations are now starting to see more and more of the working poor families coming in to get support," Goodes says.

"They might be coming in to get a food parcel because they've got to pay their electricity bill this fortnight, and after they've paid their rent there won't be any more left over for food. That food parcel will get them through those lumpy periods of time where they've got bigger bills due. More and more Tasmanians are at the point where they can't live anymore. They literally don't have the money to live."

Our number one need is shelter, Goodes says, "And people will go without everything else to maintain their shelter. They might not put the heating on and just stay in bed, they will stop paying insurance or be forced to give up food." The number of Tasmanians who go without food on a regular basis is actually very high. They also stop taking medicine and don't go to the



Picture: MATT THOMPSON



Picture: EDDIE SAFARIK

doctor."

It's a shocking reality that Melissa* in Moonah totally gets. She's had recurring tonsillitis for months now, and last week was very unwell. It's been a problem for her since she and her husband and their three children — all aged under seven — moved to Hobart close to a year ago.

Her husband's seasonal festival work had been up and down until a few weeks ago when he finally secured full-time employment. Melissa [featured on today's TasWeekend cover] was run down and fatigued and really needed to see a doctor, but she didn't have enough money because they also needed to buy their youngest daughter's regular medicine. It was a difficult decision but they decided to pay for the baby's medicine.

The family had originally planned to buy a house in Tassie because they had been priced out of the Fremantle housing market in Perth. They had saved a good deposit but decided to rent until he found full-time work.

A year later and that sizeable deposit has now all been gobbled up in much higher rents than they were expecting. Their first "tiny, old place" in Lenah Valley cost them \$470 a week.

They were grateful to secure it after applying for more than 12 houses and missing out on all of them. But they were only in the home for nine months before the owners wanted to move back in. In that short time the rental prices had increased dramatically. "Surprise, surprise, it was even worse," Melissa says. "I think the most shocking thing for us was going to the viewings for other rentals and there were constant streams of people coming down the street and massing on the lawns to view the property. It was so hectic."

For this family, forking out most of their income on rent meant there was very little left to spend on food. Sometimes there was no money. "We completely ran out of food a couple of weeks ago and my sister had heaps of green tomatoes so I turned them into pickles and we've been eating those," Melissa says.

Clockwise from main: Mother-of-three Emily* in the van she calls home; Aaron Kropf of Loaves and Fishes; Kym Goodes of TasCOSS; Richard Eccleston of UTAS; Melissa* and one of her three daughters.

of our farmers and fruit pickers, who also work seasonally; and artists like Glebe's Frances Butler who, just before Easter, took her landlord to court to fight a \$100-a-week rent increase and won. "I know heaps of people in the arts who have these issues," Butler says. "Because their work is not consistent they are slowly being priced out of the areas they get most of their work. We are the kind of people who make events like Dark Mofo happen, yet we are the people who are struggling to make ends meet."

Colin Howell is used to washing fairly worn and tired-looking clothing as a volunteer for a mobile laundry van called Splasher, run by a charity called Orange Sky. The Hobart retiree says he's noticed that lately the quality of the clothing he's putting into the machines is much higher than normal.

"We get very well presented people who come to our service," Howell says. "These are people, if you walked past them on the street, you wouldn't consider they were homeless. A man I washed for the other day had a full-time job in Hobart but

Clockwise from main: Hobart City Mission's John Stubbley with emergency relief officer Clinton Duong; Andrea Witt of Shelter Tasmania; Leah Galvin of Eat Well Tasmania.

"It's a bit of a paradox," says Leah Galvin, who runs Eat Well Tasmania. "We live in a state where there is a fantastic bounty of amazing fresh produce but it's not always where people need it to be, and not always at a price they can afford. Unlike Melissa's family who spent the little they did have on fruit and vegetables, Galvin says usually it is fresh produce that is the first to go when budgets are tight.

When I call Michelle Williamson in Burnie and I'm waiting for her to pick up, the ringtone turns into the original Wonder Woman theme song: "All the world is waiting for you... and the power you possess". When she answers I cheekily ask the Produce to the People manager "are you Wonder Woman?" Her "sometimes, sometimes not" response is a reflection of the warm and fuzzy feeling Williamson gets from knowing she's making a difference, but also the fizzle of that fuzzy feeling when she realises there are so many more Tasmanians who desperately need it.

Every Tuesday and Thursday the four-season, volunteer-run farm, squatting on a one hectare block of dirt at Burnie High School, opens its greengrocer-like shopfront for people who can't afford to buy fresh vegetables. Today it's "insanely busy." The shop is stocked with about 50kg of freshly-harvested vegetables grown on-site and another 20kg of vegetables local people grow and drop in.

Among them is Wynyard retiree Paul Plunkett who has just unloaded 102kg of his backyard pumpkins. Loaves and Fishes also donate around 950kg of pantry items and pre-made meals and more vegetables: usually carrots, onions and potatoes, but sometimes rare treats like mangoes and bananas.

Williamson says when the roller doors go up she is "gob-smacked with the line of people going right out the door". There's usually at least 40 families waiting to come in and select their free food. One hundred families file through its doors — six at a time — every time it opens. They've just had to have the car-park reconfigured because demand is so high the customers were causing traffic jams.

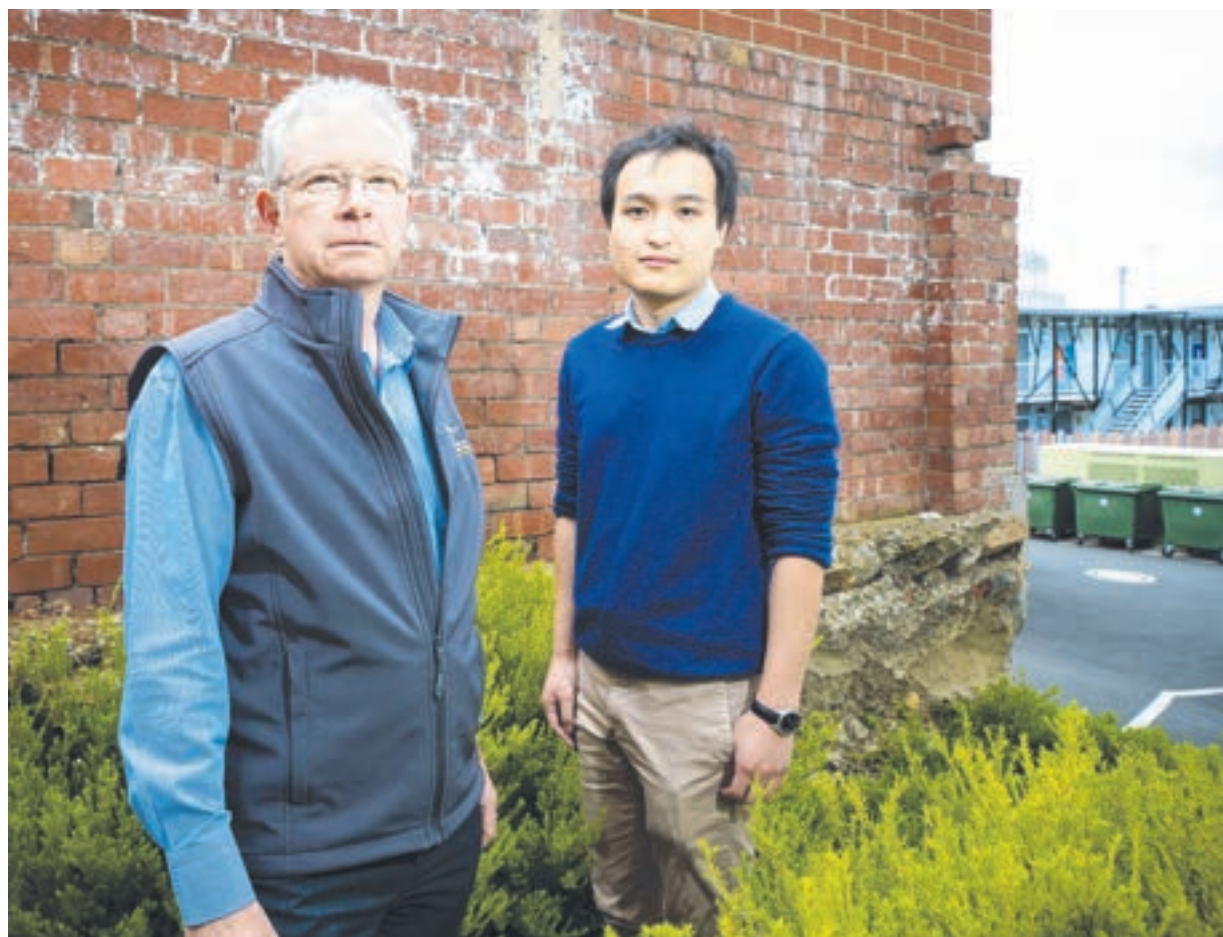
She says more and more working families are reaching out for help. "We wouldn't usually see any working people, but now there are around 10 working families who come and see us every week. They may have been slammed with a bill they haven't budgeted for, their hours may have been cut back, or most likely their rent has gone up. There are whole families couch surfing and people living out of their cars. A lot of our customers are very highly stressed and many of them feel really embarrassed about having to get help."

Andrea Witt is the chair for Shelter Tasmania, the body that represents every homelessness service in the state — and she has never before seen it as bad as it is. She has never before seen the number of working Tasmanian families who need help. Witt's been in the industry for 25 years and observed the consequences of a 44 per cent increase in the capital's rent prices in just 10 years, while Tasmanian incomes remain the lowest in the country.

It's tragic, she says, that some working families are not able to afford to rent a place to live in. Emergency relief services around the state are unable to keep pace with the growing demand for those that need support, she says. On average, each day 16 requests for emergency relief from families with children go unmet.

More and more Tasmanians — many of them working families — are seeking emergency relief, says John Stubbley who runs Hobart City Mission, a charity that has been helping Tasmanians for 167 years. Stubbley says sometimes the people seeking support haven't eaten for three or four days. "It's now more than not having a roof over your head, it's not having food in your stomach," he says.

Hobart City Mission is currently turning away 1200 people seeking emergency relief funding each year because of a lack of funds. This year more working families than ever before are seeking help. "We have seen a dramatic increase in people seeking our help," Stubbley says. "It's [helping working families] probably gone from non-existent to now being quite noticeable." His colleague Annette Clarke says a lot of working families who need



Picture: RICHARD JUPE



Picture: MATT THOMPSON

help often leave it to the last minute because they are so embarrassed about the stigma where they feel they shouldn't need help. "It's a sad thing that's going on," she says.

But, despite this growing need, the Federal Government has just slashed funding to many of Tasmania's long-standing and trusted welfare organisations from the end of 2019.

Mr Stubbley says the Federal Government put emergency relief funding out to tender last year, resulting in long-standing emergency relief providers experiencing either a cut in funds or a complete cessation of funding. He says the change means the potential loss of about \$2.6 million in emergency relief funding to Tasmania.

Hobart City Mission is one of six charities and community organisations that have written to the Federal Government, outlining the "dire consequences" of the cuts. The other groups include St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, the Benevolent Society, the Helping Hand Association and Wyndarra support centre in Smithton.

For the Hobart City Mission, it potentially means shutting its doors to people seeking emergency relief from the start of next year. The funding cuts will mean about half of the emergency relief support now available in the state will no longer exist.

Shelter's Ms Witt says she is gravely concerned the need for working families to seek emergency relief is going to get worse. "There is not a person in Tasmania who doesn't know someone who is experiencing these hardships. It's so difficult for the people who are on lower working incomes and doing their very best to get ahead but struggling because of a rental environment that is well and truly out of their control." She says working families right around the state are often finding paying the bills just as difficult as families on benefits, and are being forced to make dif-

icult decisions because more and more of their income is being spent on putting a roof over their heads.

"These people cannot afford to pay the rent and buy the food they need," Witt says. "Children with strong sporting skills have to stop playing team sports, family members are stopping their medications because the money doesn't stretch that far, parents are giving up a meal a day and children from working families are being kept home from school because their parents can't supply them with sandwiches like the other kids have."

At one point last winter, Emily's car broke down and she had to borrow a friend's car to sleep in. She remembers lining up every day at Colony 47 to get assistance to find a rental, which is difficult for someone who once owned her own home.

"And I remember how much I stank," she shudders. "I absolutely stank, and I could see people staring at me. A few weeks earlier I was just like them. Homelessness can happen to anyone."

After she lost her home, Emily's two sons, who were studying at UTAS, had to find their own places to stay while her 13-year-old daughter stayed with her. She says "the absolutely suffocating expense of renting in Hobart" robbed her of being able to care for them all under the one roof.

"When you are living in a vehicle you become aware that you have to keep moving on," she says. "You have to keep feeding the meter. You become really aware of how unwanted you really are. I feel shut out."

"Losing the roof over my head has rattled me to my core. It has totally destroyed my confidence because I was the person who helped others — and now I am the one that needs help. I've always been able to look after myself and pay my bills and I know I am doing all the right things, but it's still not enough." ●

**We have changed the names of the two mothers quoted in this story for privacy reasons.*

HELPING HANDS

- NOBUCKS CAFE at 56-58 Melville Street, run by the Wesley Unit- ing Church, offers a free lunch from 12pm-2pm every weekday
- FOOD NOT BOMBS at Criterion House offers free vegan and glu- ten-free meals with takeaway bread 4.30pm-6.30pm Saturdays
- KINGS DINER in Mathers House offering bakery type food on Wednesdays at 7pm
- LOUI'S VAN operates six nights in Glenorchy, Hobart CBD, Gagebrook, Bridgewater, Clarendon Vale and Rokeby
- THE SALVATION ARMY at 180 Elizabeth, St Hobart, offers a free Sunday lunch