

# SPEECH

**Claire Victory, National President**  
**CEO Sleepout**  
**Wilson Carpark, Adelaide**

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Thank you Brenton. Good evening everybody, I'm honoured to be here to speak to you tonight.

As Brenton said, my name is Claire Victory and I am the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society – an organisation which comprises over 60,000 members and volunteers in Australia alone, and 800,000 worldwide in about 150 countries.

In my spare time I work full time as a solicitor in a small firm in the CBD.

Working in the city, as I'm sure many of you do, I'm reminded daily of the reality of homelessness within our city – you see people sitting, or sleeping, or walking around who clearly have no safe place to call home.

If those people were the totality of those experiencing homelessness in our city, it would be sad and shocking enough, but unfortunately those individuals represent the tip of a very large iceberg – there are so many we don't see.

Myself and my fellow members of the Adelaide Vinnies conference visit people each week who live in crumbling dwellings and in cars and on other people's couches and in toilet blocks and in tiny rooms in shady boarding houses which are both expensive and insecure – and there are members in conferences across SA experiencing this same thing.

While it's easy to get bogged down in statistics and despair at the soaring rates of people who are living in poverty, sleeping rough or who are victims of family violence, there is no doubt that Vinnies has an enormous impact, assisting more than 135,000 South Australians last financial year alone – whether it's through receiving a supermarket voucher and being able to put food on the table; being served a hot meal at Fred's Van; being supported with crisis accommodation; or receiving help with bills and living expenses.

What I learned when I first began volunteering with Vinnies 25 years ago, aged 10, is that food and shelter and clothing are really important... but they're not the only important things.

I learned then, and am reminded every day by the amazing but largely hidden work of our members, that the friendship and personal support we offer as Vincentians is so important, and the way in which we meet with people where they are – in every sense – is what makes this Society unique and so special to me.

The impact of the compassionate ear we offer to our companions in need is something that can't be measured; when you're living on the margins of society, you're already sent a million messages by the community and the media that you don't matter, that it's your fault, that your poverty is a personal, moral failing....being made to feel guilty for seeking or accepting help is an added burden that should never be placed on the shoulders of those doing it tough.

Vinnies is committed to providing assistance without judgment, and in a way which respects a person's inherent human dignity.

So often we see in the media negative portrayals of people living in poverty or on the margins of society – it is easy to demonise people living in these circumstances as 'other'; certainly much easier than doing something about the underlying causes of such poverty, such as the appallingly low rate of Newstart.

We have seen it just this week with the reported desecration of the War Memorial, where the presence of a few blankets automatically had authorities pointing the finger at people experiencing homelessness as if that's exactly what we should expect.

It's why it is so important that you have taken the time to participate in the Sleepout – as people of influence in your workplaces and community more broadly, you have the power to change some of the stereotypes associated with people living on the fringes.

When you speak, people listen – and so beyond the much-needed financial support you offer Vinnies – for which we are, truly, so very grateful – your role as advocates is so important.

I hope that when you leave here tomorrow your eyes will have been opened to the realities of life for some of our fellow Australians, and that you will step in next time someone you know (or maybe even someone you don't know) continues the narrative that people living in poverty or who are experiencing homelessness are to blame for their circumstances.

Later tonight you will hear from someone who was a guest at the Vinnies Men's Crisis Centre, who certainly doesn't fit the stereotype that many associate with homelessness. It's an account

from someone who was living a comfortable existence before circumstances collided, and a reminder that poverty and homelessness are experiences and situations, which need not be inevitable or infinite and which should *never* define the identity or character of a person.

And from Vinnies' point of view, that is our strength: we see and respect the *person* and have an unshakeable belief in that person's human dignity; no matter their circumstances, we strive to offer them a hand up – no judgment. We act locally, responding with love in our hearts to individuals according to their unique circumstances.

And it is important for us to continue to strengthen our role as a leading voice through social justice and change. Our members aren't always great at talking about what we do – we like to quietly go about our work, avoiding the spotlight. Having partners like you who can help us joyfully tell our story and help us advocate for those in need is so important, and we are so grateful.

I would like to personally thank you for your participation in tonight's event; and for your fundraising efforts in the lead up and, in the case of many of you, your support over a number of years.

Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the night.

*The Society of St Vincent de Paul consists of 60,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 Conferences located in individual parishes across Australia.*

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**MEDIA CONTACT: Judith Tokley 0408 824 306 / 0400 845 492 or [media@svdp.org.au](mailto:media@svdp.org.au)**