



GO REVVING  
WITH THE RIV  
CHECK IT OUT  
FROM PAGE 16



SLEEPING UNDER THE BRIDGE, IN THE BUSH OR A FREEZING CAR...

# FORGOTTEN FAMILIES

OUR SPECIAL  
REPORT ON AN  
UNSEEN TRAGEDY  
STARTS ON PAGE 2



## RED NOSES ALL ROUND

At Goodstart Early Learning getting ready for today were (from back row) Jade Stuart with baby Pippa Reeves, Ashlea Swan with baby Grace Adam, Taylah Pryde with baby Blaire McGowan, Jess Macphee with baby Rachel Miles and (at front) Mikaela Wilson with daughter Zahlia Oranje and baby Matilda Burke.

FULL STORY PAGES 8 & 9

Photo: Cath Grey



GOING, GOING, GET IT  
6 BIG PAGES OF REAL ESTATE

STARTS PAGE 27



## CAREERS

EDUCATION, TRAINING  
& EMPLOYMENT 2019

INSIDE TODAY STARTS PAGE 19

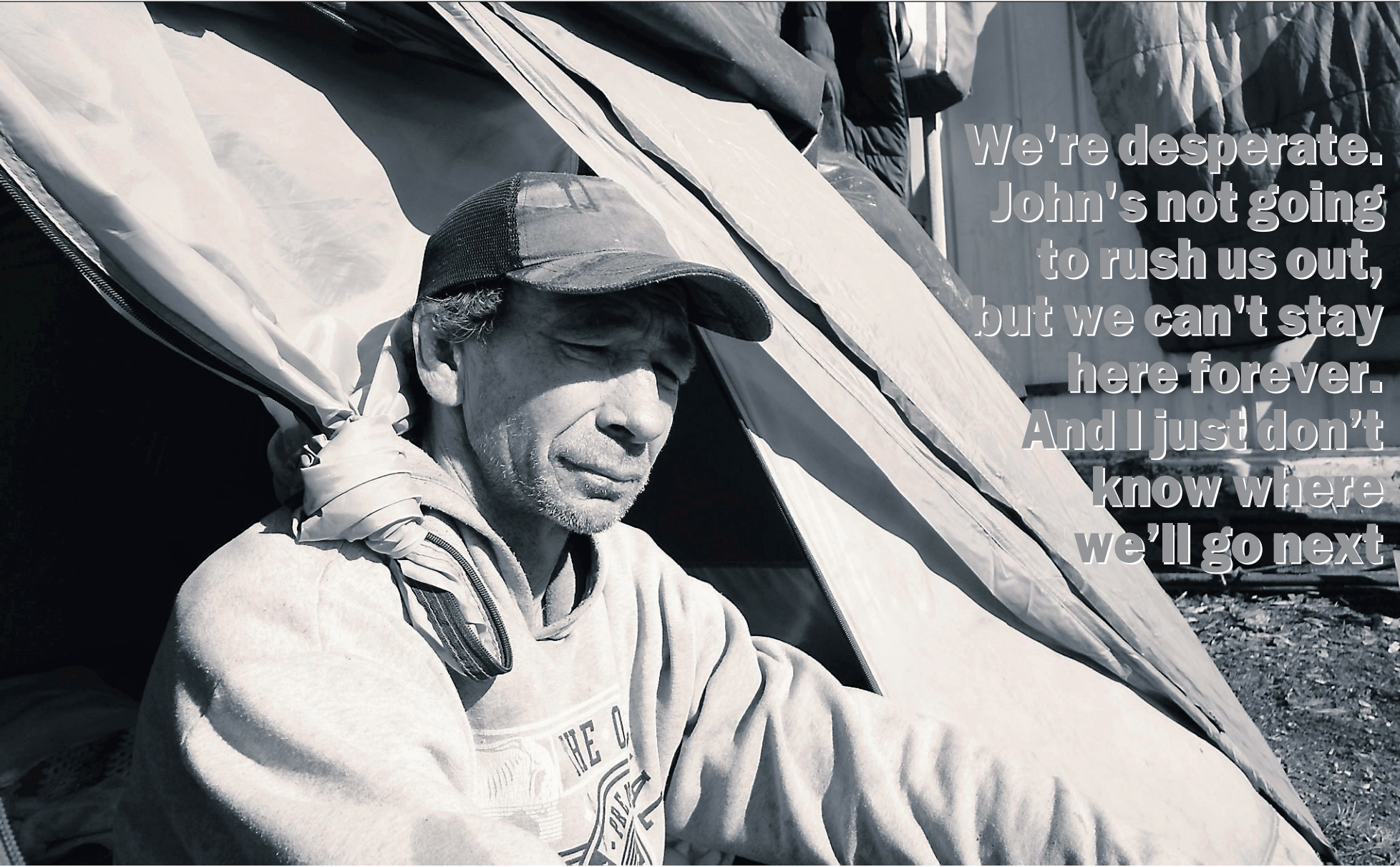
## GAME ON SEASON 2019

16 HUGE PAGES  
OF LOCAL SPORT

IN YOUR MONDAY RIV



# OUR FORGOTTEN FAMILIES



We're desperate. John's not going to rush us out, but we can't stay here forever. And I just don't know where we'll go next

# Homelessness, hopelessness

LOOK into Tony Haigh and Melissa McGee's eyes and you'll see something extraordinarily heartbreaking. You'll see weariness, the emptiness. But above all, it's the hopelessness that leaves you not knowing exactly where to look. The Moama couple has been homeless for six years. And for the past eight months they've been sleeping outdoors. Rain, hail and shine, snatching whatever warmth they can from a campfire, whatever shelter from the Echuca-Moama bridge and whatever protection from a tin fence. They are on their own long day's journey into night. Nomads with little more than a tent and the few blankets supplied by local homelessness services; band-aid tokens to tide them over until the next roof, maybe, one day, comes along.

THE homeless exist in a netherworld; in the case of the twin towns if you care to look it doesn't take long to find some. On a freezing winter's night under the bridge is a favoured haunt; sadly also occasionally a hunting ground for people who get a kick out of kicking those who are down. Writer CHARMAYNE ALLISON and photographer CATH GREY have been investigating the issue, which reaches across the community, and discovered the most disturbing collateral damage of all – the hopelessness. People who have fallen through the cracks and who the system can't, sometimes won't, help because even the system is tragically overloaded and dreadfully underperforming

They've been told it will; promised it will. But as two people in an ever-lengthening list of locals desperate for housing, the pair are at long last on the verge of defeat; to give up hope, the one thing that has kept them going. Tony is 48 but looks about 70, and so emotionally traumatised, so stressed,

he has tears rolling down his cheeks as he talks. "We're sick of it. Melissa and I have been together for ages, she's the light of my life, but we're struggling. Our relationship is struggling from this," he explained, wiping tears from his eyes. His face scarred with wrinkles and dirt staining the seams on his hands, each

line the marker of a tough life – and an especially tough eight months. For a while now, Tony and Melissa have been living under Echuca-Moama Bridge. They haven't been alone, two in a group of about 15 seeking shelter under the twin towns' historic link. Among the group, a pregnant young woman, four children aged 14 and up

and a young man struggling with mental illness. Each with their own challenges but all linked by a desperate need for something most of us take for granted – home. Last Thursday night the group was torn apart. They claim a man wielding a gun stormed into their site and threatened to shoot them if they didn't leave. Fearing for their lives, Tony and Melissa and a couple of others sought protection at Moama Local Aboriginal Land Council. Seeing their desperation, Moama LALC chief executive John Kerr didn't hesitate to offer temporary refuge behind the land council building. "Home" is now a semi-circle of ramshackle tents heated by one small fire.

Continued next page

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OUR FORGOTTEN FAMILIES

It all comes down to the numbers... and you lose

THERE are 764 homes available for social housing in Echuca. Today there are 1809 applications for them.

Tonight no-one really knows how many people will sleep rough, or hit couches and floors in the homes of family and friends.

But it will be a lot; too many.

And many of them are the legacy of our booming real estate market.

“Our options are very limited,” Anglicare Victoria regional director Francis Lynch said.

“There’s a lack of availability and, particularly in Echuca, we find it extremely difficult to find affordable rental accommodation for people on low incomes or Centrelink benefits.”

While the NSW Department of Family and Community Services only provides statistics for the vast Murrumbidgee region, the story sounds much the same in Moama.

St Vincent de Paul Echuca welfare conference president Theresa Jacobs said she had seen a steady climb in the number of homeless locals asking for assistance from both sides of the river.

“I’ve been here the past 10 years and it’s definitely increased throughout the past five,” she said.

“We’ve seen a big jump in homelessness, but it’s a difficult issue to put a number on.

“We help as much as we can. We can give food, clothes and bedding.

“And Anglicare does a wonderful job as well. But the accommodation in Echuca-Moama is not very good.”

In the 2018-19 financial year, Anglicare Victoria helped 239 people including children with their parents and 73 young people through their Echuca homelessness services.

“We don’t actually offer any accommodation ourselves,” Mr Lynch said.

“We can assist people to find emergency accommodation in a motel or a caravan park.

“We also work with people to find them longer-term rental accommodation.”

But due to limited resources and staffing, Anglicare were unable to assist almost the same number – 250 people and 62 young people – in the past financial year.

Mr Lynch said this was largely due

to a stark imbalance in supply and demand.

“It’s incredibly hard to find rental accommodation when there’s a big tourism influx,” he said.

“Plus a lot of communities are struggling with homeowners putting their properties on the Airbnb market rather than the rental market, meaning rental markets are tighter than they might have been five years ago.

“Public housing is also tight, even if you’re on an emergency priority list. Often these houses have long-term, stable tenants.”

The same goes for crisis housing.

“It’s an ongoing issue in Echuca because availability is limited,” Mr Lynch said.

“And occasionally people might have history with a motel and the motel may say no, we don’t want to house that person. That can be a problem as well.”

Mr Lynch said the number of Campaspe locals in housing stress was high, exacerbated by the lack of affordable rental accommodation in the region.

“We’ve found there are no affordable properties available for people on Newstart. And even for people who are on benefits like other Centrelink payments there are still large gaps in affordability,” he said.

“That’s the same for people just on minimum award rates. Many find it very difficult to find affordable accommodation, even if they’re working.”

While Mr Lynch admitted there was a long road ahead before this crisis was fixed, he said both State and Federal Governments had a major role to play in terms of changing policies.

“Even in the last Federal election there were issues discussed around housing affordability and it’s not a new issue, it’s an ongoing issue that as a result we’ve had a lot of families in significant housing stress,” he said.

Njernda Aboriginal Corporation was contacted repeatedly for comment but did not respond.



From previous page

That’s where Melissa and Tony were found crouching yesterday, boiling water for coffee over the embers.

The squealing of their two puppies Coco and Mokbel, who played in the dust nearby, is at odds with the heaviness in Melissa and Tony’s voices.

“I’ve wanted to take my own life several times,” Melissa admitted.

“I’ve gotten really low.

“But the problem is, homelessness is political. No one wants to take responsibility and help find us a home, they just keep arguing with each other over who’s doing the most for people.

“Meanwhile we have nowhere to go, it’s like they don’t even think about us.”

Like many in their situation, Melissa and Tony are the first to admit they’ve had rough histories.

Both have struggled with drugs. Tony “did the jail thing”.

They claim they’re both drug-free now.

In fact, Melissa successfully completed rehab six years ago – but the joy of that victory was short-lived.

A few days later, they would become homeless.

“At the time our kids had just come out of welfare after eight years and they had a lot of hurt in them,” Tony said.

“They came out smoking marijuana and it was a nightmare. Melissa was away in rehab and I was trying to watch the kids.

“But because they were on dope they played up and smashed the house.”

Melissa came home to a sight she’ll never forget – windows smashed, holes kicked in the walls.

She and Tony were evicted and have been homeless ever since.

“What my kids did reflected on me and now I can’t get a house,” Melissa said.

“The kids now have somewhere to live and I don’t. They come down to visit sometimes – they regret what they did to us.”

Tony and Melissa have been drifters ever since, sleeping in tents throughout Echuca-Moama for the past eight months.

Although they are both on Newstart, the couple says it’s just not enough to make ends meet.

And certainly not enough for Echuca-Moama’s consistently high rental prices.

While Tony doesn’t have steady employment, he chops firewood and digs bardi grubs on the side.

As for Melissa, she’s currently dependent on Newstart, but would like a job.

“I love cleaning, I love gardening,” she said.

“I’ve always wanted to work. But because I can’t read and spell, it makes it harder to get a job.”

Even as we speak, she barely keeps still, washing dishes under the tap, raking leaves onto the fire and hanging quilts on the tin fence to dry.

“I tried to get it clean before you came,” she smiles.

There’s another moment when Melissa’s face briefly lights up.

A couple of nights ago, Tony and Melissa were invited to dinner by John Kerr and his family.

“It was a beautiful hot meal,” Melissa said.

“I can’t remember the last time I sat down for a real meal.

“When you’re living like we are, you don’t eat well because you have nowhere to store the food.”

Ask Melissa what she misses most about living in a house and she’ll wax lyrical.

“You don’t know what it’s like to live in a tent until you’ve done it for a long time,” she said.

“You can’t move around, there’s no view – but it’s the only place you can stay warm and dry.”

Throughout the interview, she regularly doubles over with a hacking cough.

It’s causing her pain and she knows she should see a doctor about it.

But, she admits, when all you can worry about is what you’ll eat and where you’ll live, health is low priority.

By the time we return later that afternoon, Melissa’s condition has deteriorated to the point that she’s curled in her tent, barely able to move.

Tony is running down the street as we pull up.

“I’m going down to my uncle’s place to ask him to drive her to hospital. She’s in a really bad way,” he said.

By the next morning, Melissa is back at the campsite.

She still looks worse for wear, but after seeing the doctors she had nowhere else to go but back to their freezing makeshift home.

Watching his partner suffer, it’s no wonder Tony’s eyes fill with more tears; the only thing they are not short of.

“All we want is a home, we’d live in a shack,” he said.

“There’s no reason Melissa and I shouldn’t get a house.

“We’re responsible, we’ll take care of it, we’re willing to have our payments straight out of the bank because that way we know it’s paid.

“We’re desperate. John’s not going to rush us out, but we can’t stay here forever. And I just don’t know where we’ll go next.”



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OUR FORGOTTEN FAMILIES

“The bottom line is, you don't give up on people – it's just basic humanity



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It’s an old story that just gets worse

FOR Moama Local Aboriginal Land Council chief executive John Kerr, Echuca-Moama’s homelessness crisis is, tragically, not a new story.

And after months witnessing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families and individuals struggle to put a roof over their heads, he’s had enough.

“The bottom line for us is to get a conversation started,” he said. “We want to try to get something going, emergency accommodation, whatever it can be, just to get them off the streets.

“We need to bring this to the forefront, to go into crisis mode. This is on our doorstep and we need to deal with it as a community.”

Not only is this crisis not new — John believes the number of homeless locals is on the rise.

“It’s always been in the background. It’s always been there. And it’s only going up,” he said.

While Moama LALC has done what it can to help, John admitted resources were limited.

“Our hands are certainly tied. We’re not like other big organisations, we don’t have loads of money,” he said.

“We only own four houses in Moama and they’re all tenanted up. All we are now is a referral service.”

This dearth of houses is a pattern across the twin towns.

“Private rent here is through the roof, it’s just ridiculous,” John said.

“And even social housing out west is very hard to come by because even if people do leave, they sign it over to one of their family members and it’s passed down.”

John believes a failure in the system has left so many families sleeping rough.

“The sooner we pull together as organisations and help these people get housed, the better,” he said.

“It’s sad when you see people’s kids have to go down and live in the bush as well.

“There’s no power, no basic amenities, you have to go to the toilet behind a tree and not shower for weeks on end.”

John was concerned housing services turned away struggling families who had “messed up” while in public housing in the past.

“We all make mistakes, but how many times do you forgive your neighbour? A thousand times a thousand, it never stops,” he said.

“People deserve second chances. And third and fourth and fifth chances.

“The bottom line is you don’t give up on people – it’s just basic humanity.”

It is here and now, on our doorsteps

I’VE never been personally touched by homelessness.

Never in my 25 years have I worried where I’ll sleep at night.

How I’ll stay warm.

Whether I’ll even have a roof over my head.

But just 40 minutes with local couple Tony and Melissa was enough to open my eyes to this local crisis – and leave me absolutely heartbroken.

I’m mystified that in a country like Australia and a booming town like Echuca-Moama this couple, and so many others, can’t get a roof over their heads.

Especially in the freezing depths of winter.

It’s a national disgrace for which no one seems to want to take responsibility.

Everybody knows there’s a problem and everybody says it’s someone else’s problem.

It doesn’t matter who you talk to – homelessness seems to get passed around like the proverbial hot potato.

After ringing around to the powers that be, I still couldn’t get a satisfactory answer as to how and when this crisis would be properly addressed.

And who would address it.

Housing services are buck-

OPINION Charmayne Allison

ling under the pressure, struggling to rehome a revolving door of desperate locals in a district with high rental prices and scant available real estate.

Meanwhile state politicians claim they can offer little assistance besides a letter or a phone call back to these services or other politicians to pressure them to take action.

As for Federal officials – well, they brushed it off as a state issue.

The homelessness crisis is being treated like a political football, tossed from service to service, politician to politician.

I get that it can be complicated.

I get that there are two sides to every story.

What about issues with drugs, alcohol, vandalism, you name it – the myriad caveats which can cause local services to pause before putting a roof back over these people’s heads?

But as Moama Local Aboriginal Land Council’s John Kerr eloquently put it, people deserve second chances.

And third and fourth and fifth chances.

No matter how many times someone makes a mistake, forgive again.

Because no human should have to live like this.

After hours of interviews, I’m getting nothing. No answers.

And tonight, I’ll go home to my nice, warm house with a meal on the table and a toasty bed.

I’m not under any pressure to house my partner, family, children.

Meanwhile locals like Tony and Melissa are shivering through the night, clawing for hope.

Clawing for the will to even live another day.

These are people.

They have names, stories, bodies fighting sickness, faces ageing too quickly and mental health hanging by a thread.

It’s not enough to point fingers or say “one day”.

This crisis is here and now, on our doorstep.

And it can no longer be ignored.

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## OUR FORGOTTEN FAMILIES



We can't offer crisis support. What we do is try to exert influence over the agencies to resolve matters quicker

**Peter Walsh**  
Member for Murray Plains



I'll find out exactly what we need, I'll get what the needs are right through the electorate

**Helen Dalton**  
Member for Murray



As I understand it, public housing and social housing are purely state-based

**Damian Drum**  
Member for Nicholls

# Politics holds no answers for region's disadvantaged

WHEN it comes to the homelessness crisis in Echuca-Moama, there's one point all politicians agree on – there's no easy solution.

And as for offering emergency assistance to desperate locals like Tony and Melissa – the reality, according to our local members, is much more complicated.

So complicated no government member, opposition member or independent could do, or offer, anything that would in any way provide any kind of immediate relief — not just for Tony and Melissa but for whoever else slept in last night's cold and rain.

“We can't offer crisis support. What we do is try to exert influence over the agencies to resolve matters quicker,” Member for Murray Plains Peter Walsh said.

“That's achieved through letters and phone calls.”

Mr Walsh said locals regularly came into his office asking for support to find housing.

“This calendar year we've helped a number of people who have come in, particularly young pregnant mothers who did not have homes and we've worked very hard to get accommodation for them,” he said.

“It's tough going because there's not a list of vacant housing stock out there.”

Mr Walsh said the Victorian Government currently provides funding to local housing organisations like Njernda and Anglicare.

But he was not aware either of these organisations had recently sought additional state government support.

As for struggling locals like Tony and Melissa, Mr Walsh said there was often a backstory for why some people were unable to secure housing.

“You need to know where they've been with the agencies so far and what history they have if they've been in public housing before,” he said.

“If they've created problems that can be why they're now out of public housing.”

Across the river, Member for Murray Helen Dalton said she would advocate to NSW Minister for Housing Melinda Pavey for social housing and affordable housing in Moama.

“I'm yet to have that conversation,” she said.

“We only got back from the winter recess last

week and this week has been hectic because of the abortion bill and water.

“But I will be raising my concerns to Melinda Pavey.

“And as I speak to different councils, I'll find out exactly what we need, I'll get what the needs are right through the electorate.”

Focusing federally, Member for Nicholls Damian Drum said he believed homelessness had grown throughout the electorate in the past four months.

But while the federal government assists with funding to improve housing affordability and availability, the money is administered through the state government.

“As I understand it, public housing and social housing are purely state-based,” he said.

“The Federal Government would be open to ways of assisting the various states with their policies surrounding homelessness.

“But it's certainly not the Federal Government's role to develop what's going to work in each of the respective states.”

Federal Member for Farrer Sussan Ley was travelling and unavailable for direct comment.

However her office said NSW will receive \$2.27 billion from the Commonwealth over the next five years under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

\$7.5 billion has been budgeted over five years to all states and territories through the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

This includes an additional \$620 million in specific funding for homelessness services, which must be matched by the state governments.



**Federal Member for Farrer Sussan Ley was unable to be reached for comment as she was travelling.**

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**QUEENSLAND FRUIT FLY COMMUNITY UPDATE**

**Winter control of Queensland Fruit Fly**

Winter control of Queensland Fruit Fly (QFF) requires the placement of traps and baits in places where fruit fly are overwintering. The most common overwintering sites are lemon trees (or loquats and other dense evergreen trees) situated close to a heat source, such as a winter-heated house.

### Refuge from cold, wind and rain

Ideal locations for fruit fly to take refuge from winter conditions include evergreen plants near heat sources and sunny evergreen orchards. Heat sources include houses, lighting, compost heaps, chook or stock yards and evergreen trees surrounding open sunny ground. Heat sources can be:

- **Active**—i.e. they produce heat (e.g. heated houses, compost heaps) or
- **Passive**—i.e. they warm up in the sun and slowly release heat at night (e.g. woody evergreen plants, sports ovals)

### How long do adult Queensland Fruit Fly live?

- **Summer**—QFF are very active and spend a lot of energy on flying, mating and egg-laying—2 to 3 months
- **Winter**—If they find suitable refuge, they go into a type of hibernation mode—6 to 9 months
- **Total**—2 to 12 months

### Winter and spring jobs

Home gardeners with a fruit tree or vegetable patch should complete the following tasks:

- Place protein-based QFF traps in evergreen trees near the house or other heated buildings;
- Pick up or harvest and destroy or treat fallen fruit or unwanted fruit that are still on the tree (particularly citrus fruits at this time of year). Destroy by sealing in plastic bag and leaving in the sun for a few days, freezing, microwaving, burning, cooking, drying, immersion in water, break open and feed to animals, etc;
- Rake out fallen fruit around trees into the open and mash or mulch;
- Prepare for the next fruit fly season, if necessary, by stocking up on traps, baits, lures, toxicants for traps and baits, netting, fruit protection bags, approved pesticides (visit your local nursery to find these products).
- If you do have pesticides in stock make sure they are currently approved for use against fruit flies in the crops you have growing and they are within their use-by date.
- Prune fruit trees to an easy-to-harvest height, reducing the amount of fruit to a useable quantity and making it easier to net if netting becomes necessary.

If you have unwanted or unmanaged fruit trees, have them removed free of charge through the Host Tree and Plant Removal Program. Contact your council customer service area and complete an application form.

For more information on QFF control, collect an information pack from your Council's Customer Service Centre.

Funded by the Victorian Government's Managing Fruit Fly Regional Grants Program

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