

Compassion key to helping Gawler's rough sleepers

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GAWLER police and Riverside Salvation Army are encouraging the community to show compassion for people sleeping rough on the back of increased concerns around homeless people in the town.

In recent weeks, Gawler police have seen a number of complaints centred around the number of homeless people in town and concerns their presence will lead to a rise in crime.

However, Gawler officer in charge Senior Sergeant Robert Mowday said that was not the case.

SS Mowday said Gawler was bucking the trend in terms of both the number of rough sleepers and crime related to them through the work of initiatives like the Red Room Project (RRP).

"The Red Room Project ensures police actively seek out and engage with rough sleepers and homeless people around town, around the clock – especially on night shift," he said.

"Police build relationships with them, which not only enhances their personal safety, but provides an avenue for them to report crime.

"Then what we can do is join or unite local services to meet and address their bespoke individual needs in a cohesive sort of way."

In looking at metropolitan Adelaide, SS Mowday highlighted Hutt Street Centre, for example, has seen requests for food and showers up between 50 and 100 per cent – the largest increase since its records began in 1954.

Catherine House, a service to aid women, had reported it was only able to assist one in five women in 2023 due to increased demand.

SS Mowday said through RRP, police and the associated services in Gawler have actually seen a reduction, with six rough sleepers in the area getting into housing and two getting into rehabilitation programs.

"Since we started the Red Room Project in mid-2022, we had over 60 rough sleepers come to the area and it probably spiked at 15 or 16 at one time," he said.

"We've got the numbers down to less than 10 [in Gawler at any one time] – that fluctuates probably between seven and 10, that could be different tomorrow than it is today.

"In the context of over 60, I think that's



Gawler police officers including Senior Constable Randal Murch and Sergeant Debbie Luetkins often engage Gawler's rough sleepers to connect them to services like Riverside Salvation Army.

PHOTO: Aidan Curtis

pretty good."

The engagement with RRP has also led to an 18 per cent reduction in rough sleepers being exposed to or suspected of crime in Gawler.

"Leading into engaging with Red Room, 39 of the rough sleepers had been either a victim of crime or a suspect in the six months leading up to engagement," SS Mowday said.

"Upon engaging the Red Room, in the six months afterwards, that had reduced to 22 of those either being a victim of crime or a suspect."

Riverside Salvation Army has been a part of RRP from the get go, with Riverside church leader Darren Dwyer helping SS Mowday get the project off the ground.

Mr Dwyer said RRP has had a big impact in tailoring individual help for homeless people accessing the various services and support.

"To actually work hand in hand with local authorities and police, to really tailor a plan for each individual as best that we can, has been fantastic," Mr Dwyer said.

"I think to be able to then have all the organisations that somehow have interactions

with homeless people, or potentially homeless people, and then invite them here where they can build that relationship and then move on into accommodation or rehab, has been really helpful.

"Everyone finds this is a safe place to be themselves, and they know that if they do want to engage and move forward, then we will support them."

Both SS Mowday and Mr Dwyer said they believe a community is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable people and called for more compassion going forward.

"It's not illegal to be homeless, it's not illegal to be sleeping rough – it's about us assisting them," SS Mowday said.

"It's also about the community understanding, being aware and showing compassion for the plight of these people who are struggling for different reasons.

"At the end of the Red Room, we don't want anybody homeless or sleeping rough in Gawler. I think it's achievable.

"We're getting there slowly, but need everybody's assistance. We need the entire community to work with us."