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HOMELESS NUMBERS RISE IN CAIRNS

MEET DR SHARMILA BISWAS, LONG-TIME AMA QUEENSLAND MEMBER AND CAIRNS GP. DR BISWAS RECENTLY SPENT TIME VOLUNTEERING WITH THE ROSIES CAIRNS FOOD OUTREACH PROGRAM AND WAS AMAZED AT THE AMOUNT OF HOMELESS PEOPLE ACCESSING THE SERVICE.

Cairns is being dubbed the homeless capital of Australia after a recent demographic study revealed 1.6 per cent of the Far North Queensland city's population are without a home—the highest proportion of Australia's 18 major cities. Recently released data suggests more than 2,300 people are sleeping in the city's streets, overcrowded dwellings and other temporary accommodation. As if that's not alarming enough, this figure is on the rise.

Local GP, Dr Sharmila Biswas is familiar with the homelessness epidemic reportedly taking over in the city she has called home for 20 years.

"It's a very, very complex social challenge," says Sharmila. "Homelessness is not just about being without a secure house or shelter, it's an extreme form of social disadvantage and moreover, social exclusion. The impact is not only felt by the individual, but the community as a whole. Sometimes at the Gateway to the Great Barrier Reef—a popular holiday destination—their presence is seen as a terrible hindrance."

For those forced to sleep on the city's streets, survival is knowing where to get a feed or a cold or hot drink, a blanket or a bed, or the savvy to avoid the dangers that surround them out in the open with no shelter or protection. There is no doubt in Sharmila's mind that without the presence of Rosies' outreach food van in Cairns, many of the homeless wouldn't survive.

"Neglected and disadvantaged children would have no food, youth unable to connect with their families would have no-one to talk to, and women who are victims of alcohol and domestic violence would have nowhere to go. Young and old socially isolated men, the Indigenous peoples far from their homelands, and anyone in need of medical attention exacerbated by hunger would continue to suffer," she says.

Having recently spent time out in the van with the street outreach volunteers, Sharmila witnessed first-hand the increasing number of people who are relying on their support, not only for basic needs such as food, but also to feel some connection with the community around them.

"The outreach program has been operating in Cairns for the past 24 years and the present vehicle is over 20 years old," Sharmila explains. "It has extensive rust and has been deemed not mechanically safe. A reliable and serviceable vehicle is vital to the program and without a replacement van, those who are most vulnerable in our community will have no access to food, drink, emergency clothing, and blankets." A new, fully fitted out van costs a massive \$50,000.

"Some of my patients that I have seen over the years are regular patrons of the local outreach van making up just a few of the 120 or so homeless people they connect with each week. I'm told these numbers have been steadily increasing over the past 18 months, and a new and larger van would not only enable the program to continue but also allow it to grow. It would be able to carry more volunteers and amenities safely."

The AMAQ Foundation desperately needs your support to raise \$50,000 for a new van for the Rosies Cairns food outreach program. **Q**

DOCTORS DOING GOOD



Do you have a project which needs financial assistance?

Contact Colleen Harper, Foundation Manager:

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Website: www.amaqfoundation.com.au



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The AMA Queensland Foundation has joined the world of social media! To keep up to date on all the latest Foundation developments and projects, including how our fundraising appeals are tracking and much more: like us on Facebook

'AMA Queensland Foundation'; follow us on Twitter '@AMAQ_Foundation'; check out our YouTube channel; or visit www.amaqfoundation.com.au and click on the links. **Q**



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Please contact Colleen Harper, Foundation Manager for a discreet chat. Strictest confidentiality will be maintained. We recommend you take legal advice when making a will. TressCox Lawyers have kindly offered to provide a discount for this service. Please contact Paul de Silva, Special Counsel (07) 3004 3520 or Paul.de.Silva@tresscox.com.au for further details. **Q**

