

**HOMELESS PERSONS INFORMATION CENTRE  
(HPIC)  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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**Interviewee:** Elizabeth Giles

**Date:** 5 June 2009

**Place:** Town Hall House, Sydney

**Interviewer:** Margo Beasley

**Recorder:** Marantz PMD 620

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**TRANSCRIPT**

0.00 **MB:** This is an interview with Elizabeth – known as Liz – Giles. It's taking place in Town Hall House in the City of Sydney. The project is the Homeless Persons Information Centre, known as HPIC Oral History Project. It's being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme. My name's Margo Beasley and the date is the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009. So, Liz, if you don't mind, could you give me where and when you were born?

EG: Sure. I was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, 1969, in Papua New Guinea.

**MB:** In Papua New Guinea.

EG: Mm.

**MB:** So, you're a long way from there now. How did you end up in Australia?

EG: Oh, well my father was in the army so I was only there for a few years and then we ended up back in Australia, travelling around here and there.

**MB:** So, your title now here at the City of Sydney is -?

EG: 'Manager, Homelessness Unit'.

**MB:** Right. Which means that you cover a whole lot of different areas, not just HPIC?

EG: Yes.

**MB:** HPIC is one of your areas but what are the others?

EG: Well, under the homelessness strategy we jointly fund the Inner City Homelessness Outreach and Support Project. Also in partnership with Housing [NSW] we fund the WYCA brokerage programme. The Complex Needs Coordination Project is a project that aims to provide long term housing to long term homeless people with highly complex needs and then there's the street count which we carry out a couple of times a year and that's basically our attempt to try and count the number of people who are living in primary and secondary homelessness across our local government area and that involves about two hundred people, counting between 1.00 and 3.00am in the morning.

2.02

And then there's a series of other, smaller projects that also come out of my unit, such as the inter-agency meeting that's held every couple of months, privacy project which aims to put together a resource to help services in the inner city understand how to work with the different types of privacy law when they're dealing with people with complex needs, the Food Van Accord which is working with all of the mobile free food services to try and get them to work together in a coordinated way, the photography project that we did last year and we have an exhibition coming up very shortly in June and various other things like that and a lot of public space management. Oh, and our public space management.

**MB:** You groan when you say "public space management". I guess that's because although HPIC is, I guess, primarily about preventing homelessness, this other very large slab of your work is actually about people who are chronically homeless.

EG: Mm.

**MB:** We will talk more about HPIC shortly but I wonder if you could just give me a bit of a broad picture of chronic homelessness in Sydney at the moment?

EG: Sure. Well, chronic homelessness as opposed to rough sleeping which are two different things, so I might explain both of them. Rough sleeping is just basically people who are living outdoors or in

very temporary forms of shelter, so whether that's the overnight accommodation provided by ..... communities which is not much more than a mattress on a floor in a church hall or something like that to people who are quite literally sleeping out in public space. And as of the last two street counts there's an average of around three hundred and fifty people sleeping rough on our streets of a night.

**MB: That's within the City of Sydney?**

EG: That's just within our local government area and about another four hundred and seventy people who are sleeping in homelessness hostel bed like your Matthew Talbots and your Foster Houses and those sorts of places.

4.03 Chronic homelessness is long term homelessness. So, we define chronic homelessness as people who have been homeless for over twelve months or longer or people who have experienced repeated episodes of homeless over a long period of time, so they might be homeless for a while and then return to a home or a stable environment and then come back into homelessness again or get into their own home and fall back into homelessness again and that typically happens for a lot of people over a long period of time. And then within the population of people who are chronically homeless there's a much smaller cohort. Generally speaking, as much as we haven't measured it in the inner city, if you look at similar populations in other areas where the research has been done, around ten to fourteen per cent of that group of people will have more than one disabling condition such as mental health, substance abuse, chronic ill health, a disability of some description and they will also probably be involved with a lot of different services all at the same time and a history of failed interventions. So, lots of people have tried to help them but nothing's working and they're still homeless and that's the group of people that the Complex Needs Coordination Project focuses on.

**MB: So, I guess from that you're saying that quite oftentimes people are sleeping rough but that might be a very short term thing, they are not necessarily chronically homeless?**

EG: Typically, most people who become homeless will exit homelessness relatively quickly. If you look at the HPIC statistics, I think last year in the 2008 calendar year there was something like sixteen thousand people who contacted HPIC, sixteen thousand individuals who contacted HPIC.

6.00 Eleven thousand of those – and I'm just speaking rough numbers – but eleven thousand of those people contacted HPIC for the first time. And usually when people are contacting HPIC for the first time they're newly or recently or just become homeless or just about to become homeless; we don't generally get calls for the first time from people

who've already been homeless for a long period of time. So, if you look at that's eleven thousand out of those sixteen thousand newly homeless, if you like, or recently homeless and that means about four thousand of the people who contacted us last year are repeat callers, they've been homeless for a longer period of time. So, as a kind of indicator of all-over numbers how many people sort of stay in there, they're having to call back several times to get their needs met and those are the people who stay in the system for a much shorter period of time. But all up those sixteen thousand people make around fifty four thousand calls.

**MB: So, how did you come to be working in homelessness, what's your professional background?**

EG: Sporting. I was working – it was about fourteen years ago, I think, in about the mid 1990s – 1996, I think it was, I was working in a corporate conferencing and travel company as a business development manager and I signed up to do some volunteer work with Mission Australia and I worked on the telephones for a while and I didn't like that at all and then they called me in to go and do some volunteer work with Mission Beat.

**MB: Which is -?**

EG: Mission Beat, sorry, is a crisis transportation and referral service for people who are homeless, predominantly people who are experiencing primary homelessness and secondary homelessness.

8.00 And on my first day I went out in the van with one of the drivers who to this day is still a very good friend of mine and I was just hooked, I was absolutely hooked.

**MB: What did you do on that first day?**

EG: Well, we drove around and we talked to a lot of people on the streets and I was just absolutely charmed by them. And it was interesting: he said to me at the end of the day, "So, you know, what did you think?" and I said, "Well, I'm surprised. I thought that I'd get, you know, the buzz from having gone out and done something good and what I didn't expect was to feel so grateful to them for being so charming and welcoming to me". And I think that that shifted my way of thinking, you know, right from the beginning which was that whole thing of, "Well, it's not just about me saving the world, it's actually about an interaction with people and a respectfulness and a taking something back as well as giving something" - and I've never forgotten that first day.

**MB: Can you tell me a bit more about who you met on that day?**

EG: Yes, I can, I can name their names. There was – although maybe I shouldn't so I'll just maybe - - -

**MB: Just first names.**

EG: First names. There was Old Ray who used to sit down in Frog Hollow who I knew for many years before he died and he was the first person. Usually what would happen is we'd drive up to a space and Dean, the Mission Beat driver, would get out and talk to people and I'd sit in the van and was very timid, I didn't know what to do with these homeless people and I was just - and he'd kind of leave me there. I think he was just letting me find my own space and Ray, who was an old guy, sitting on a milk crate in Frog Hollow said to me, "Well, what are you doing in the van? Think you're too good to get out and talk to me, do you?" And so I did and he was lovely and was charming and charmed me.

9.56

And then we met another couple of guys, Ronnie and Gordo, who were two inseparable friends on the streets who I also knew for many years and they were, I think, two of my biggest supporters when I was trying to get a job at Mission Beat because no women drivers worked at Mission Beat at the time. They were part of my vanguard to help me actually get paid because I had to apply for a job three times before they'd give it to me.

**MB: So, you decided to apply for a real job with Mission Beat, as opposed to being a volunteer corporate person?**

EG: It did. I was going regularly on Sundays for maybe a month, I quit my job, I went back to work in bar work whilst I worked to convince Mission Australia to give me a job at Mission Beat. And I think it took me three separate job applications and about six months to finally convince them because women didn't drive for Mission Beat.

**MB: What year are we talking about there?**

EG: Sorry?

**MB: What year would that have been?**

EG: That was about '96, I think, and maybe tipped over into 1997.

**MB: So, it must have been a perception from within Mission Beat that you needed to be a tough male or something? Because it's not like there weren't women pilots and women everything by the mid '90s.**

EG: You worked on your own. It was a twenty four hour service in those days and the daytime shifts was either six to three or three till eleven pm - you were in the van on your own. You're in radio contact with

base but you were in the van on your own so there was this perception that it wasn't safe for a woman, which of course was just, you know, a silly way of thinking because it never was about gender, it was about your ability to relate to people.

11.57

And, in fact, in many instances you had an advantage being a woman because the men on the streets didn't feel the need to challenge you like they might another male; you know, they would be charming because it was important for them to be that, say, "Here's a lady. We won't swear in front of her, we'll be charming", and they were a lot of the time - I swore more than a lot of the guys on the streets did, you know - so that was completely wrong.

**MB: So, the two inseparable friends – Ronnie and Gordo, was it? They became like referees for you for the job, were they?**

EG: Yes, because it got out because I think some of the other drivers talked and I think there was a bit of a split, you know, between the drivers in support of me getting a job – because throughout this I just continued to volunteer – and then the other half went, "No, it's not a place for a woman". And so I gather that some of them had talked to some of the guys on the streets – in fact, I probably also talked to some of the streeties about, you know, "I'm trying to get a job" – and so they would just bail up various other drivers at various other times and, you know, back to them and tell them they had to give me a job, I was the best driver even though I didn't actually drive – they were just wonderful. And then there was Wayne, 'Wild Wayne' who was a really, really unusual, funny, larrikin special guy. So, there's this little cohort of people that – because at that time too I'd also started volunteering up at Campbell House in the proclaimed place which is they call them 'Intoxicated Persons Units' and we just called them colloquially 'The Drunk Tanks' back then. And I loved the tanks, I loved working in the tanks. It was just sometimes it was - - -

**MB: And they were about -?**

EG: They're otherwise known as "sobering up places", so they were places where street drinkers predominantly but anyone under the influence of an intoxicating substance could be taken for a safe place to recover, shower, get a meal, etcetera.

14.04

And that was a big part of what Mission Beat did, was transporting people who were intoxicated on the streets and not necessarily safe to a safe place where they could, you know, get some rest, have a shower, maybe get referred to other forms of accommodation, etcetera. So, yes, became a bit of a volunteering junkie for a while there. And then I went to work at Campbell House as well, so I worked for a while at Mission Beat and Campbell House at the same time.

**MB: As a volunteer?**

EG: No, no, ..... Centre give me a job as well as a casual at Campbell House and full time with Mission Beat.

**MB: Now, actually it probably would be better for you to elaborate on this but you went through some kind of transformational, personal experience going from this kind of very corporate kind of stuff into - - -**

EG: Mm, shoulder pads.

**MB: Shoulder pads, which was the mark of a true businesswoman, corporate person in the mid 1990s that we're referring here to the - - -**

EG: Oh, absolutely. Yes, it was, it was. They were just embarrassing, those shoulder pads.

**MB: Yes, and you were changed?**

EG: Totally, totally.

**MB: Can you tell me a bit more about that?**

EG: Yes. I think it actually started when I was about sixteen and I was watching a documentary on some nuns who went to El Salvador, you know, to do their good work and got executed and for some reason at that point in time I thought, that's what I was going to do – not get executed, obviously, but I was going to do some kind of big work for the poor. And I had lots of very grandiose notions, I think, about what I thought that said about me and the kind of person that I was meant to be, having been raised as a Catholic, perhaps, and not having any religious affiliations with the work that I do now but I think it was possibly tied in there at some point in time.

16.11 So, that's kind of where it started but it was going to be overseas and it was going to be with the poor and it was going to be – so, I did nothing for, like, probably another ten years. I think I did maybe – no, really, I did nothing.

**MB: You must have got a job of some sort.**

EG: Nothing related to that, I should say, I did nothing. I did, I had jobs, I went and travelled overseas and did all that sort of stuff but I did nothing in relation to this big goal but I never let it go, either, but it had to be overseas. And then it suddenly occurred to me, yes, in the mid-1990s, "You know, I could really do this at home – couldn't I?" Because I had when I was about fifteen done some volunteer work in a soup kitchen in Brisbane and remember really enjoying that, really

enjoying the characters and stuff like that but that hadn't gone any further. So, I called Mission Australia and, yes, I signed up to volunteer and they put me on the phone lines and I hated that. And then they asked if I'd do the Mission Beat thing and I almost said no because they said, "You don't get to go out in the van, you do the radio, you coordinate the calls and all the rest of it". I go, "Well, that doesn't sound very exciting" but I thought I'd try it out. And fortunately for me on that very first day I went out and the person that I went out with was also part of it. He had an exceptional ability to get on with people and he was obviously so very well regarded and liked and such enjoyable rapport with people and such insight and intuition into things that were going on. In fact, on the second or third time that I went out in the van we were driving past one of those little lanes in Surry Hills, those little back lanes that end in a wall.

17.59 And there were two people there, two of the streeties there – and I'll just say, I call them streeties because they call themselves streeties, like, the whole people who are homeless kind of thing – two streeties there and one who Dean knew very well and another one who he didn't and he just found something very suspicious about that. I just thought they were two people hanging out, having a bit of a drink and he just said to the guy, "I'll be back to check on you", and sure enough we came back half an hour later and he was sexually assaulting her and she was completely unconscious. And so we ended up with him with the van at the end and me down towards the back of the cul-de-sac, trying to talk him into staying there while Dean called the police, telling him we'd called the ambulance. And in hindsight, you know, you would never have a volunteer with my level of experience in that situation but that's just what happened. And I did, I managed to convince him to stay until the police turned up and then they went through a whole process - because she was deaf and dumb as well, so a deaf and dumb Aboriginal woman, Margaret, and we went through a whole process of trying to make sure that she got some level of justice for that, that it wasn't just yet another sexual assault that happened on the street - because it happens to women all the time on the streets - but, you know, we would make sure that there was justice for her. And there was of sorts. I can't say it was very satisfying justice but there was justice of sorts. He did three months, which by the time he went to court he'd already served concurrently so he was out straight away - but it was a big deal to Margaret.

19.47 And so all of that happened in, like, you know, my very brief period of time in my first experience with that so it all just became - and I got everything: I got personal satisfaction, I enjoyed the relationships, there was drama, there was adventure, there was chaos, there was always something happening. In terms of the senses it just stimulated everything: a sense of fun, sense of excitement, sense of drama, sense of poignancy, fear, excitement, adrenaline, everything,

sometimes all in one day at work – who wouldn't want to do it, you know?

**MB: So, you did it.**

EG: Oh, I did it.

**MB: They finally gave you the job and you became the first - - -**

EG: They finally gave me the job; I had to threaten them with the equal opportunity thing and I'm thinking "You can't be using this", and they finally went, "You know what? You've worn us down. Shut up and we'll" – I think they gave me a job as a casual, initially, and then I had to go through my baptism of fire of proving myself. But as soon as they gave me the job, to the very great credit of the men who worked for that organisation, they treated me like an equal; they didn't treat me badly at all, they treated me as a complete compadre from day one. And that was a big deal because I was worried about that having basically forced my way in there against the views of some of them. After that it was a wonderful, wonderful place to work, with relationships with my colleagues that I very much enjoyed and with people living on the streets that I loved.

**MB: So, how long did you do that job for?**

EG: About five years, between that and Campbell House, I think. Well, all up, probably about five years because I went overseas in 2000 and accidentally joined a cult because I thought I was going to work in Angola. That kind of harkened back to the whole grand aspirations of a sixteen year old and then came back with my tail between my legs nine months later and went back to work for Mission Beat and Campbell House again for about another nine months and then went off to Cambodia for three years and then came back and then went to work for a different outreach service.

22.15 **MB: What did you do in Cambodia? I won't ask you about the cult in Angola – it looks like it was a painful episode.**

EG: Well, I never got to Angola - that was the problem - I ended up in bloody Denmark. In Cambodia, I went as an Australian volunteer for the first couple of years and I worked with local NGOs on "violence against women" projects. And then in my last year I was hired as a consultant to implement a project that I helped raise money for which was working with male perpetrators – well, men in general on male responsibility in addressing violence against women and then I came home.

**MB: And you came home. So, that would have been by then about 2003, was it?**

EG: Yes, end of 2003.

**MB: And where did you work then?**

EG: Then I went to work for the Street Outreach service that was funded by the City of Sydney and I worked with them for about a year and then I was given the job of manager of that service. So, I managed that service for about two years and then I came here as a project coordinator in the homelessness unit.

**MB: And you're now -?**

EG: Goddess of the homelessness unit.

**MB: Yes.**

EG: Manager.

**MB: You manage everything which is a long way from actually working with people directly on the streets.**

EG: Yes, I really miss that. I had to make some decisions in deciding to come to work for the City. It was even tough taking on the job of managing the Outreach service, from being an Outreach worker because even then, you know, I was taking a step away.

24.09

But, you know, right from the beginning, even when I was, you know, just an upstart, pushy volunteer just I've always had opinions about how things should be, could be different and better and improved. And so over a series of years where I've got a lot of experience and, you know, a little bit more substance to back up my opinions, I guess, there came a time where I had an opportunity to put my money where my mouth was and to move more in a direction where I could influence policy and strategic thinking and other services who were doing the same - so, that's the decision that I made. And even then within the City, going from project work which is very content-focused to being a manager which requires me to faff around with paperwork and stuff like that's just, again, the compromise that you make. But I'm still in contact with a lot of people who are currently homeless; a number of them stop by here to say hello and to talk and to share their ideas. And I do my best when I spend time with - whether it's the Outreach service, whether it's our public space liaison office, of letting the guys on the streets know that I am their representative at, you know, their local council officer and that if they have concerns, opinions, anything to share that's absolutely their right to come and see me and many of them do. Or, I will go out to talk to them, force a little bit of Outreach of them just to keep my sense of connectivity with what's going on so I'm not too removed when I talk about stuff from what is actually going on on the ground; it's not based on a memory

of what I know but it's something that I do still actually currently understand.

26.15 **MB:** **You groaned a little bit earlier when you talked about the management of public space.**

EG: Yes.

**MB:** **Which I guess is a huge issue, particularly as – we haven't talked about this yet but as the numbers of homeless are increasing. What are the issues there?**

EG: Well, the public space is probably – because the City of Sydney is incredibly unusual in their approach to homelessness. No other council in the country has a dedicated unit; most of them don't even have a homelessness project coordinator. You know, we have an entire unit: we fund services, we directly provide services, we make policy. But of all of the things that we do, that which is probably closer to something that is more typically mandated for local council is the management of public space. And that's really the whole issues around public spaces where you have rough sleepers, particularly where you have large groups but sometimes it doesn't take more than one. It's amazing the sight of someone begging on the streets can infuriate members of the public, let alone places like Woolloomooloo - we have something like seventy on the ground down there. So, there are impacts: people living in public space create impacts, sometimes very minor, sometimes not so minor and certainly the perceptions of other people who share that public space, either temporarily or more permanently there's a need to manage all the competing interests around that shared space: the right to access it, the right to enjoy it, which is an equal right for people who are homeless.

28.06 And we are observers of the State Protocol. For people who are homeless it says that they won't be discriminated on the basis of their homelessness, providing they're not doing anything wrong but, you know, frequently it's really contested space. And it becomes something that's very emotive and it's not pleasant to deal with people who just think that homeless people should be swept under the carpet, which is sometimes the request that we get. Other people just want the problem to go away and other people contact us who are lovely and are just concerned. And then when you get large populations of people and a need to respond to that and you have angry residents and angry local businesses you have, you know, a police force that sometimes is just a little bit overly enthusiastic in their enforcement of the law in a way that doesn't help us as we try to negotiate compassionate and proactive responses to people. So, we don't want to clean them up, sweep them away, move them on; we actually want to offer them assistance that will help them to find an alternative life beyond the streets. But when there aren't enough

crisis shelter beds – there sure as heck aren't enough houses – and you've got seventy people on the ground in Woolloomooloo what are you going to do? And meanwhile you've got a whole lot of other people just going, "Do something, do something". And because local councils are so accessible to their local communities we tend to carry the burden of expectation rather than where that should be going which is straight up to, say, the State Government, whether it's for law enforcement, whether it's for providing housing or other welfare services. And that's essentially why we have a public space liaison officer, 'Super Fish', who's a fabulous human being.

30.11 **MB:** 'Super Fish'?

EG: 'Super Fish', we call him, yes.

**MB:** What's his real name?

EG: Mike Fish, yes.

**MB:** I see.

EG: Yes.

**MB:** Now, something else I'd just like you to address a bit too, because you've mentioned a couple of times are gender issues in homelessness. People tend to think of homelessness - the stereotype is male, probably older, maybe younger, maybe alcoholic, sleeping around on the streets in a sleeping bag or wrapped up in blankets and that stereotype is a stereotype. But the gender thing, I think, is one that really doesn't get much recognition about women who are homeless. So, can you just tell me a bit about that, how that works?

EG: Well, statistically, there are less women than men who are homeless but what we are seeing – and this is certainly reflective of the housing affordability crisis for a start is that we are seeing more women and families becoming homeless. They don't tend to be as visible because women may be more likely to stay with friends or families in crisis but we're seeing more actually drifting into – like more, for instance, calling HPIC than ever before. And what's happening is even if you can go and stay with friends or families you can't go and stay with them indefinitely and if you can't get into alternative accommodation for whatever reason, then you are going to end up relying on the welfare system to provide you with accommodation. We see more women coming into homelessness on street level and there's very little in the way of accommodation services for women around, even less for women with substance abuse issues and they're, of course, twice as vulnerable on the streets as well.

32.06 And then there are all of the women who are – most of the crisis accommodation for women tends to be accommodation for women escaping domestic violence.

**MB: The refuges, in other words?**

EG: Yes. But even with those, it's a fairly narrow definition, I guess, in terms of who those refuges can and will accept and so family groups find it very difficult. Women coming off the streets, escaping relational violence off the streets aren't recognised in that system and relationships are, you know, a big thing on the streets because women on the streets develop relationships with other people experiencing homelessness for the bonds of affection, for protection; sometimes they're just naturally exploited for resources. And then things may go awry and they may genuinely need to get away from that person but, you know, it's not going to be recognised as relationship violence, it's just, you know, another homeless person getting away from violence. And it's a shame because people experience trauma when living on the streets. They experience the trauma of being homeless for a start, the way that they're treated and viewed and perceived as being homeless and then they experience very real physical trauma and illness on the streets but there's not a lot of recognition for that. A lot of people don't develop substance abuse or mental health issues until after they become homeless, which is challenged as the dominant stereotype, that mental illness and substance abuse causes homeless. And, of course, it has been known to but a lot of people develop those problems after they become homeless.

34.03 But what we have is these generic kind of responses that just say, "Well, you know, here's a hostel" and that's it and I think partly too where we end up with this myth that people choose to be homeless. I don't know anybody who said as a fifteen year old, "I'm going to grow up to be a homeless person"; it's an extraordinary idea that someone would choose to be homeless.

**MB: Although sometimes there is probably, I suppose, a sense it's not necessarily an active choice but a sense that some people might be provided with housing and so on, public housing, but because they have got a substance abuse issue or something else like that they, whatever, might have a bit of money from Centrelink but the money gets spent on the substance rather than the housing and so on. So, you could in a sense call that a kind of a choice.**

EG: Well, in my unit and in the approach that we are taking absolutely challenge – that's the way that the system's been operating for a very long time, with this whole idea of that in order for someone to exit the streets into long term housing they have to be housing-ready. They have to be taking their medication, they have to be on a treatment

programme, they have to demonstrate that they can manage all of these issues before they can manage a house. Now, given that homelessness is actually a causal factor for many people in mental health and substance abuse but we expect people to resolve those problems while still being homeless before we give them a house is absolutely ridiculous. Overseas, what they've found in very successful programmes called 'Pathways to Housing' that had very high retention rates is that they turn that idea on its head and they went, "No, no, no, what you do is you give a person a house and a stable environment and you make sure that they have the support that they need and then the other things will be managed".

36.05 And they have an eighty seven per cent success rate in retaining housing. There are a lot of people living on the streets who have fallen who have fallen out of public housing who exited the streets, went into public housing and fell out of it back onto the streets again because they didn't get the support, they didn't get the help, they were lonely, isolated and cut off. And so either because they stopped paying rent, they had a mental health breakdown, something else went wrong, they were exploited or they just left and they ended up on the streets. So, in that whole idea of choice it's about, well, what choices are we offering? You know, my choices in my life are empowered; I don't make choices I don't want to make and yet we offer very, very limited, unattractive choices to people who live on the streets and get very righteous when they say, "No, thank you very much, it's not good enough". We offer them a bed in a hostel where they have to live with other people who have substance abuse issues, for instance, that they may be trying to get away from, where there has been, you know, conflict and violence - infrequently but it happens - where they are given a curfew, they're told what time to eat, what time to be back, when to see their case manager, what their goals are, what they have to do. Frequently, for people who are either, say, coming out of prison or hospital going, "Yes, that's what I want: to go into another institution. No, thank you, I choose autonomy. I'll wait on the streets till I can get my house". And then with people on the streets in terms of housing the bureaucratic processes are so dehumanising and so humiliating and so frustrating and so bamboozling for so many people that it's a better choice for them to say, "I can't take that on again".

38.00 And so it's not really a choice. And I've worked with people who've said, "No, thanks very much". You know, I've said, "I'll help you get a house", "No, thanks very much, don't want a house". You work with them over time and actually what they do want is a house; what they don't want is an isolation tank or what they don't want is to be told that they have to go to a treatment programme first or get on medication. What they don't want is to have some pushy bureaucrat waving, you know, a wad of paper at them and then sending them away yet again because some box is not ticked. But if you push through all of that, oh, my God, yes, they want a house, they want a

home, they want somewhere to live, they don't want to be homeless any more, they don't want to be humiliated, they don't want to be looked down upon. And I get really frustrated when I hear this, "People choose to be homeless". It's like, "Well, you know, maybe we could stop offering them such crappy choices".

**MB: O.K. Let's go to HPIC.**

EG: Yep.

**MB: I guess it's a very interesting setup, HPIC, because it's about preventing homelessness, it's about intervening before things get too difficult – is that right? So, how would you describe it?**

EG: Look, HPIC, we'd like to see it doing more early intervention and they certainly do that, although HPIC is very limited by the resources that are available. So, if you refer someone into a homelessness hostel you're not referring them out of homelessness, you're just referring them into another layer of homelessness. But that's when you've got fifteen minutes to make a quick referral or, you know, a brief period of time that's what you do with the expectation that the people in that service will work with the individual to help them to exit homelessness, which in effect is not what the current service system does but with recent changes in national and state policies hopefully it's going and that's certainly what we promote.

40.05

So, HPIC is predominantly crisis response and meeting immediate need, whatever that may be. So, sometimes that is prevention, it's grabbing someone quickly and trying to move them out of the system and sometimes it could be dealing with people who have been homeless for twenty years, you know, who they know extremely well, who know all the workers in that office and who call several times a day. So, it's that whole spectrum from the recently homeless with not terribly complex needs to the very long term homeless with very high and complex needs and they deal with the entire spectrum in there.

**MB: It's a telephone service but as I've come to understand it they really do a great deal more than having to be on the phone, having to do most of their work by phone they're not meeting people face to face but can you give me a few examples of the kinds of other things that HPIC does? They don't just pick up a phone and say, "Have you got a bed for somebody tonight?", they organise a whole lot of other stuff around that, don't they?**

EG: They do, they do. It never ceases to amaze me the complexity of the work that they do in there. So, for instance, someone may need accommodation but before they can get that accommodation it may be that they've got an old debt, for instance, or they don't have ID. So, HPIC, a referral to just your basic accommodation service provider may also involve a referral over to the brokerage service to

try and negotiate some, you know, back payment of rent to be paid to the service and then a call to Centrelink to help them to establish some ID so that they can actually prove who they are.

42.00

And the service may say, "Well, they've got mental health issues, they need a medical clearance", so ensuring that they, you know, can get up to the hospital to see a doctor and then contacting Mission Beat to make sure that Mission Beat transports them there and contacting the hospital and saying, "This person's coming here. They need this, they've got this bed after this. All you need to do is this", etcetera, and before they know it they've negotiated with seven different services just to get someone into a crisis bed. And it's the most rapid-fire case management that I've ever seen. And so having done case management myself in the past, those guys, you know, might do all of that in the space of, you know, fifteen minutes or spend half a day with one person, you know, organising trips interstate. We've had calls from overseas for people coming into the country. They have to advocate sometimes; you know, they really have to fight on behalf of people to get them access to services where services might be being denied to them. They deal with the police, they deal with Child Protection Services, they deal with the crisis accommodation services, sometimes they deal with real estate people. So, it's not even – they deal with nurses and social workers and doctors and it's not just, you know, the homelessness services, it's just all of them and it requires an intense understanding of the entire service system, what's out there, and who can go where and what needs to be done. Most of them know at a glance, you know, "They'll go to this service because they have these issues and this service will accept them but we know maybe this service won't and we'll have to do this to get them in there". So, because there's that vast repository of information in there which they share with each other but there's some staff in there, as you know, who have been there for ten years – my God.

**MB: So, they know a great deal.**

44.00 EG:

They know a huge amount and a lot of it is now intuitive, which means that their success rate when making referrals is really high and this came out in the evaluation that we did last year as well. And what that means is for the person on the other end of the phone who's just trying to get a need met, they need that need met as fast as possible so to actually have that level of skill and competence and just understanding to actually achieve that quickly and then to advocate when it's being denied and then to follow up, etcetera, is just so important. And I'm just constantly flabbergasted at the complexity of the work they do because, yes, most people think that's all they do: they call, they book someone into accommodation, put it down and take the next caller. It's like, oh no, oh no, you know.

**MB: So, it's a really pivotal service?**

EG: It's a triage in-point into the system because most accommodation services receive most of their referrals and get most of their beds filled by HPIC and when they need to refer someone else most of them use HPIC because you've got a one-stop shop. So, you could either phone ten different services, looking for something, or you call HPIC because you know HPIC will do that for you so you only have to call once. It works for the services as well as the clients and it also then gives HPIC a chance to look for the most appropriate rather than the first available service, whereas if you were ringing around you'll just take the first service that says yes, whereas HPIC will go to the most appropriate service first and then work backwards. And the services will trust a HPIC referral because they know that they're honest, they're straightforward, they don't, you know, stretch the truth or get creative in order to get someone in.

46.06 They know they need to protect the relationships with the service so they give very good faith referrals so a lot of the referrals that we make are actually accepted – where there's a vacancy, of course, which frequently there's none.

**MB: So, is there a particular personality type that works the best for HPIC – can you describe that?**

EG: Ah, that's a really good question. You have to be thick-skinned, I think you have to be patient, you have to manage stress. Those phones in there at times are relentless; you put a call down and you have to pick up another one and it might go on like that for hours with five people sitting on the queue at any one time. You have to face the fact that frequently you have to say, "No, I can't help you", which I would struggle with. I struggled to do it with one person – if I had to do that several times a day to someone in genuine need – I have such admiration for those guys. You have to be tenacious, you have to be a good advocate but a strategic advocate and manage that balance of relationships but also, like, seeking the best outcome for someone. You have to be able to take abuse, which you will, you know, hear; you have to be able to hear one story of hardship and trauma and all the rest of it after another and still come back to work the next day or just pick up the next phone, dealing with anything from people who are expressing suicidal thoughts to people who are expressing homicidal thoughts to people just getting knocked back from services that they really need for really silly reasons.

48.06 All of the things that just certainly frustrate the hell out of me, if I had to do that, call after call after call – but, of course, they have all the people that they do help and I think that's where you find the balance. But to do that for, you know, 7.25 hours a day, one call after another after another after another, I think it takes a very special person to work in HPIC. And we have staff in there who have such longevity in the service - ten years, five years, four years, who go away and come

back, etcetera - says great things not only about the leadership in that room – Maurice [Parraguez] and Kaylean [Smith] are just fantastic human beings - but the team itself, the comradeship, the way that they look after each other and the fact that there's not a soul in there who doesn't have a genuine compassion, love of the work and a real desire to get outcomes.

**MB: Who do they have to say no to then - in what circumstances does that happen?**

EG: Look, it frequently happens where there's just no services available. For some people who have certain issues there is a group, I guess, that fall through the cracks that no service either wants to help or they're all very busy saying, "No, this is someone else's responsibility". And that tends to be a lot of the people that we deal with through the Complex Needs Project, are the ones that are just dropping through the cracks. But for the most part they've got a pretty high success rate, given current resources for getting people some form of assistance but, you know, sometimes it might just be an overnight shelter so you know they're going to be on the phone the next day.

50.06

So, it's like the leaky boat: as soon as you move a person on there's always, you know, someone else arriving to take their place and it's like as fast as you bail out the boat the water just keeps pouring in. Yes, that they don't just pass out with exhaustion at the end of every single day, I don't know how they do it. But the reality is that there just aren't the resources and we've set up a lot of short term accommodation services and no long term options and then wonder why we can't help anyone exit homelessness. The only thing that ends an experience of homelessness is a home. You know, it's not rocket science and yet for the last twenty five years what we've provided is crisis accommodation. We need to stop managing crisis and actually think about ending homelessness. We've just been managing crisis, we've been managing homelessness for twenty five years, not working to end it.

**MB: What would be the reasons for that? I guess, you know, I'm fishing around here or putting words into your mouth but presumably it's financial because it, I would think, would be quite a big government commitment.**

EG: I don't actually think so. I think that it's certainly a financial issue now in terms of resourcing but I think where it started was around the current, you know, hostel system, if you like, homelessness hostel system which has been funded under what was formerly known as the Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme, so when we refer to crisis accommodation we call it SAAP, in the lexicon.

51.55 And SAAP started about twenty, twenty five years ago and it was back in a time where it was thought that three months – because that’s the standard amount of time you stay in crisis accommodation before you have to leave – it was thought at the time that that was a sufficient period of time to help people resolve their crisis and move out of homelessness and then that system was never changed. And I think that having worked in that system for a long period of time there was just people who were moving around from hostel to hostel; there’s not whole lot of focus in getting them into housing. And then suddenly we have this affordable housing crisis and we can’t get them into housing if we want to and then there are more people falling into homelessness as a result of it. Certainly, we’re starting to see – I mean, we’ve yet to really know that because the last census was pre [the] affordable housing crisis and our street counts only started in August last year, so whether there’s a real increase or not, it’s hard to know but anecdotally and certainly going by the number of calls that HPIC’s receiving it would seem to indicate yes. And it was lack of planning: it was this whole idea that this crisis accommodation approach was that that was our approach to homelessness, was three month stays in homelessness hostels.

**MB: And then the problem’s solved, not.**

EG: Not. So, as we finally start to get smart about, “No, actually, we need to help people to exit that system”, then there were no exit points. And, look, the national and state policies are recognising that: we have all this new commitment to social housing, social and public housing that’s meant to be built in New South Wales so now we will increase the exit points and actually focus on getting people out of the system. And that has been a resourcing issue; it took a commitment by the government of 6.2 billion dollars to do it.

53.58 But prior to that it was just lack of foresight and planning and an overall reliance on a very tired, old service model that had it been properly scrutinised or investigated - little incremental changes made here and there but not across the system – we’ve never had a national policy on homelessness; we haven’t even had a state policy on homelessness. And I think that that’s a big part of the reason: no strategic approach. So, lots of ad hoc programmes doing what they’ve always done or some variation of it and no road map for saying, “Actually, how do we want to deal with this” – because homelessness is very expensive. We haven’t done the research in Australia, really, but certainly they’ve done a lot of this overseas and they’ve found out that it is actually much, much cheaper to put someone into a home than it is to continue managing them in this kind of crisis system. And we did some of our own, very preliminary, study here at the City of Sydney a couple of years ago: took a couple of case studies, about three case studies of people who were fairly atypical, I guess, of general homeless, average homeless person –

thirty six thousand dollars a year to keep them homeless. Just, yes, why are we paying to keep people homeless? It's just crazy.

**MB:** Now, you referred there to the housing affordability crisis and we probably should talk about that before we wind up because this is the term that's on everybody's lips at the moment. Sydney in particular - - -

EG: Yep.

**MB:** - - - has gone through a property boom, I suppose, in recent years and the cost of buying private housing has become very, very expensive and rents also as a consequence of that. So, can you tell me a little bit about how that impacts on HPIC, what you think is happening there?

56.12 EG: Well, I think the way it impacts – because HPIC doesn't refer people into houses. We just can't; it's not quite as easy as that although I would like to get to a point that that's exactly what we do. We do Outreach on the streets, "Here's your key. Let's go and see your new place", but we're not there yet. But because other homelessness service providers say the accommodation providers, the Outreach services, the case managers are meant to be helping people get off the streets permanently but because they're not able to do that because the lack of exit points then when HPIC is trying to refer people to those services those services are full, you know, there's no room at the inn, so that's the impact that it's having on HPIC. The other way in which that's impacting on HPIC is what we've seen last year, I think, was the first year in which some form of housing stress was the most frequently reported primary reason for homelessness. Now, traditionally, that most frequently reason is family breakdown. Last year for the first time it was some form of housing stress: people being evicted, mortgagee sales, unable to pay their rent or unable to pay utility bills or things like that, the owner moves back in and boots them out, you know, all those sorts of things – falling out of public housing is a big one as well – and when we asked people what's the biggest reason, the main reason why you've become homeless that was the most frequent answer last year. It's the first time that I'm aware of in HPIC's history where that's been the most frequently reported.

57.56 And that's happening predominantly out western Sydney way which is why I think that in terms of our own local government area we've not yet seen the major impacts of that combined with the economic situation and rising unemployment, etcetera, but we will because when you first become homeless you're more likely to stick to the area; you know where your friends are and your supports are, etcetera, but when they can no longer support you you tend to drift more towards where the services are which is why cities like Parramatta and Blacktown are seeing an increase. And, you know,

anecdotally, we seem to be seeing higher numbers coming towards here in the city and certainly that's what a lot of services are reporting as well and HPIC is taking more calls. Last year they took sixty thousand calls which was an all-time record for them. This year, if we extrapolate out the figures from January to May we'll hit seventy thousand calls this year. Now, usually on average seven or eight thousand of those calls are general in terms of it's from a service to say, "We're shut tonight" or whatever but the majority of those calls are from or on behalf of people who are homeless. Back in 2006 it was about fifty four thousand; it's just increasing exponentially.

**MB: When HPIC first began, which is twenty five years ago, what sort of calls would they have been taking then – do you know offhand?**

EG: No idea because unfortunately HPIC only moved to a computerised system ten years ago and, of course, the staff that we have have been here, you know, not much more than ten years; for our longest-serving one, I think, is eleven or twelve.

**MB: So, you've got nobody going back twenty five years?**

59.59 EG: Nobody going back twenty five years and not much in the way of paper records, which is such a shame because not only would the numbers be really interesting but I reckon we'd be finding some of the same names still calling us, which is just extraordinary.

**MB: O.K, thank you. You've given a very energetic interview which I really appreciate; you've approached it all with such complex ideas and all of that. I don't know if there are other things that you want to say about HPIC?**

EG: No, no, I think that they just do an amazing job and that I think that they're also very unique – I think that's an important thing to say. There's not - Queensland's now set up a model based on HPIC although it hasn't reached quite the size and the extensive network but apart from that there's not a service I know of – there's certainly no other service anywhere in Australia that does what they do. But I'm not aware of a service anywhere that does quite what they do in the way that they do in sort of sitting in the vortex of all of the services, you know, in the middle of all of it, referring people out. I think it's an incredible model of service provision that should be emulated everywhere. I think we should have one in every state in the country because we would coordinate and use our very limited resources so much more effectively if everyone had a HPIC and all the HPICs worked together, not to mention the great data that we would gather. But, yes, the staff in HPIC have me in awe daily, daily: they do such a remarkable job and they do it so well with such respect from their colleagues in the sector as well as people on the streets and that's a wonderful thing.

62.08 **MB:** Thank you, Liz - that was terrific.

EG: Thank you, Margo.

**Interview ends**