

# The Homeless Connect Expo\*

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Thousands of South Australians experience homelessness everyday. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the situation is not improving and their point in time snapshot tells us that about 8,000 South Australians are without a home and approximately 1,000 people are sleeping on the streets on any given night. For two years, I have had the opportunity of co-organising the Homeless Connect Expo for Shelter SA. Coming from a family who had never really had to think about homelessness before, it was an amazing eye-opener to see the number of attendees, and even more to organise the entire event for them all.

As much as it made me feel good to see the happiness on everyone's faces, it was not about me, it was about giving this group of people an opportunity to have a day entirely for them. A day where they could talk to the service providers that they needed, mingle with friends and meet new people, eat food that they may not usually be able to eat, get their hair cut (possibly the only one that they would have all year), have a general health check-up, relax with a back massage, and be entertained by some well known, South Australian musicians.

Housing is such a basic need for all humans and when people are faced with housing problems many other essentials including health, education and employment can take second place. People experiencing homelessness can find it difficult to buy food, see a doctor or even catch a bus to make a job interview. Without a home people find it hard to maintain employment and relationships. Children in families facing homelessness will often find it difficult to stay in education.

The annual Expo aims to improve the health and well-being of some of South Australia's most marginalised and disadvantaged citizens by providing necessary housing, health, legal and employment and government services information. The Expo focuses on enabling interaction between people experiencing homelessness and community services staff, increase community awareness of the issues and improve the health, well-being and housing outcomes of homeless people or those at risk of homelessness.

As well as the community services, each year the expo offers a range of different activities, free raffles and performances which create a fun and festive vibe. Australian artists such as Cal Williams Jr. who has been awarded *Best Australian Blues Album*, *SA Blues Album of the Year* and *South Australian Songwriter of the Year*, The Borderers who have recently won *Best World Music Act* at the Musicoz Awards; and South Australia's own acclaimed buskers Lemorai and Pipe Guy, entertained the crowd over the four hours. The giveaways included morning tea, lunch, barista coffees, vouchers, savoury foods, oral hygiene products, bags, new clothing and a lot more; all of the simple pleasures which people often take for granted.

One of the things that I found really made the day was the atmosphere. Everywhere I looked, people had smiles on their faces; they were talking, they were laughing, they were dancing. Each participant had the opportunity to talk about themselves to people who wanted to listen; we found out who they were and where they had come from. The Shelter SA stall was set up like a lounge room, we invited attendees inside to talk to them on the couch — it was a relaxed and informal environment which helped to put people at ease and welcome them to the expo.

During the event, the day centres such as Hutt Street Centre and Baptist Care close their kitchens, giving the Expo an opportunity to work to its full advantage and assist those in need. Our promotional posters were also put up in all of the day centres and relevant organisations to help encourage people to attend the event without advertising it to the general public. The generosity that Shelter SA has received from the businesses and organisations that were willing to donate or discount their time and expertise to lend a hand was also what helped to make this event so worthwhile.

I learnt a lot about homelessness that day and it gave me a very different perspective on the difficult circumstances and situations people face, and it made me realise how vital it is to host an event like this which can offer the homeless community an opportunity to take a break from a sometimes harsh world and to connect or re-connect with the services they need.

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