

Mental health conference appalled by homeless comments

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Organisers of a major international conference on mental health being held in Auckland's central business district this week are appalled and concerned by comments from an Auckland City councillor about homeless people.

Paul Goldsmith, chairman of the Council's Community Services Committee has said it is unacceptable for vagrants to be seen on the city's streets, and has not ruled out the possibility of having them arrested. He was quoted on radio this morning as saying it's "untidy", "messy" and "not a good look" for the city.

"We're appalled and concerned by the callous disregard being shown for homeless people in the city, some of whom will be experiencing mental illness," says Judi Clements, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation. "We would suggest it's 'not a good look' for the chairman of a Community Services Committee to attack people living on the streets before attempting to understand why they are there in the first place, and what outreach support and help is available."

David Lui is a Pacific health consultant who was integral to the establishment of the first Pacific Island mental health community support service in New Zealand. He spent four years working with Auckland's homeless in the late nineties, and is saddened by Goldsmith's comments.

"I've worked with people who live under bridges and in shop doorways, and I've found them to be some of the most inspiring people to work with," he says. "In all of them I found a wonderful sense of pride."

Some homeless people are living with a diagnosis of mental illness, others are coping with the stress of being homeless and disenfranchised from their families and society on their own.

"The measure of a good society is how we look after those who are most vulnerable, and how we restore some of the mana that they deserve," David Lui says. "It would be a sad day for Auckland if we passed legislation that criminalises people because of circumstances beyond their control."

The Mental Health Services Conference (TheMHS) is an international mental health education forum held annually, attracting over 1,000 mental health clinicians, managers, consumers, carers, families, researchers, educators and policy makers.

The theme for this year's conference is "Be the change you want", inviting all those working with service users to share examples of how they have become visible role models for changes that are needed within the mental health workforce.

"If the Council is serious about getting homeless people off the streets, it has an opportunity to model this change by tackling social exclusion, treating homeless people with respect, and finding solutions that work for them," says Judi Clements.

"With regards to people experiencing mental illness, we're discussing real solutions, not knee-jerk ones, at our conference this week. As chairman of the Council's Community Services Committee, we invite Councillor Goldsmith to come along and hear about them."

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Media enquiries to:

Chris Banks

Senior Communications Officer

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

Mobile: 021 790 236

www.mentalhealth.org.nz