

Jay's big plans to help the homeless

Ex yourlocalexaminer.com.au/jays-big-plans-to-help-the-homeless-in-the-city-of-armadale-through-pop-up-homeless-hub-called-project-home

September 5, 2024 3:08 pm

By Mel Dee -



Jay Dowling and his partner launched their pet pantry in December last year. This month they plan to launch their most ambitious project yet. Photograph – Richard Polden.

It is estimated there are currently close to 200 people sleeping on the streets within the City of Armadale.

But there are hundreds more experiencing homelessness, with many kipping on the couches of friends and extended family members.

The last census estimate showed there were most likely 465 people who were homeless in the City of Armadale – but that was in 2021, before the rental vacancy rate in Perth shrivelled to less than half a percent, and when local rents were half as much as they are now.

Crisis is an often-overused word in the media, but when whole families are currently being forced to survive the Perth winter in their cars, there's nothing more cogent to call the current housing emergency.

“We’re all five minutes away from being homeless, especially in the rental landscape we’re in now,” Street Aid Social Project founder Jay Dowling said.

After a particularly low point in his life, Jay came face-to-face with just how little practical support there was in the Perth CBD for people experiencing homelessness.

Three years ago, after getting back on his feet, he decided to do something about it.

He and his partner started small, by handing out dignity packs filled with essential hygiene products to anyone who needed them.

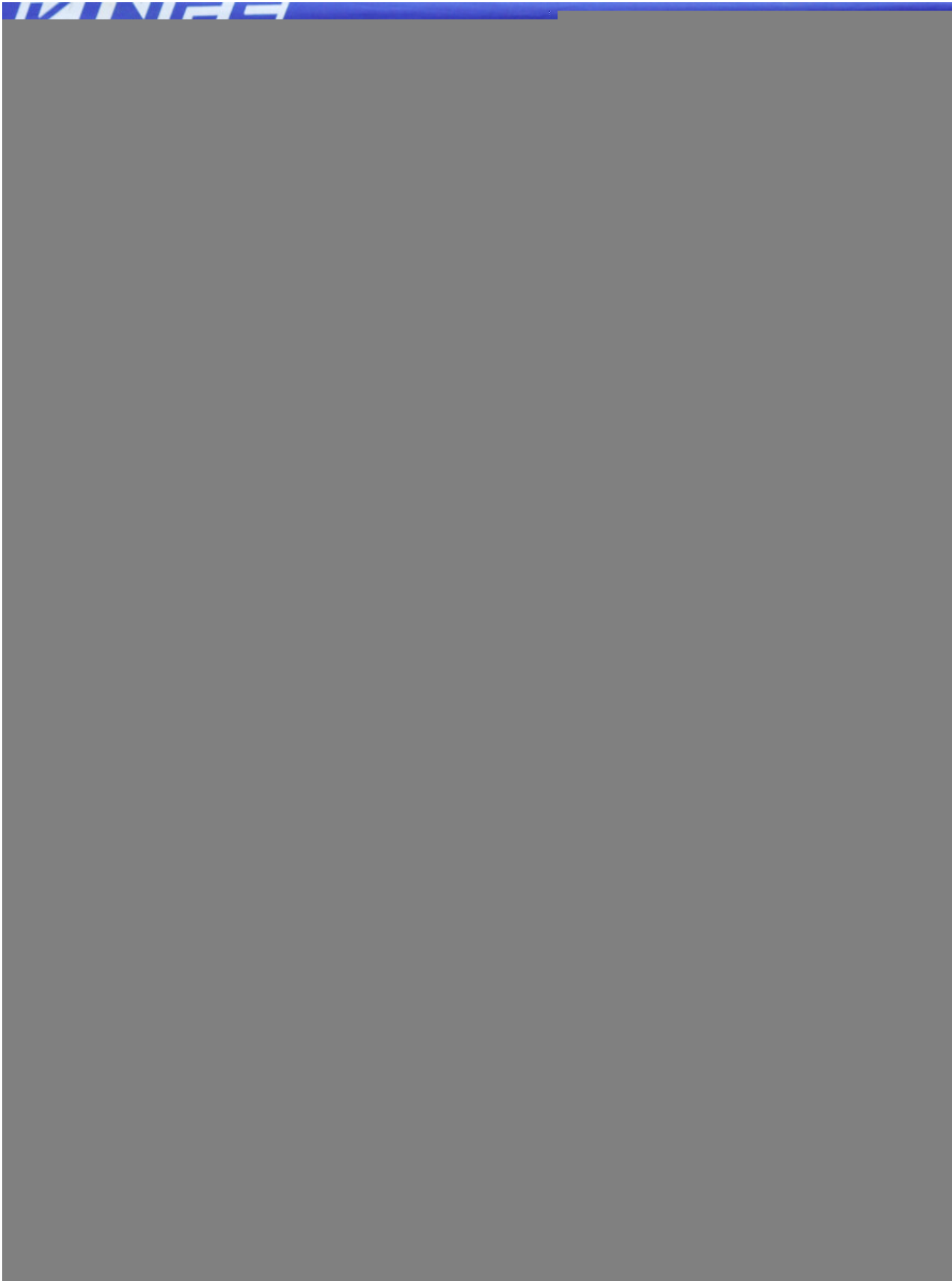
“But we were also having a conversation with them at the same time,” he said.

“A lot of times people feel less than ... and we wanted to make them feel more than.

“We were also trying to work out what other needs there were, and direct people to some of the other charities who were out there doing amazing work.”

Their mission to address the various challenges faced by the growing homeless population in the region meant their outreach service quickly expanded to include a range of supports like general first aid and wound care, counselling, trauma counselling, advocacy, alcohol and other drug counselling and support, and safe sex information.

Then in December last year, the pair launched their pet pantry project in the City of Armadale.



Jay with Luna the bichon frise. Photograph – Richard Polden

“We live in Armadale. We love the area and the people – it’s got a great community feel,” Jay said. “And we realised we couldn’t keep driving through Armadale to go and help another community when our own neighbours here needed help.

“Our aim was to ensure that no one had to choose between feeding themselves or their pets.

“In our first month we fed 10 people’s pets, and we started to wonder if we were on the right track.

“But then in January we helped 50 people. And now, eight months later, in Armadale alone, we help 400 families feed 1200 pets. And 2000 pets in total across greater Perth.”

The pantry currently operates weekly on Sundays at the Armadale Market (Harold King Community Centre, Camillo), and pet food is also distributed to a range of locations including the Byford Baptist Church, Champion Centre, Neerigen Brook Primary School, and 54 Reasons. A limited supply of flea and worm treatment for cats and dogs, and leads, bowls and jackets are also on hand.

“The pantry is for anyone who needs it – you don’t have to be homeless. If you have the courage to ask for help, we’ll help you,” Jay said.

After the success of the pet pantry, and three years connecting with people on the streets, Jay and his partner are about to launch their most ambitious plan yet: Project Home.

“It’s time to take what we’ve learned and make a meaningful difference,” he said.

And they’ll be doing that with the support of the City of Armadale.

Despite often copping a bad rap in the past, the City of Armadale has embraced a new compassionate homelessness policy since 2021.

“City staff and its contractors who interact with people experiencing primary homelessness will do so with an attitude of empathy and a disposition to assist,” the policy reads.

“Vulnerable or homeless people, including those sleeping rough, have the same right to be in public spaces as all community members who are behaving according to the law.”

And they’re not just virtue signalling, they’ve also been putting their money where their mouth is.

The City of Armadale recently invited businesses and not-for-profit organisations to submit tenders for services and activities that aim to address one or more of the ‘social priorities’ identified during its Growing Our Communities review last year.

One of those priorities was access to essential supports, including for people experiencing homelessness, food insecurity and financial crises.

Jay and his partner decided to put forward their idea to begin a community support hub for the homeless and struggling. The City of Armadale thought it was an excellent initiative and decided to back their project.

“We were going to do it anyway, but the feeling we had when we found out we’d have funding support was pure unadulterated joy,” Jay said.

“Because now we’ll be able to deliver everything we want, and not have to scale down.

“And we were happy for the community, that we can be out there doing something meaningful for them.”

From the end of this month, the Project Home pop-up hub will rotate weekly across a range of locations in Armadale, Kelmscott, Seville Grove and Champion Lakes.

At each site there’ll be a hot meal and drinks available, as well as clothing, food hampers, tents and sleeping bags, hygiene packs, first aid, haircuts, showers, a laundry service, pet assistance, mental health support, a children’s activity area, and information and referrals for a range of services including housing support, crisis support, advocacy, financial counselling and mental health counselling.

Jay said the primary goal of the hub is to find people a place to call home, and to support them to live more comfortably while those wheels are in motion.

“Sometime homelessness is the best choice someone has at the time. Yes, they’ve ‘made a choice’ – but sometimes it’s a choice between life and death. How horrible is it that the street is the better option,” he said.

“Part of our goal is also to raise community awareness – we want the community to be part of the solution through volunteering, and community action days.

“We plan to be very visible, and we encourage everyone to come down to the hubs, have a chat, a sausage, and bit of soup.

“If the community gets a better understanding, they won’t see homelessness as a problem, but as a reflection of the deeper issues within our society, and a challenge that needs a whole-of-community solution.”

For more information, and future hub times and locations visit www.streetaid.social

Donations of items can be made at Better Pets and Gardens in Kelmscott. Full a full list of needed items visit the website linked above.