

# Leader Page

# When charity stops at home

**E**VERY Wednesday morning a crowd of about 60 people used to gather outside the Brotherhood of St Laurence Material Aid centre in Kookaburra St, Frankston.

When the doors opened at 10 am there would be a rush to get to the counter first to stake a claim on the free furniture available.

But times are tough. Instead of giving furniture away, once comfortably-off families are now holding garage sales to supplement their own dwindling incomes.

Consequently, donations to the Brotherhood have dropped off at an alarming rate which means there isn't so much to go around the community anymore.

As a consequence of the aggression and tension — some of it racial — which started to build up between the recipients as they waited for the doors to open in Kookaburra St, a new furniture distribution system has been introduced.

According to manager Robyn Souter, the atmosphere inside the centre once the doors had opened was "oppressive".

"The stress was terrible on the staff. It would be wall to wall with small children — they're always small — and it just became too much for everybody," Ms Souter said.

"We've introduced a pilot program whereby people now make appointments before furniture distribution day and that has reduced the crowds considerably.

"It was a big battle to see who got in first and that was causing shocking problems.

"I'm very particular about the

By DENISE GADD

user group's right to dignity, irrespective of need. For example, it's a cattle run some days, especially on furniture mornings.

"We could probably only help seven to 15 people and the rest had to come back the next week. You can imagine the tensions that arose.

"In addition to that, racial tension surfaced because there are a lot of refugees from El Salvador living at the Enterprise Hostel.

"So there's this frustration at not being able to get what you want, then this racial tension with people saying 'We're Aussies, why should they get this stuff? We've been here longer than they have.' And all because resources are so depleted."

**T**HE Brotherhood's free Material Aid Service caters for people on pensions or benefits who live in the shires of Cranbourne, Frankston, Hastings, Mornington, Flinders, Chelsea, Springvale, Phillip Island and Wonthaggi.

Free clothing, linen and household items are also available, but the meagre offerings on display are another sign of the times.

With 6500 people in Frankston now claiming unemployment benefits and 4.45 per cent unemployment in the region from Frankston to Cranbourne, the pressure on charities such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence is increasing daily as Victoria sinks deeper into the recession.

"It's becoming very serious now. We've got 30 per cent more people using our free service than this time last year," Ms Souter said.



LEFT: Times are tough on the Peninsula and around Western Port as revealed by a Brotherhood of St Laurence survey. Material Aid centre manager Robyn Souter says this is reflected in the number of people looking for free clothing and furniture. Picture: PHIL ROWLEY

killed us. Even working people can't afford to give their stuff away these days. They'd rather sell it and supplement their income in some small way."

Robyn Souter has "good access" to local Labor MPs Maureen Lyster and Jane Hill, and they have "good access" to her.

But while they are "supportive", Ms Souter is "not so sure" they relate the problems "to their policies".

On the other side of politics, local Liberal MP Graeme Weideman's "office" has also been extremely supportive.

"His office gave us boxes of shampoo, conditioner and hand cream so that kids could give their mums something for Christmas," Ms Souter said.

"It wasn't top-grade stuff, but it was a lovely gesture and the mums really appreciated it. Many of them cried. Weideman raised that issue for us so we'll keep doing it."

**T**HE condition of some of the clothing and furniture donated to the Brotherhood leaves a lot to be desired.

"Unfortunately, there is a group of society which says these needy people are poor and they should be grateful for what they get," Ms Souter said.

"Thank goodness it's only a minority. Our collection fellows have the right of refusal because we've got a strong belief that people should get what they need, not what people think they deserve."

As the recession gets worse, the pressure on charitable institutions like the Brotherhood of St Laurence will no doubt increase.

This in turn will put added strain on the dedicated band of workers who run them.

Having been with the Brotherhood for 10 years, Robyn Souter is used to that sort of pressure.

"I'm a bit of an old campaigner. I know I can't save the world. We can only do what we can do," she said philosophically.

"The real value in this is the loyalty and dedication of staff. They are amazing. They've got incredible compassion and humor and they are really important in this environment because people have to be treated equally.

"There's no way any of the staff would create any gaps between themselves and the people who use the service.

"I think that's the success of it — the staff's attitude to their job and the people who use the place. I feel pretty good about that."

"What we've got is people leaving the workforce through retrenchment who've never been unemployed before.

"They are the new poor because they've never experienced these dilemmas before, whereas a lot of women who've been left with young children have developed creative skills to be able to manage on a low income.

"Older men who have been retrenched don't have those skills. Plus there's the psychological problem of knowing they probably won't get into the workforce again. I've spoken to some of the men who have used our service and they say retrenchment has been disastrous on their marriages.

"Those who grew up in the post-war period have that strong work ethic and that strong belief that

men are the providers and it's a terrible affront to their egos to be without work."

The centre costs more than \$300,000 a year to run, which is raised through sales at the Brotherhood's opportunity shops.

**C**USTOMERS can use Frankston Material Aid Service on an ongoing basis.

"A lot of single parents, predominantly women, would come here to clothe themselves and their children in an ongoing way," Ms Souter said.

"We get a regular supply of clothing through our depot and from the local community which gives us clothing direct, but we're desperately short all the time.

"For instance, garage sales have

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