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A community initiative of The Big Issue.

**The WOMEN'S
SUBSCRIPTION
ENTERPRISE**

Finding jobs for homeless women is a Big Issue

Rick Feneley

THEY are among the legions of Australia's less-visible poor: the 46,000 women who, on any given day, are homeless. Yet Sheynell Perry and Clarissa Hall have been more visible than most because they have worked as street vendors, selling *The Big Issue*.

About 85 per cent of the magazine's vendors – who must be homeless, vulnerable or marginalised to qualify for the job – are men. It is not a job that usually suits homeless women, most of whom have fled domestic violence. Many lack the confidence for such public displays; many consider standing on street corners too dangerous; others worry about the sex-worker connotations; and many have children in tow. Two-thirds of children seeking refuge in a homeless service last year were in the care of a woman escaping a violent partner.

Yesterday, Ms Perry and Ms Hall joined a "round table" discussion in a plush boardroom in Sydney where they were introduced as the real experts on homelessness. Here they met the federal Minister for Housing and the Status of Women, Tanya Plibersek, who acknowledged their bravery.

And here, with \$1.2 million of seed money from Ms Plibersek, *The Big Issue* announced an employment project to keep women off the streets – as a place of work, and hopefully as a

place for sleeping. It is pioneering a program that will rely not on charity or more government money but on profits to address a big social problem.

The fortnightly magazine launched its "women's subscription enterprise" under which it hopes to sell – on top of its 30,000 street circulation – at least 9000 more magazines to corporate and other business subscribers. For every 100 extra magazines it sells, it will give one homeless woman a part-time job, with flexible hours, as a dispatch officer in its distribution centres. The 9000 sales would pay for 90 self-sustaining jobs, and provide the women with training for work in the wider market.

Westpac has signed up for 100 copies and its general manager of corporate affairs and sustainability, Sally Herman, told the meeting that the bank hoped to one day employ some of the women. Other subscribers include NAB, Telstra and AXA. Doctors' surgeries will be targeted. Ms Perry, 29, and Ms Hall, 44, will be among the first women recruited.

Ms Perry, who left home at 14 to escape abuse, hopes her new job will allow her "to throw most of my baggage behind". For the past 15 years, she has literally carried her baggage around Sydney, night after night, while sleeping rough in parks or "couch surfing" with friends or family. She has spent time in jail for assaults committed while under

the influence.

Two years ago, a *Big Issue* vendor called Ronnie took her under his wing. She cleaned up her act. Still, her jail record prevented her getting work, until now.

"This is not a charity," said another woman at the table yesterday, Cheryl Kernot. "This is a for-profit, social-purpose business."

Ms Kernot, a former leader of the Australian Democrats and Labor shadow minister, is now the director for social business at the Centre for Social Impact at the University of NSW. She showed the meeting a water bottle made of composted corn starch, another example of a successful social enterprise. Filled bottles are sold for profit, 100 per cent of which goes to clean water projects around the world.

Also at the table was Kirstie Papanikolou. As a child she was shunted between foster homes. But she was one of 35 young homeless people taken on as retail trainees at The Body Shop. Two years later she went to work in *The Big Issue's* administration and has been there for 14 years.

"I'm married," she said. "I've got two young boys. I own my own home. I have a full-time job and I have a wonderful family-and-friends support network. If someone had have said that 16 years ago, I would have said, no, I would probably be dead by now."



Clarissa Hall and Sheynell Perry ... personal accounts. Photo: Brendan Esposito