

Blessing Bags Melbourne  
2019-2020 Annual report



Blessing Bags would like to acknowledge the many sacred lands and waterways the we work on. While our work is predominantly on Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung lands, we know our bags travel far and wide across the many traditional lands in what we now call Victoria. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that First Nations people are shamefully over represented in the population of those experiencing homelessness, and accessing homelessness services in Victoria. Our aims to help those experiencing homelessness and provide meaningful change naturally extends to joining the struggle for true and meaningful reconciliation with our First Nations peoples. This was and always will be Aboriginal land.

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# Introduction and Director report

Welcome to Blessing Bag's first annual report! After 5 years of operation we are so pleased to have the resources available to be able to present an annual report, highlighting our key achievements in 2020. This report marks a significant step forward for Blessing Bags as we continue to grow and move forward as an organisation. We sincerely hope you enjoy reading about our work, impact and achievements throughout the last 12 months.

In many ways 2020 was a difficult year for Victorians, and for Blessing Bags, with a lot of our operations ceasing due to COVID-19 restrictions. We found it difficult to receive donations, pick donations up, bag in bulk and distribute to those most in need.

In spite of the difficulties faced in 2020, the tenacity of our team and kind supporters enabled Blessing Bags to continue to operate to ensure the many organisations relying on us received our bags. In particular, our Distribution Coordinator, Nic, did incredible work, bagging around 60 bags per month behind the scenes in her house and did brilliantly to ensure that these bags were distributed across Melbourne. We also had a very generous community member, Karen, who would drop off 20 bags every few weeks for us to distribute. It was this generosity, camaraderie and selflessness that reminded the team at Blessing Bags how lucky we are to be a part of a community that is so compassionate and giving, and what inspired us to continue our work in helping those experiencing or vulnerable to experiencing homelessness.

A major achievement for Blessing Bags was being named as a top three finalist for the 7NEWS Young Achievers Awards in the Community Service category. This was a tremendous achievement for our team, a great reflection on how hard we have worked and how far we have come over the past four years.

Another big milestone for us this year was welcoming three new committee members on board. Our Social Media and Marketing Coordinator, Natasha, has been an amazing asset to our team. She has brought a new vibrancy to our socials and marketing content, and her work so far has helped Blessing Bags develop a new and unique image, which in turn has helped us to connect with some amazing people and organisations. We also recruited a new Treasurer, Jay, who has been exceptional at managing our finances and implementing new ideas and systems to help Blessing Bags function at an optimal level. Finally, we also had Claire recently join us as our first ever Policy and Research Officer! Claire has already done some incredible work, contributing to some excellent policy drafting and blog write ups. From not having a policy and research portfolio at Blessing Bags, to now having an Officer on board is a testament to Christine's hard work on behalf of Blessing Bags, in advocating for policy change on behalf of Blessing Bags to end homelessness in Victoria. I am looking forward to seeing what other things the policy and research arm will bring in 2021!



I am also looking forward to growing our team and its reach. I am looking forward to seeing Danielle thrive in her new role as Fundraising Coordinator and finally being able to host fundraising events again and connect with our community supporters. We have recently embarked on a new partnership with Patterson Lakes Tennis Club, which has kindly offered storage for our stock and has offered their club room to host future Bagging Days. I am looking forward to seeing Bree back in her element, hosting bagging days again, and not having to bag behind the scenes anymore. I am looking forward to growing and working together as a team, and continuing the fight together with the wonderful Blessing Bags community to help combat homelessness in Victoria.

**Hayley Gould - Director**

## Our vision

To see people experiencing homelessness treated with compassion while receiving the appropriate support for them as an individual to have access to safe, affordable and secure housing.

## Our purpose

To provide people experiencing homelessness with essential items that we take for granted. We aim for a judgement-free approach to our work to ensure our services are accessible. We aim to create change through meaningful conversations, to spark change in small everyday acts of kindness.

## Our values

Dignity, Compassion, Community, Empathy, Gratitude, Joy.



## A snapshot of homelessness in Victoria

While Australia has experienced strong economic growth over the past two decades, more people continue to experience homelessness. Between 2014 and 2016, homelessness increased in Victoria by 14% in real terms, and 5% in relation to the State's population growth. While sleeping rough is the most visible form of homelessness, it only represents 7% of people experiencing homelessness nationally. The majority are hidden, with almost half living in severely crowded dwellings. Others are living in shelters, couch surfing, living in cars, or staying with friends and family.

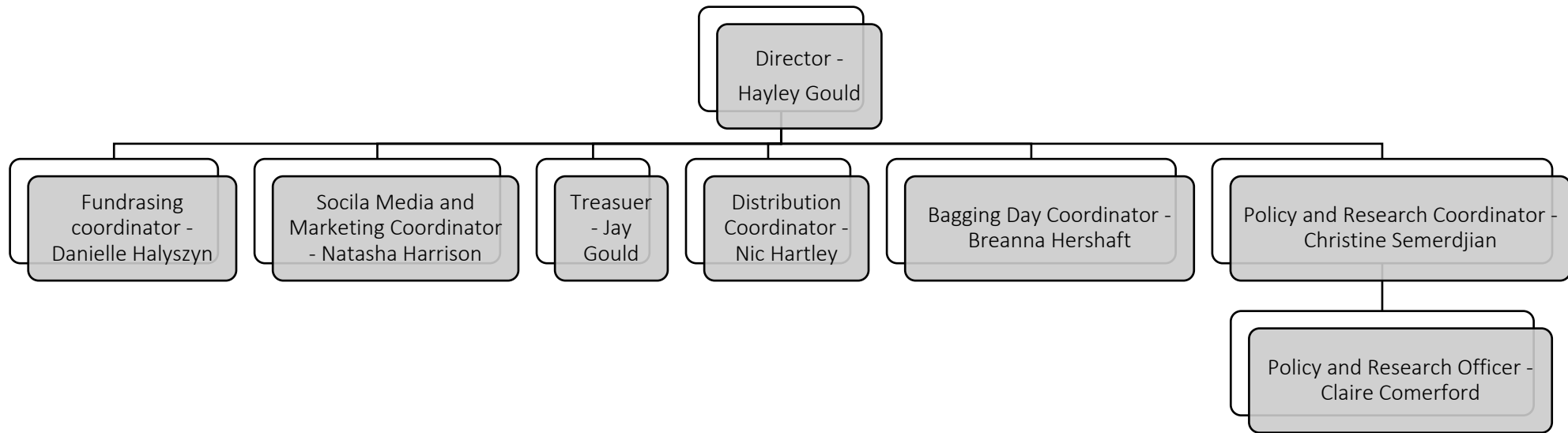
Today, the population of people experiencing homelessness consists of women fleeing domestic violence, families, young people, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and single women aged over 50 years (the fastest growing population of people experiencing homelessness). These changes reflect the social, economic and policy trends in recent years: rising living costs, wage stagnation, and the decrease in affordable, social and public housing - all contributing factors to the increase in people experiencing homelessness.

In 2020, housing and homelessness was thrust into the spotlight. With the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State government implemented a range of policies and programs to keep people safe and off our streets: evictions from rentals were banned, rent rises were frozen and rough sleepers were placed into hotels. Along with the 2020-21 State Budget providing one of the largest investments in social housing, 2020 taught us that if we really want to, we can end homelessness and the housing crisis.

## Impact of our bags

The impact of our bags is wide and far reaching. Harnessing the power of the local community we make and distribute up to 500 bags quarterly. We distribute bags in two ways: (1) through partner organisations such as crisis centres; and (2) at distribution days where we hand-deliver bags to people experiencing homelessness. Our bags contain a toothbrush and toothpaste, a muesli bar, sanitary items, shampoo and conditioner, body soap, deodorant, tissues, and a hopeful note of encouragement. Since being founded in 2015, we have distributed over 12,000 Blessing Bags all over Melbourne. Despite 2020's challenges, we continued to make and distribute bags through our community partners, who were still relying on us to provide these goods to their service users. We distributed a total of 831 bags, despite usual operations like bagging, distribution days and donations being put on hold.

# Blessing Bags 2020 Structure





# Our finances – securing our future

It’s safe to say that 2020 and the subsequent COVID-19 restrictions resulted in a difficult year for many people within the community, notably those experiencing homelessness. Not being able to run our operations as usual created a slow and unconventional year for Blessing Bags, with our usual bagging days and fundraisers scattered across the year.

In 2020 we implemented new accounting software which gave us greater control over the Blessing Bags financials. Despite the many challenges that COVID-19 brought the team we were still able to find new and creative ways to help raise funds. This allowed us to total a profit of \$2,242.48 for the financial year which is incredible considering the circumstances.

Looking beyond 2020 I’m very excited to see what creative and unique fundraising ideas will come out of the blessing bags team. As COVID-19 slows, I look forward to hopefully one of our largest bagging years yet to help many vulnerable Victorians during these troubling times.

<b>Statement of Activities</b>	
<b>Blessing Bags</b>	
<b>01/07/2019 - 30/06/2020</b>	
<b>Revenue</b>	
Donations	\$ 460.39
Fundraising Income	\$ 2,506.14
Grant Received	\$ 2,739.00
Interest Income	\$ 2.89
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>\$ 5,708.42</b>
<b>Expenses</b>	
Advertising	\$ 19.00
Consumer Affairs	\$ 59.20
Donations to Community Members	\$ 200.00
Food and Beverage	\$ 85.91
Fundraising Expenses	\$ 737.31
Postage & delivery	\$ 17.85
Product for Blessing Bags	\$ 2,019.09
Rent Expense	\$ 63.00
Website	\$ 264.58
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 3,465.94</b>
<b>Net Profit</b>	<b>\$ 2,242.48</b>

Jay Gould - Treasurer



# Partnering to strengthen communities and fundraising

2020 was a tough year for all, including Blessing Bags. While we were still able to operate (to a degree, thank you to those making up bags from their own homes so that we could still provide), we were unable to share our days with the community like we normally would.

Most of the year's work took place behind the scenes during COVID-19 lockdowns, like creating lots of new content, working on policies, establishing new connections, and so much more. I am proud of our team and our community for sticking at it, and always following our purpose. 2020 was the year we added some new team members and have started to watch them thrive and grow in their positions.

In 2021, I am most excited to finally start planning and sharing our fundraising events with our supporters. We are excited to have our community join us at our bagging days, and to start spreading more and more awareness as the days go on. Blessing Bags are back and ready to make the most of 2021 with our supportive community right beside us.

**Danielle H - Fundraising Coordinator**

## Communicating through Social Media

With our daily lives moved online in 2020, social media was the only channel for us to connect with our supporters and stakeholders. During the year we communicated new, innovative ways to get involved in Blessing Bags while staying home. With Facebook still being one of the major ways our supporters continued to connect with us, keeping our content up to date and responding to messages was of high importance to us.

While what we had planned did not pan out how we expected, we are proud of the growth in support our social media page has raised: increasing our advocacy work, bringing us closer with our community, and continuing to create awareness. We look forward to continuing this in 2021.



# Advocating to address homelessness

2020 was a big year for housing and homelessness policy in Victoria.

However, before the pandemic hit Australia, we reached a milestone in our policy and research work with an invitation to write a submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Among other key recommendations, our submission highlighted the need to invest in more public housing to end the homelessness and housing crisis in Victoria. You can read our submission [here](#).

As COVID-19 was beginning to hit Victoria, the policy team kept our community informed about the changes in policy relating to housing and homelessness, covering the rent moratorium, changes to what was then Newstart and the introduction of Jobseeker, and of the homes for homeless program. We also continued to advocate for the housing rights of all Victorians, as the public housing lockdowns were unfolding amidst the global Black Lives Matter movement. We were proud to be able to play this part in our community and are looking forward to continuing this role in 2021 and beyond.

In 2020 we continued to raise awareness through our educational blog posts on important issues surrounding housing and homelessness. The hope of the policy team is that people will read these pieces, learn and advocate on behalf of the homeless. You can read our blog [here](#).

As our team grew, we delivered our first response to the 2020-21 state budget. We analysed the sociological and economic impact it will have on the community with a primary focus on homelessness, including the biggest investment in social housing in the state's history. Blessing Bags welcomed the purpose and heart of the Victorian 2020-21 State Budgets investment in social services but hoped to see more funding towards Public Housing and call to end the Public Housing Renewal Program. You can read our response [here](#).

Blessing Bags is uniquely positioned to advocate for policy change as an independent organisation. In an era where the truth and facts are highly politicised, Blessing Bags acts as a non-partisan voice committed to sharing evidence-based research with our community

## Christine Semerdjian and Claire Comerford - Policy and Research Team



## Making and distributing our bags

With 2020 forcing us all to work remotely, the Blessing Bags team had to grapple with the challenge of how to continue making and distributing our bags. The majority of 2020 was spent making up bags single handedly. We had volunteers working in their own homes making anywhere between 10 to 50 bags for us to distribute in the community.

While this process impacted upon the quantity of bags that we were able to distribute, we still provided 831 bags to the community and our partners. We were proud to be able to still support the work of the following community partners:

- SHARPS
- Community Support Frankston
- Salvation Army (Flagstaff)
- Mobilise
- Monash Health (Dandenong)
- Mental Health Community Clinic (St Kilda)
- Living Free Project (Frankston)

## Nic Hartley - Distributions Coordinator

### Connecting with community - Bagging Days in 2020

During 2020, we were only able to hold one of our Bagging Days and the restrictions made it difficult to get donations and distribute our bags. Throughout the harsh lockdown we were still able to distribute over 100 bags- a massive thank you to Nicole and Hayley for organising those bags to be distributed.

In December we were able to have our first Bagging Day of the year which was our Christmas Bagging Day. I would like to give a huge thank you to all of the volunteers that came to help out on the day. We made over 300 bags that were given to SHARPS Frankston, Community Support Frankston, Salvation Army Flagstaff, Monash Health Dandenong, Living Free Project Frankston & Mobilise. This brings the total number of bags made since Blessing Bags started to 11,650. In 2021 I am looking forward to hopefully being able to get back to running all of our Bagging Days and distributing the bags to the local community.

## Breanna Hershaft - Bagging Day Coordinator

# Thank you for your support

During the challenging year that was 2020, we were incredibly grateful for the generosity of our Blessing Bags community.

Our work is driven by a dedicated, passionate and hardworking team of volunteers who give their time to help provide bags of essentials to people experiencing homelessness. In addition to our incredible core team, we would like to sincerely thank all volunteers who come along to our bagging days, donate items, or make a financial donation. Without your ongoing generosity, we would simply not be able to continue to do the work we do.

A special thank you to the Methodist Ladies Old Collegians Club for donating \$3,000 to go towards making up our women's bags.

## Contact

Please get in touch via our facebook page at Blessing Bags Melbourne, or send us an email at [blessingbagsmelbourne@gmail.com](mailto:blessingbagsmelbourne@gmail.com).