Rents the bane of poor: charity

Hilary Gallagher
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JOHN Lee is one of the popular people on the Tweed – but he wishes he wasn’t.

The founder of the You Have A Friend charity is finding a slowly increasing number of people seeking his organisation’s support and help as part of the crisis that confronts homelessness in the border region.

You Have A Friend is one of several charities working with government bodies on all levels and the Southern Cross University to come up with practical and achievable actions to address the growing problem.

However, Mr Lee shares the frustration of those people who turn up to the charity’s food handouts and meals in the Murwillumbah and Coolangatta areas.

“We have the same sorts of numbers at Coolangatta for our Sunday breakfast but these people are just for come forward for help.

“These are small figures compared the large numbers of people in the area who are living in their cars, on couches, in tents or wherever they can without being harassed.

“For many people it is a matter of pride – especially those older folks who have worked all their lives and now find themselves in circumstances which they thought they would never be in.”

Mr Lee said contrary to some claims in the media, a lot of people now seeking help from You Have A Friend weren’t “blow-ins” from outside the area but came from the Tweed and southern Gold Coast.

“There’s no doubt that the soaring coast in rest is having a major contributing factor to forcing people out of homes and onto the street,” Mr Lee said. “We simply do not have enough low-cost housing. If we could provide affordable accommodation, you’d find that would give many people a foundation to get themselves back on their feet.

“I’ve put this case to our local politicians many times but have yet to hear anything back.

“I have always supported the ideal that by subsiding rents, we could get more people off the street than by simply buying or building properties to put people into.”

Mr Lee was concerned that there might be a push to move homeless people on from the area with the Commonwealth Games approaching.

“It has happened elsewhere and we are seeing signs of that on the Tweed,” he said. “The SCU has been instrumental in leading an approach to addressing the problem through its seminars and I think the uni could act as a conduit between government bodies on all levels and non-government organisations in instigating some positive action.

“I just hope we don’t have to wait too long.”
MISCONCEPTIONS about the homeless aren’t helping to address the plight of those living on the streets.

That’s the opinion of You Have A Friend volunteer Patsy Howie who is one of a dedicated group doing what they can to provide support for a slowly growing number of people on the Tweed.

“Unfortunately, there are many people in the community who think that those living rough or on the streets are druggies or have alcohol problems but that’s definitely not the case,” she said.

“Yes, there are a few people who do have those problems but what we are seeing are families and older people who find themselves homeless through no fault of their own.

“What is concerning is that a growing number of people are finding themselves on hard times, through loss of a job, domestic breakdowns or circumstance which they have had no control over.

“Adding to the problem is the cost of accommodation, which is having a major impact. If you lose your job or source of income and have to try and find high rent, it can and does mean you lose the roof over your head.

“Put it this way, if homeless people had money, they wouldn’t be living on the street and asking for handouts.”

Mrs Howie said many people found it embarrassing to turn up for help and as a volunteer, it was gratifying to offer them support, comfort and someone to listen to them.

“In our experience, these people who come to us are just so grateful for anything we can do for them, they are far from being demanding,” she said.

- BOB ANTHONY