



## MEDIA RELEASE

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For media opportunities, please contact:

Michelle Minehan, RSPCA NSW Media Manager

E: [mminehan@rspcansw.org.au](mailto:mminehan@rspcansw.org.au) P: 0413 622 020

## Squalor and hoarding – a secret epidemic in the spotlight

The first National Squalor Conference, being held in Sydney this week, aims to highlight the growing number of people living in squalor in Australia. The conference will examine the links between squalor, hoarding, mental health issues and social isolation.

Confronting statistics collected by a number of agencies in relation to people living with compulsive hoarding and severe domestic squalor, emphasise the number of Australians living in squalor is far greater than previously thought. Over 1 in 1,000 elderly people are thought to live in severe domestic squalor and of course it doesn't just affect the elderly.

Catholic Community Services has been working with a variety of agencies, including the RSPCA and the Fire Brigade, to address the complex issues of hoarding and squalor.

Catholic Community Services launched the pilot Severe Domestic Squalor project in Sydney 12 months ago to provide a central point of coordination for services. Since that time, the project has received 218 referrals from across Sydney.

Susan Graham, the Senior Coordinator of Catholic Community Services' Severe Domestic Squalor project says the key to addressing squalor is a coordinated approach. "People often fall through the gaps as the focus is on the rubbish instead of the person. They may have been in touch with various agencies over the years; however each agency most likely only dealt with one piece of the puzzle. A sustainable solution will never be developed unless agencies look for the issues behind the squalor."

The Catholic Community Services Severe Domestic Squalor project provides advice, advocacy and coordinates the various agencies involved to assist in developing sustainable living environments for clients. Hoarding, and the squalid conditions it causes, is not just about coveting possessions and objects, it often includes animals as well.

RSPCA NSW estimates that there are approximately 700 animal hoarders in NSW, owning an average of 30 animals each. There are potentially around 20,000 animals in the hands of animal hoarders in NSW alone. And the RSPCA sees approximately 200 new cases every year.

"Animal hoarding results in extreme suffering, affecting large numbers of animals for prolonged periods. The extent of abuse, neglect and social deprivation is such that euthanasia is often the only practical option for many of the animals rescued from these situations," says RSPCA NSW CEO Steve Coleman.

"Last year over 130 small dogs were seized from a property in the south of the state. Large seizures like this place enormous emotional and financial strain on the RSPCA."

**Catholic Community Services**

T: 1800 225 474

F: 1800 049 967

**Referrals Fax:** 1800 032 136

PO Box 858, Epping NSW 1710

[www.catholiccommunityservices.com.au](http://www.catholiccommunityservices.com.au)

Likewise, compulsive hoarding has become a huge concern for the Fire Brigade.

"Hoarding represents an increased risk to the occupant, neighbors and responding firefighters in a fire. In a world first study of hoarding related fire incidents and fatalities, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade can advise that fires in hoarding households where the occupant is aged over 50 represent 24% of all fire fatalities in the last ten years, said Julie Harris, Community Ageing Strategist with Metropolitan Fire Brigade Victoria (MFB).

NSW Fire Brigades (NSWFB) Assistant Commissioner Jim Smith, Director of Community Safety, welcomed the research from the MFB.

"Clutter is dangerous for both residents and firefighters alike. It can make a fire spread more quickly and it produces a lot of toxic smoke. It also makes it difficult for residents to escape and firefighters to get in when there is a fire, so it's vital that entry points and escape routes are kept clear.

"The NSWFB will continue to assist Catholic Community Services in developing a collaborative approach to working with people living in unsafe conditions and the findings of the MFB report will be used in NSW to develop strategies to help this 'at-risk' group in the community."

The first ever **National Squalor Conference** will be held in Sydney on 5-6 November 2009 at the SMC Conference Centre in Sydney. It will be launched by The Hon. Paul Lynch MP, Minister for Ageing, Minister for Disability Services and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and hosted by Angela Catterns. Guest speakers include Dr Norman Swan, Father Bob Maguire and Professor John Snowdon, a leading academic in the area of squalor.

More information is available at [www.nationalsqualorconference.com.au](http://www.nationalsqualorconference.com.au) or by calling 1800 225 474.

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**About Catholic Community Services**

Catholic Community Services provides a diverse range of services in the home, in the community and in day centres to the elderly, people with a disability, people with a mental illness and people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Our clients live in metropolitan, regional and rural NSW.

Catholic Community Services is a division of Catholic Healthcare.

For more information visit [www.catholiccommunityservices.com.au](http://www.catholiccommunityservices.com.au)