

Help for Diggers who do it tough

EXCLUSIVE

BRUCE McDOUGALL

HOMELESS war veterans sleeping rough on the streets will be given a roof over their heads under a \$1 million program to be rolled out in the state Budget.

Surveys have found about 8 per cent of rough sleepers in Sydney are war veterans, half with serious physical and mental health problems.

The government action follows a campaign by The Daily Telegraph highlighting Australia's shameful neglect of its war veterans.

Homeless vet numbers have increased alarmingly since The Telegraph revealed an estimated 3000 were battling mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency, relationship breakdowns and suicide.

Under the government's plan, the most vulnerable will be helped into the private housing market through rental subsidies that will flow for the next three years.

The money will pay for a bond on rental accommodation and provide ongoing financial assistance based on each veteran's circumstances.

"These Diggers have fallen on hard times. Sometimes they struggle to return to civilian life," Family and Community Services Minister Brad Hazard said yesterday.

"We are saying to them 'We



Lee Sarich.

will stand next to you as you stood next to us when you fought for the country.

"The Australian Defence Force does a lot of good but we need a uniform approach across the country to house our Diggers and get them the support they need."

Veterans Affairs Minister David Elliott said: "It is everyone's responsibility to make sure those who served our nation are well catered for in their post-military life."

The Telegraph revealed last year that homeless war vets were seeking emergency accommodation at the rate of one per week. After years of serving their country many have lost their careers, marriages, income and their homes.

Lee Sarich, who did two tours of Afghanistan and was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, was thrown a lifeline by RSL LifeCare which provides accommodation at its villages through the Homes for Heroes program.

The crisis is now affecting many personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since 1999 Australia lost 46 soldiers on the battlefield and at least 239 from suicide at home. Sixteen are believed to have taken their own lives already this year.