My name is Rebecca and I have been a member of the StreetCare consumer advisory committee for 12 months.

I have a lived experience of homelessness. I grew up as a ward of the state. From the age of 11 to 27 on a number of occasions, I founded myself in and out of refugees and on occasion sleeping on the street.

By the age of 20, I was on a first-name basis with NSW police. I would regularly interact with the police. I would be walking somewhere they would see me stop me and go through my bag.

Later on in life I discovered to my shock they also took notes on what was in my bag and where. They would ask me to lift my bra outward to see if I had anything I shouldn't have and empty my pockets. I would be asked to leave areas and they have made derogatory comments about how I was supporting myself as a sex worker. These interactions left me feeling humiliated and defeated.

I was 33 when I finally paid off the fines I received in that period. To have fines hanging over my head for that amount of time caused me a lot of stress.

A friend of mine by was found deceased two weeks ago. She was in severe distress and was fighting with the system to try and put a roof over her head. Department of Communities and Justice were more concerned with her compliance with the temporary accommodation rental diary than providing her with help and support.

Two weeks prior to her death she was found by police to be in possession of a small amount of the drug ice. When police questioned her, she admitted her crime and burst into tears. However, to my knowledge, no appropriate referral was made so that she may be able to get the help she required. Instead of giving her help and support they gave her a court date. Two weeks later she was deceased.

There have been so many times in my life were there could have been meaningful intervention by police in order to help me break the cycle of homelessness and disadvantage.

However, instead of helping me or asking if I was ok, they spoke down to me, were aggressive with me, insulted me and punished me.

The consequences of these interactions last a lifetime and have severely limited my opportunities, particularly in employment. They have also had a negative impact on my self esteem and self worth.

If police abided by the protocol, they have the potential to change people’s lives for the better. There were times certain police officers did help me. For example, calling the youth refuge to come to me and a group of kids we were sitting at the rail station. They have even taken me to hospital on one occasion.

However, the majority of interactions I have had with police have not been helpful. The Protocol sets out ways that organisations should interact with people sleeping rough. However, In order for the protocol to be effective, it needs to be able to hold the police and other agencies accountable for their actions.

There needs to be mandatory reporting requirements of all signatories as to how they have implemented the protocol. All police should also be trained in trauma informed care so they are able to interact appropriately with people experiencing homelessness and be a force for good rather than kicking people while they’re down.

This training and accountability could be monitored and supported by a lead agency. They could also be someone that people could speak to anonymously about their experiences and complaints they have.

The protocol has the potential to be an incredibly powerful document to set a standard amongst all organisations to treat people experiencing homelessness with respect, empathy and care. However, in order for it to be effective, it requires leadership, direction and accountability.

Thankyou for listening.