

Homelessness in Newtown Forum

On Wednesday May 14th we held our Forum 'Homelessness in Newtown'. Over 60 people from a range of organisations attended the forum, and heard presentations from a panel of speakers, as well as a rousing finale performance from the Sydney Street Choir.

The first presentation was from Elisabeth Baraka of Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), who drew everyone's attention to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises housing as a basic human right, the declaration states:

*“everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, **housing** and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”*

She went on to look at some of the definitions around homelessness, and outlined some of the common legal problems homeless people faced. The Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS) runs a free advice surgery in conjunction with Newtown Neighbourhood Centre and the Newtown Mission every Friday at the Mission drop in, 280a King Street, between 1.30 and 3.30pm. HPLS can help with any legal problem faced by homeless people and run other open clinics across the city; they can be contacted at homelessproject@piac.asn.au



The next speaker was Elizabeth Giles, Homelessness Manager at the City of Sydney. She outlined some of the work carried out by the City of Sydney, one of the very few local governments in Australia working directly with homelessness issues. One of the many parts of their work is the Homeless Persons Information Centre, (HPIC). Which serves all of NSW, providing a housing advice and referral service for homeless people and those at risk of homelessness; they take more than 50,000 calls a year, providing a service seven days a week.

She highlighted a definition of homelessness that had been developed in conjunction with people who have experienced long-term homelessness, and while using the definition developed by Chamberlain and Mackenzie, this definition also gives a depth to the experience of homelessness:

The First Home: the self. The characteristics of this home are physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual in nature. This home needs to be nurtured, rested, nourished and emotionally supported.

The Second Home: might cover any of the descriptions provided under the primary, secondary and tertiary definitions of homelessness. It is the place where we live, and it refers not only to the physical structure but also to the living environment within which it is located. This home is where we sleep, where we begin and end every day, where we store our belongings, it may be where we socialise and interact with others.

The Third Home: is the larger community within which our first and second homes are located. It provides context to the lives that are lived within it and how that is realised at an individual level. Here the connectivity between individuals, multiple communities, the residential, business and visitors all meet in the same place. The quality of that home is defined by the relationships of all groups within it.

Heather McGillivray from Housing NSW hosted a presentation that concentrated on Housing First, an initiative with the City of Sydney and a number of other partners; the project is a model of accommodation for chronically homeless people with complex needs. The model provides long-term permanent accommodation and structured multi agency support to promote capacity to live independently.

Harriet Davidson the Affordability Housing Officer at Marrickville Council gave an informative presentation on the constraints and opportunities for affordable housing within the Marrickville LGA. She highlighted the high number of boarding houses in the Marrickville area, and the relatively high percentage of private rental accommodation, (44% compared to a Sydney average of 33%). She spoke of the aim of the Council strategy to preserve the existing affordable housing in Marrickville, and to facilitate the creation of more. The constraints are however, lack of affordable land, market values and state planning policies and direction.

John Nicolades from South West Inner Sydney Housing Co-operative (SWISH) provided an engaging presentation on the work of Community Housing providers, and the potential for growth in the future. He highlighted some of the partnerships that SWISH had established with homeless support agencies, including work with ex-prisoners, older homeless people, people living with HIV/AIDS and a range of others.

The final speaker, Leigh Connell, Manager of NNC Boarding House Project, gave much food for thought, answering the question posed to her, '*Are Boarding Houses a viable housing option?*' Leigh gave some examples of where this may be the case citing housing models in Melbourne, Victoria, but not necessarily, where the primary motive was that of a private business and a profit, especially if the people living in such accommodation had a disability or support need.

The models cited by Leigh provided not only accommodation but also on site support for tenants with a ethos that aims to foster recovery, wellbeing, healing and human capital over financial gain.

It was interesting to note that latest figures indicate the number of people living in Boarding Houses have doubled since 2003. As Leigh observed, ‘the current model of boarding houses in NSW is a tough way to live.’



In the second half of the morning the forum split into two workshops. The first looked at *How and why people are homeless and what can be done to break the cycle*. The underlying reasons for homelessness were explored and then participants were asked what more their individual agencies could do within existing resources. Some creative responses were developed around joint working and identifying GP’s who were sympathetic to or had an interest in mental health as this could lead to improved access to mental health services, and consequently increased tenancy sustainment.

The second workshop looked at how the supply could be increased, and what else needs to be done to increase the supply of housing. The ensuing discussions looked at some of the concerns with the DOH in its present form, and if it was too large, if its role should be to regulate a larger community housing sector. Discussions also covered the role of the private sector, and the possibilities of tax incentives to private developers to allocate a percentage of new housing stock to social housing. The role of local government was also discussed, and the need to make greater use of SEPP 10 (State Environmental Planning Policy No. 10 -Retention of Low Cost Rental Accommodation) and ensure affordability is on the agenda of the State Government.

The group also looked at Boarding and the improvements that could be made. Throughout the discussions the need was identified again and again for ongoing tenancy sustainment and support, so that people could maintain their homes and not be part of the revolving door syndrome that many homelessness services recognised.

The morning’s events finished on a high note, indeed a few high notes and very few missed notes, with a performance from the Sydney Street Choir. Performing both original songs, reflecting on inner strengths and past addictions and some fantastic interpretations of old favourites such as ‘perfect day’, it was a great way to end the morning, and helped to ‘keep in real’ for all involved.

The Sydney Street Choir are planning to go to Uluru in August, and people are invited to join them on this journey, visit www.sydneystreetchoir.com for more information about the choir and their forthcoming tour.



At the end of the day we gave out copies of our housing services directory and hope that services that use these will find them a useful source of information in assisting homeless people. A few copies are still available for organisations that were unable to make the forum; contact us if you would like a copy. For more information about this directory please see page 6 of this newsletter.

The challenge for Newtown Neighbourhood Centre is how we move forward from the forum. There have already been positive outcomes with the possibility of a major housing provider offering to run a monthly advice clinic out of the centre, and we are seeking funding to make the directory pocket sized and suitable for homeless people to carry around. We'll also be formulating a response for the Green Paper and we welcome the Federal Governments recognition of homelessness as an issue that needs to be addressed.

The Federal Governments Green Paper on homelessness 'Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness' will be available from May 22nd. Check out the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) website www.fahcsia.gov.au for more information. Electronic submissions can also be made. There will also be the opportunity to attend a public consultation in Sydney on June 11, but you need to register beforehand. See the website for more information. The Green Paper will be followed by a White Paper, with a plan for action, by August 2008.

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We would also like to thank all those who attended and participated on the day.