



New(town) Beginnings #30

Dear Neighbour,

We're (physically) back!

Last week we opened our doors to the public for the first time since March. Excitement swirled around 1 Bedford Street as we finally reinstated our face-to-face Information and Referral Service, albeit in a modified, COVID-safe way.

With the large volume of people who passed through our doors before the pandemic hit, I used to think it unfathomable to consider closing for multiple days, let alone for months...but we all know how that story played out.

Although we can currently only open for part of the week, it's reassuring to know that individuals who want to come in for a chat or need urgent support are now able to do so, three times a week.

Our Operations and WHS team have worked tirelessly to ensure our staff are able to keep a safe physical distance as we interact with our clients. In fact, without their hard work, we wouldn't have been able to reopen.

They measured spaces, redesigned work stations stuck 'Stand Here' stickers around the Centre and installed wall-mounted hand sanitising stations. They also established protocols so that we could reintroduce access to our free computer and phone, which pre-COVID was our most popular request used by many, all day, every day.

I know they wouldn't like to be acknowledged publicly but we do appreciate the often unglamorous work they do for the Centre, which in turn enables us to support the community.

Over the past few months we have been mostly conducting our work over the phone and email. However, almost every Thursday afternoon since lockdown, we've had a presence outside the Centre in what we've called our One Stop Shop Pop Up.

Our original One Stop Shop model will be on hold for the foreseeable future as it attracts an average of 50-70 people in an indoor space, which would instantly breach the current regulations. During this time we have seen how the alternative Thursday afternoon pop-up outside the Centre, held at the same time as One Stop Shop, has provided a very critical life line during these strange times.

While we don't have our regular partner organisations physically there, we can still reach out to them for advice. And on occasion, thanks to generous local businesses or churches, we are able to distribute some food.

It's an opportunity for us to reconnect with our beloved regulars and share some laughs, and also gives the team the ability to assist with a few complex cases, which wouldn't have been possible over the phone.

Recently a young woman stuck in nightmarish limbo popped by on a Thursday. She had escaped a violent relationship pre-lockdown and had been placed in a refuge where she was subsequently assaulted. In NSW, people are entitled to 28 days of funded temporary accommodation, known as TA in the sector, and had unfortunately 'reached her limit'. She was being refused additional days, despite the immense trauma she has been through and the recent COVID relaxations. She managed to find someone who was willing to share their TA – certainly not an ideal situation for someone in a vulnerable position.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre was recommended and when she came along on a Thursday, it took three experienced workers, close to three hours to deliver a positive outcome. They advocated strongly for extra nights of TA, and called case management services so she could be linked to appropriate support.

We were also visited by an older teenager from Liverpool, England. Arriving to Australia at the start of the year, he never expected for COVID to have such an impact on his life. After running out of money, and unable to obtain a job, he found himself couch surfing and essentially homeless.

A lovely volunteer from Lentil As Anything met the young boy and suggested he stop by our Thursday Pop Up. Immediately my colleague was able to help find him a bed in a refuge and connect him with a youth service.

Without the ability to meet these two face-to-face, and many others in similar situations, we may not have been able to help them and ensure they were able to find safe and secure accommodation.

I believe that the ability to use our wonderful connections and ensure that individuals receive wrap around support is crucial to ending homelessness and I am thrilled that we are back open to offer our support.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team