



New(town) Beginnings #31

Dear Neighbour,

On a Monday morning, in our alternate reality, the one not set against the bleak pandemic backdrop, my manager and I would have been chatting with local residents at our weekly Information Stall pop-up at Marrickville Metro Shopping Centre.

Our Outreach Information and Referral program was expanding just as COVID-19 hit. We had planned to reach out to the community by going to places where our neighbourhood congregates – the Metro, other community centres, Magic Yellow Bus park visits, and some of the larger social housing estates in Marrickville.

Instead, I find myself sitting in my eerily quiet house, trying to write about life at the Neighbourhood Centre, acutely aware of the undercurrent of anxiety returning after a two-month reprieve from the virus.

The rapid force of change and disruption this year has been all-consuming and nothing short of brutal. The chaos dominating 2020 has permeated all facets at NNC. Yes, we've adapted, but it's affected our service delivery, our advocacy efforts, fundraising and seeped into our internal structure. It's draining and I fear that the next few months will prove to be even more relentless.

But as I have spoken about before, what keeps us going is that we know this uneasiness is a permanent fixture in many people's lives, and while it sometimes feels easier to succumb to the upheaval, our resilient community almost never do.

During our pop-up last Thursday, chatting with many familiar faces, I realised that the 'pandemic anxiety' gripping those of us in more fortunate positions, is not necessarily shared among everyone. For many, the coronavirus is just an extra hurdle they may have to face, but it's not their most significant worry by any stretch.

"I don't really care, it's all going to be ok," was echoed many times.

What's far more critical is what will happen when JobSeeker payments go back to the unliveable amount and individuals are cruelly pushed back further into poverty. From September the rate will be just over \$400 a week – a measly amount to cover rent, utilities, transport, food, clothing, medicine and other essentials.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

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The long term unemployed can't simply walk into a job without immense support, training and guidance. Instead of receiving reassurance during this uncertain time, those who rely on financial support to survive will have new stringent requirements looming over them following the reduction later this year. These include having to accept any job offer that comes their way, regardless of suitability, in order to comply and avoid having their payments stopped.

Having heard anecdotal accounts over the years, the mismatch of jobs offered versus suitability is often starkly incompatible, and is a frightening concept for many.

The dole bludger trope is such a misnomer because having to survive on income support is far more arduous than actually working. There's no bludging involved. There are constant appointments, commitments to be met, calls to be made and forms to be submitted. While often being treated like a second class citizen.

This is compounded by the strain on mental health. For many who face chronic and long term social isolation, having to observe physical distancing rules is almost as terrifying as getting sick. We all need community around us but not all of us have the means to communicate using digital technologies, so face-to-face contact is the only lifeline.

A staff member who works with the elderly members of the Former Yugoslavian community shared that a few of the seniors are terrified of going back into some form of lockdown again because of the lack of social contact. For many, that is causing more anxiety than the virus itself.

While we all know it's for the greater good, the containment measures are easier for those in privileged positions to accept.

I worry but I also know that those who have experienced ongoing adversity are the wisest and strongest amongst us. I'm sure it's a label they would give up in a heartbeat but I often think they have way more answers than I ever will.

For now, I will try to share their optimism.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team

P.S. – Newtown Neighbourhood Centre strongly believes the JobSeeker rate needs to be raised to stop the cycle of poverty, debt, social isolation and homelessness. [Sign the petition](#) and stand with us today.

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