



New(town) Beginnings #32

Dear Neighbour,

The path out of homelessness can be as arduous as the one into it.

As our dedicated Homelessness Services Coordinator, Karen's daily preoccupation is working with long-term rough sleepers to support them and to offer pathways out of homelessness. Once someone is housed this starts a whole new journey where they can start to heal and thrive after their trauma of living on the streets. This is not always an easy path especially for those who have lived on the streets for several years. Since starting her current role in 2018, Karen has been instrumental in ensuring more than 25 people in the Inner West have not only been housed but that their situation is sustainable and continues to improve beyond signing a lease.

But it takes persistence, perseverance and fortitude to take on this task.

Adam* first engaged with our Newtopian Outreachers – the volunteer homeless outreach group which Karen co-manages – when he was sleeping in a tent in Enmore Park. He initially didn't want assistance but enjoyed the interaction and conversation. He often talked about feeling invisible so these moments of human connection would boost his spirits.

"I know that many of us without any lived experience of homelessness may find it hard to understand why someone wouldn't immediately accept help, but it's a fairly common scenario for those who are deeply entrenched in homelessness and there are several reasons why this is the case", explains Karen.

"Firstly, just like any relationship it takes time to build rapport and trust. This is even more critical among people who have been let down time and time again and don't believe the system can help them."

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

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During this time, Karen and the Newtownian Outreachers kept in regular contact with Adam and it was that monitoring, known as soft-entry engagement, which made a big difference.

Despite trying several times, Karen never came across Adam when she patrolled the park. However, she knew where he slept so left her details nearby.

“Adam really led this process and we listened. He didn’t want assistance initially and we respected that but let him know where he could get support if and when he did need it.”

About 8 months later he dropped into the Centre, holding her card. He was crying, very distressed, and wanted some help. It was the middle of winter: he was cold, malnourished and now living in the back of a Ute at the park.

Karen organised for the Department of Communities and Justice Homelessness Outreach Support Team (HOST) to visit him and through that introduction he was provided with temporary accommodation while Karen provided case management.

“People can also get so acculturated to sleeping rough and that way of life that the prospect of living in a house seems too daunting or they can’t even imagine living any other way, so it can take a long time before they decide to accept housing assistance”, continues Karen.

“Also, the experience of homelessness can exacerbate existing mental health issues or can lead to people developing mental health issues. Engaging in conversations that can lead to a pathway out of homelessness can be made all the more challenging because of this and requires a delicate, tactical approach.”

Adam was harder to find as he had become what is known as the “hidden homeless”. Those who live in cars or who couch surf are often missed on regular street patrols, so they don’t have any contact with any specialised homelessness services.

Following his interaction with HOST, Adam spent months in temporary accommodation before accepting an offer from Housing NSW and is now permanently housed.

Being housed has allowed Adam to recommence part-time employment. He’s getting regular uninterrupted sleep and his health is improving as he has been able to establish regular check-ins with a GP and a psychologist.

It’s that vital intensive wraparound support provided by Karen and others in the Specialist Homelessness Sector who offer a critical lifeline to clients who are learning to navigate their new world and develop the skills required to manage the demands of being housed.

As Karen points out though, “it’s not all rainbows and lollipops” and there’s always a risk that if people

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don't have the right level of support and it's too overwhelming they'll fall back into homelessness, which in some ways they may see as familiar and less stressful.

"Adam's had some issues with his housing provider around the need for some property repairs to his home. Although he has every right to feel frustrated and annoyed, it has allowed us to discuss perspective and that the problems he is experiencing now transcend that of basic survival, like 'will I freeze to death tonight?'

The upside is that while he is still being supported by NNC, these experiences are allowing him to develop self-advocacy skills and agency: "I love it when a person I'm working with hits that point where they have developed the skills to manage their place, they're comfortable and enjoying it and have created a life for themselves where they no longer consider returning to homelessness as an easier option."

We are extremely grateful to have the likes of Karen looking after those most vulnerable and ensuring everyone has a safe space to spend the night.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team

*Not his real name