

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings #20

Dear Neighbour,

Homelessness and accruing fines go hand in hand.

Why?

For someone with no place to live, and no other method of getting to appointments, public transport is a necessity and a solution. However, the reality is that when you have little to no funds, topping up your Opal card is the last of your priorities when you are starving and need to spend the last few dollars on some sort of sustenance to get you through to your next meal.

We are asked regularly by service users if we can give them funds to buy a ticket or if we supply Opal cards. Just this week we had a young man present at our Information and Referral Service looking for some financial assistance. He had spent the past few weeks sleeping on trains – a common temporary remedy for people who find themselves without housing.

Rough sleepers hop on late night services from Central to Newcastle or Kiama, where the train trips are longer and the seats are comfier, and hope to get as much shuteye as they can. Sleeping on a train is also a safer option and a preference to open areas such as parks or on the streets.

While sleeping on a train can provide someone with temporary shelter from the elements, inevitably, they are woken from their slumber by Transport Officers asking to check their Opal card, which usually does not have enough funds to cover the cost of their trip.

As a result, this transient and insecure lifestyle comes with a hefty price. Public transport fines, which can accrue at a drastic rate, can also affect future benefit entitlements. For me the biggest impact is the effect a debt hanging over one's head can have on someone's mental health and well-being.

Thankfully, there is a program that can help combat some of this. Newtown Neighbourhood Centre's Boarding House Outreach Service is a registered participant in the Work Development Order (WDO) Scheme.

Karen, our Homeless Outreach Co-ordinator explains that "the scheme allows our eligible clients to reduce their fines if they participate in volunteer work, education or treatment such as mental health support."

Here at the Centre we offer a free Generalist Counselling Service and the scheme fortunately includes seeing a counsellor as part of the participation. Recently one of our clients celebrated finally paying off his fines, which had amounted to over \$1000, after attending regular counselling sessions for the past year.

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“I was so stressed about knowing that I had all this money to pay back...it’s a total catch 22. You need to use public transport to try and survive, but the thing is, without money for an Opal card it’s hard to get to appointments or to places like Centrelink or Housing. So you take a risk and then cop a fine.”

As someone who had recently found permanent housing through Karen and NNC’s support, being able to tackle and clear his large debt was a huge achievement.

The Work Development Order (WDO) Scheme has positive benefits and as a service provider we are extremely happy to be associated with the program and be able to offer this assistance. But wouldn’t it be wonderful if these fines didn’t exist in the first place.

In Victoria, community service organisations can apply for free transport cards to pass on to clients who are rough sleeping. Newtown Neighbourhood Centre would certainly support this initiative if it were to roll out in NSW. We believe it would make the lives of many people we work with a little bit less stressful.

Every little bit has the power to make a huge difference.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team