

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings #25

Dear Neighbour,

Back in 2018 we embarked on one of our most ambitious projects to date: to form a brigade of locals to help us support the increasing number of rough sleepers around Newtown.

We aimed to recruit and train 20 volunteers to become Newtopian Outreachers. The **Newtopian Outreachers** program involves volunteers taking part in monthly outreach, engaging with people experiencing homelessness and offering assistance. It takes experience, courage and emotional intelligence to pick up on nuances, know when it's ok to approach, know the right way to introduce yourself and put someone with complex needs at ease.

After a stringent recruitment process they all underwent intensive training to equip them with the necessary skills to engage with rough sleepers and to help us dispel some common myths surrounding homelessness. The project's lead and NNC Homelessness Services Co-ordinator, Karen Hunter explains:

"Our volunteers have all been trained to conduct assertive outreach, which essentially means they have the necessary skills to initiate conversation with strangers who may need support. They have enough background knowledge and context to understand how people may end up in these situations."

Little did we know that this admirable group of altruistic people would soon be required to undertake another mammoth task: to keep those most vulnerable in our community connected during a worldwide pandemic.

When COVID-19 hit, NNC needed to suspend these weekly street patrols. The volunteers were disappointed and many expressed a desire to continue supporting us in our ongoing work.

This led Karen and other staff members to develop a plan for a *Social Isolation Boarding House Project* - an initiative to keep the volunteers involved while also supporting NNC's clients. Once a week our Outreachers make social calls to boarding house residents and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

"Many of our clients who live in boarding houses face physical, social and technological barriers which often result in much higher incidents of anxiety, isolation and feeling of disconnectedness."

"They usually don't have contact with friends or family who they can just ring up, and the current restrictions meant they couldn't meet up for social outings," says Karen.

Jessie, a case manager from Individual Support Service (ISS) – a program designed to tackle social isolation for the over 60 age group – explained the impact the virus has had on her clients.

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“Dealing with the restrictions in place has meant that our clients are now all classified as medium to high needs simply because the virus has forced most of them to become temporarily house bound.

“They are no longer able to obtain their groceries or medication without some form of support, so our workload has increased exponentially as even our fairly independent clients now have extra needs,” explains Jessie.

These challenges make it difficult for our social workers to keep in touch with their entire burgeoning case load regularly, so this program has helped alleviate some stress.

“It’s almost like a triage as the volunteers are able to alert me of any concerns that I need to act on. For example, one of my clients had a fall and fractured her wrist. She often plays down her medical issues so I wouldn’t have known this until later if the volunteer hadn’t passed this info on!”

“I feel much more at ease knowing that my clients are being checked in on regularly.”

“Another one of my clients had a challenging call from a family member who is terminally ill. She was really upset and distressed and then received a call from a Newtownian Outreacher”, recalls Jessie.

“While she said she didn’t discuss this directly with the volunteer, she told me it was a great distraction and pulled her out of a dark place.”

Similarly our volunteers are thoroughly enjoying making the connections and one commented “how much the call is appreciated. The client told me that she doesn’t get to talk to many people and having someone call her and check in was really lovely”.

While this **Volunteer’s Week** we can’t thank everyone in person, we want to express our immense gratitude to our Outreachers, and all our other wonderful Centre volunteers.

To us you’re not “just a volunteer”. You are skilled community members who are deeply invested in our neighbourhood. Thank you so much for the invaluable work you do.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team

P.S. – If anyone is interested in joining us as a future social support volunteer, please contact georgia@newtowncentre.org and we will keep you posted on our next volunteer intake.

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