

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings #4

Dear Neighbour,

Every day our Information and Referral Service is a hive of activity with up to 50 people a day seeking support. To us this is no surprise, especially with the number of people experiencing homelessness continuing to grow and people needing support in navigating an exceptionally complex system.

In most cases, our dedicated and informed team of community workers can assist the majority of people with their enquiries. But every so often, despite us exhausting every possible avenue, there are those we can't.

About a month ago, a young woman walked in with a large backpack asking where she could wash her clothes.

With some gentle probing I discovered that she had arrived in Sydney from Melbourne, where she'd been living for a couple of months on a skilled working visa. Her plan was to get a job in her trained field – civil engineering – but luck hadn't been on her side. Unable to find work she headed north to Sydney with the hope of getting a job, even if it wasn't in her field of study.

After a couple of days in Sydney, she had completely run out of money and found herself sleeping in a local park. Despite having an enormous amount of strength and resilience, her current predicament leaves her extremely vulnerable, simply because she is a woman.

With her large bag on her back she had walked back and forth, from the Inner West to the City, to fulfill basic needs such as showering and washing clothes. While volunteering at Lentils As Anything in exchange for meals, one of the other volunteers let her know about Newtown Neighbourhood Centre.

Upon learning she was currently experiencing homelessness, the team and I jumped straight on the phones to try and find her a bed. We did however know that our options would be limited due to her visa status.

Our colleagues from our Boarding House Outreach Service also chipped in to help but sadly, the women's refuges we tried were fully booked and couldn't take her in.

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

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Every idea we had turned into a dead end.

We reached out to a contact we know who works in the Engineering field to ask about job agencies.

We asked our contact at Centrelink if there was any payment she might be entitled to.

We emailed her a long list of contacts for places that may be able to help - the embassy, cultural associations and even student groups from her country of origin.

We felt helpless that all we could successfully do for her was charge her phone. We were fortunate to have the wonderful women at Dress for Success squeeze her in for an appointment so she had some new interview outfits when looking for work.

Over the years we have built a relationship with Newtown Mission and asked our contact if her would kindly top up her Opal card, and he said yes. She however said 'No, thank you', and found it difficult to accept what she perceived to be 'charity' as there are "other people who need more help".

She is incredibly resourceful and has a sense of pride, which while admirable can sometimes interfere with progress.

Thankfully she reluctantly accepts food donations, which are plentiful in Newtown thanks to Lentils, the Greek Church, Newtown Mission and the Hare Krishna van.

Despite not being able to help her with her living situation she trusts the team at NNC and now as a consequence 'checks-in' once a week to let me know she is safe.

While I worry about her a lot, I have faith that she has landed in Newtown for a reason. We are in a community that looks after its most vulnerable so hopefully she'll be ok.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team

P.S – I would like to take this moment to celebrate and thank our colleague Helen for the amazing support she has provided to those most vulnerable running the Information and Referral Service for the past 7 years. She will be sadly missed by our regular service users and all of us here at NNC.