



New(town) Beginnings #6

Dear Neighbour,

Just over a year ago, while Australia was in the midst of our first terrifying lockdown, government staff were developing a response to COVID-19 for people experiencing homelessness in NSW.

There were public health concerns for the 37,000+ NSW residents without housing – a transient cohort without the means to self-isolate or present for regular testing. If an outbreak occurred among this population, the fear was it could not be contained through regular contact tracing.

With a scarcity of public housing stock, the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) rapidly developed and funded a holistic wrap-around program called Together Home, based on the successful international 'Housing First' model: a person-centred and trauma-informed framework that champions the principle that safe, stable and secure housing is a human right.

The idea being that individuals on priority waitlist for housing would transition into a head-lease property (when a housing provider leases a private rental property and then subleases it to a client) for a two-year period. The participant could also access case management support to address individual challenges, as well as factors which may have contributed to their homelessness.

The investment by DCJ, now estimated at \$65 million, has been divided across various community housing organisations to deliver the program in NSW, including St George Community Housing (SGCH) and Metro Housing. The intention is that all of the program participants will become permanent tenants of the respective Community Housing Provider at the end of this funding.

SGCH and Metro Housing approached Newtown Neighbourhood Centre (NNC) about forming a partnership whereby our staff would provide the case management support for the contracted two-year period. The funding also provides some financial assistance for household items or assessments and treatment.

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One of the two full-time Together Home Case Managers at NNC, explains:

“In the first instance, we assist participants with the entire housing process, from viewing a property to moving in, to maintaining a long-term tenancy. Once the participant has established a secure place to live, we can then address their individual goals and introduce external supports such as linking them up with a counsellor or building their skills and capacity through education and employment, to give them the best chance of sustaining a tenancy,” says Alice.

The team of three now have 24 active cases on their files and have witnessed incredible positive change for people who’ve experienced chronic homelessness and crisis.

“We’ve seen the tremendous advantage for our clients who’ve re-engaged with informal support networks such as friends, family and community – it’s hard to articulate just how meaningful and powerful this reconnection is,” continues Alice.

Grace, another NNC Together Home Case Manager, reflects: “Of course there have been challenges but overall it’s been amazing to see what we can accomplish with clients once the pressure of finding long term housing is taken away.”

“One client, a woman in her 40s, had been experiencing homelessness for years and had a number of mental health and medical issues that had gone unaddressed for the last decade. In the last six months she’s accessed NDIS, has a GP she trusts and sees regularly, is linked into a pain management clinic for her chronic pain, and has been treated for hepatitis C,”

“For the first time in years she feels safe and secure and has the support to do activities she enjoys.”

The latest statistics from DCJ report that 411 people have participated in the program, from 648 referrals.

Our staff have noticed significant change in our clients and continuously receive positive feedback, including one client who said:

“I can say that my life has certainly improved for the better since being placed in the Together Home program. Obviously there are things like a sense of security in having a stable home, but the program has also given me a realistic, and hopefully sustainable roadmap to building and living a full life. Having my own place has also given me a space where I have finally been able to adopt my pet cat Zelda,”

While another expressed it simply: “I now have stability in my life. Everything else kind of falls into place after that.”

Newtown Neighbourhood Centre recently received additional funding, which will allow our staff to support 15 more clients.

“Together Home really just gets to the root of the issue – that without housing, people experiencing rough sleeping are unable to effectively engage with support, and without support,

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people are unable to effectively address the factors that contributed to their experiences of homelessness.”

Thanks to all who deliver this ground-breaking, life-changing program, and I can only hope that it continues well past our recent memory of Covid-19.

Mel

Community Strengthening Team



Liz Yeo, CEO NNC and Julie Harrison, Manager Metro Housing.

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