

NEWTOWN

Neighbourhood Centre

New(town) Beginnings #3

Dear Neighbour

I liken my colleagues in the Boarding House Outreach Service to social work superheroes.

There isn't a day that goes by where these dedicated case managers don't fiercely advocate, and sometimes 'move mountains', for their clients who reside in what many believe are some of our city's most squalid dwellings.

After I joined NNC, I realised I held many misconceptions about boarding houses. I remember going on a tour of some a few months into my role. The first was derelict, dirty and riddled with bed bugs and roaches. It looked like a prison cell. The next few were slight improvements: one had a beautiful big garden but the building seemed like it was part way through a renovation (it wasn't) with broken doors, outside toilets, a busted laundry etc. Others were basic and bare.

The last place I visited is what's referred to as a next-generation boarding house. A place for over 60's where a true, thriving community has blossomed. Like with many things in life, there's a spectrum when it comes to boarding houses too.

I quickly realised that boarding houses, despite their flaws, are an essential part of our affordable housing mix. However, my main realisation was that boarding house residents live with the very genuine threat of instant eviction looming over them; a common symptom of tertiary homelessness.

Despite living with this uncertainty, for some residents they make the best of the situation and form a strong bond with their neighbours and build a real community.

Recently one of my colleagues received a call to say that another two boarding houses were going to be closed for "renovation". In our line of work this is code for: a property developer is going to fix up the building and then rent it out at inflated Sydney prices.

The 11 elderly residents, all single men, had been given a few weeks to find alternative accommodation. The most pressing concern was that many had lived in the same boarding house for several years and as a result had become each other's social support. Therefore, they desperately wanted and needed to stay together.

Naturally, the band of superheroes were able to find immediate solutions for the residents. One gentleman who is legally blind was able to secure permanent accommodation in a Housing NSW property within the same area. Two other residents were assisted to find a private rental option in the same area, where they could continue living together and share amenities.

I'm proud to work for an organisation that is leading the push for improved regulation of boarding houses in NSW, and one that advocates for more affordable and secure long-term housing.

Let's hope our next Government feels the same way.

Mel
Community Strengthening Team