



best practice

Community Housing in Western Australia

community housing is an important agent in building a civil society. This book documents some of ways community housing achieves this in Western Australia.

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The term 'community housing' is used to describe a wide range of housing options. Most often it is explained as housing provided and managed by non-government, not-for-profit organisations. These organisations offer secure and affordable housing to low-income people and aim to be responsive to local housing needs, the tenants and the community. It is however, more than this!

Community housing has grown in response to the needs and resources of local communities, and is driven by the skills and expertise they contain. From this responsiveness has emerged a diversity of models and approaches. Until now, there has been no real attempt to record the ways in which community housing providers have successfully housed many groups; including those marginalised by culture, nationality or poverty.

Two years ago community housing providers in Western Australia expressed the desire for more information on what the sector, and its good practices, looked like. This book is the result.

There is a lot of love, imagination and inspiration in the pages of this book. We hope that through reading this you will see the undeniable benefits of community housing to both individuals and the community of Western Australia.



Mike Newbiggin and Diane Niyati
CHCWA

foreword

Who we are and what we do

The Community Housing Coalition of WA (CHCWA) is the peak representative and service body for the organisations providing non-government social housing in Western Australia. At present there are around 255 organisations delivering approximately 4,000 units of accommodation to nearly 10,000 people.

CHCWA's role is to:

- > Represent the interests of non-government, and local government, social housing providers in WA. We make representations on behalf of the community housing sector to state and federal government.
- > Promote and expand community housing in WA. We are closely involved in the ongoing promotion and expansion of community housing, including working at a local, state and national level to raise the awareness of and commitment to community housing.
- > Improve the delivery of community housing in WA. CHCWA works at the grassroots level to improve the way community housing is provided to tenants, by offering advice, resources and training to community housing providers. We also administer and promote the Code of Practice for the community housing sector in WA.
- > Identify community housing needs not currently being met. Since merging with the Council to Homeless Persons (WA) in 1999, CHCWA has become increasingly involved in issues of homelessness—and now works to clearly identify the need for community housing in areas where that need is not currently being met.



acknowledgements

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Ian Lake talking with tenant at letterbox

going the extra mile

INTERVIEW WITH IAN LAKE, PROGRAM MANAGER AND PAUL MOTTERSHAW, HOUSING MANAGER.

Baptistcare has 15 houses, most with only one tenant. All its tenants are people with a chronic, enduring mental illness.

Baptistcare is a 'benevolent landlord'. The term aptly describes the way that the association treats its Independent Living Program tenants.

"Although everyone in the housing rental sector operates under the same rules and regulations," Ian Lake said, "we possibly have a gentler approach to interpreting and applying them.

"One example is that in the six years that we have been operating, we've only evicted one person, and that was for serious drug use and for theft of Baptistcare property."

Baptistcare is also more tolerant regarding rent arrears: when a tenant falls behind, the association will visit, write letters and suggest options such as Centrelink loans to get them through the situation. The organisation started using Centrepay soon after its introduction and has found it more effective than the direct debit system.

"If a tenant is too unwell to maintain the property, we bring in someone to do it," said Housing Manager Paul Mottershaw. "Otherwise, we have all the yard cleaning and lawn mowing equipment, which we lend to them-they only have to pay for fuel."

Baptistcare is sensitive to tenants' privacy: it inspects each property twice a year, once with Homeswest and once on its own. It advises the tenant a month before the inspection, so they have plenty of time to get the house ready.

"Apart from scheduled inspections, we ring before we drop in and we ask if it's OK to come in," said Paul. "If the tenant prefers, we just chat out on the steps."

Although all Baptistcare's tenants have chronic mental illness and most are unable to work, there are some notable exceptions.

Maria has been a Baptistcare tenant for six years. An intelligent and energetic woman, Maria has kept the accounts of the consumer group and organised many of the trips that tenants and support workers have taken.

Ian Lake encouraged and assisted Maria in applying for jobs suitable for a person of her intelligence and skills. She got a part-time job with a major education provider, liaising with Aboriginal teachers and teacher's aides and non-Aboriginal teachers working with indigenous students throughout the Midwest, Gascoyne and Pilbara.

"About three months after she started the job, she rang us, thrilled to bits to tell us that she'd just been given a full-time, permanent position," said Ian. "She's doing really well now and hardly needs any support."

Having a stable tenancy for six years and ongoing support just a phone call or a short distance away would seem to have been a big factor in Maria's 'comeback'. Previously, she had lived with various relatives and been unable to maintain stable accommodation.

"Baptistcare has been a great help to me," Maria said. "I'd had a breakdown when I was working down in Perth; and when I came back to Geraldton, I was a mess.

"I was referred to Baptistcare and I think my healing started the first time I met Ian and the crew. It wasn't just the support, it was their faith-in me, and their Christian faith too. There's been a lot of healing between me and Baptistcare."

"I think that just knowing that whatever happened she wasn't going to be kicked out gave her the security that allowed her to move on with the rest of her life," Ian said.

Another example of the benefit of the stability that Baptistcare has brought into the lives of its tenants is that of Peter, a young man whose past troubles included an ongoing struggle with his ex-partner for the custody of their two children.



support

Peter's problems were exacerbated by the fact that he was living in what Homeswest calls a 'bedsit'-where a curtain separated the bedroom area from the living area and kitchen.

"When the kids came over for weekend visits they were sleeping in the double bed and I was on the floor," Peter said.

Unfortunately, Peter had been referred to the organisation at a time when Homeswest didn't have a house they could allocate to Baptistcare. Somewhat unusually, they told Ian Lake he could go and buy a house.

"It wasn't a simple process," Ian recalled. "Getting all the approvals took about six months. But we eventually got Peter into a nice three-bedroom house in a good area; he's now got custody of the kids and the stability is helping a great deal."

Peter said there was a big difference between the mental health clinic, which after some initial counselling sent him on his way, saying there were people whose needs were greater than his, and the ongoing support Baptistcare provides.

"When I first got involved with Baptistcare, Ian would phone or come around, or I would phone him," Peter said. "When my dad died, I went and had a bit of a chat with him."

Baptistcare, keen to see Peter continue to improve, helped him enrol in a computer electronics course at TAFE. Stable accommodation and support helped get his life back on track.

"I used to have a problem with drugs," said Peter. "I don't use anything now. If you can just get some of the basic necessities in order, you can start to work on some of the things that created your mental problems in the first place."

The need to socialise is one basic human need that Baptistcare tries to nurture-tenants are encouraged to come for lunch on Wednesdays, which is 'Drop in Day'.

"It was originally Monday," said Ian. "But the tenants took a vote and changed it to Wednesday because there are too many public holidays on Mondays and they didn't like missing out!"

An outgrowth of Drop in Day was 'Surf the Blues', a peer support group formed to organise outings and provide a forum for any grievances.

"We would sit in on the meetings," said Paul Mottershaw, "but only to take minutes and to provide a bit of guidance if necessary. Unfortunately, Surf the Blues is becalmed at the moment; two tenants were driving it, but one has become unwell and the other now has a full-time job."

“ I think that just knowing that whatever happened she wasn't going to be kicked out gave her the security that allowed her to move on with the rest of her life. “

Baptistcare doesn't push its tenants, but does encourage them to expand their horizons. Christine is an example of the policy of gentle and patient encouragement.

“Christine is very intelligent but lacks self esteem,” said Ian. “She's a very social person but she's living alone and suffers from loneliness. Because she'd been out of study for many years, she was quite apprehensive at first, but we persuaded her to take a Business Studies course at TAFE.

“She is struggling in some of the academic areas, so our Disability Support worker is spending some time with her two days a week to give her some support. We're also looking at getting her a tutor, but overall we're very encouraged by how well she's doing.”



Christine praised Baptistcare for their support, which includes weekly shopping trips with Ian or Paul.

“They're always only a phone call away,” she said. “That really makes a difference. I've only got another 10 weeks to go in my course, then I'd like to find some employment-like Maria has done-she's an inspiration to all of us.”

Baptistcare seems to succeed by going the extra mile-or in some cases, a lot of miles.

“I've been a bit of a problem child for them,” Christine said. “But when I got really unwell and had to go into hospital down in Perth, Ian came to visit me.”



(l-r) Hsg Mgr Paul Mottershaw, Program Mgr Ian Lake and Disability Support Officer Kara Lake

an integral part



Artist/tenant (Haig Pk) Lynette-Kay Wood

of the community

INTERVIEW WITH CEO HANS GERRITSON AND HOUSING OFFICER NIKKI RUSSELL.

City Housing started life as Perth Inner City Housing in 1987, an advocacy group lobbying against the loss of lodging houses and cheap hotels in the inner city. This was during the America's cup defence and a lot of these places were closing down and being rebuilt as up-market accommodation. In early 1988 the organisation became a landlord when it acquired a lodging house for mainly elderly single men.

Since 1988 the organisation has grown to provide 270 - 290 units of accommodation, which includes lodging houses, apartments, townhouses and freestanding houses. While its major market is still the homeless single, City Housing also has 32 properties under the Independent Living Program for people with a psychiatric disability.

"We are involved in the Independent Living Program in partnership with the Inner City Mental Health Clinic, work with Disability Services Commission and we're about to enter into the Crisis Accommodation Program in partnership with support agencies," CEO Hans Gerritson said.

"We're slightly different from most agencies in that we own a large proportion of our apartments and units. If the government said 'OK, community housing is a dead duck'—we could keep trading.

"We were one of the first community housing associations that went into the joint venture program with the Department of Housing and Works. It's a good way to go but you have to be careful. Whenever you borrow money to do a project it needs to reflect cash flow—

never borrow more than you can comfortably service from the income of the project."

Hans said that most projects take a considerable length of time to realise: a complex in Subiaco for physically/intellectually disabled people—recently opened by City Housing—commenced more than seven years ago.

A group of parents of intellectually disabled young people were seeking independent housing for their children. The group lobbied long and hard and two governments and four ministers were involved before the project was finally approved.

"It's ended up as one of the nicest projects we've got: eight two-bedroom apartments that cater to the client and also for a carer when needed," said Housing Officer Nikki Russell. "There's a lift, so it caters for people with mobility disability as well as intellectual disability."

Long lead times for projects are common. It took three years before work even started on City Housing's Haig Park project in East Perth.

"Haig Park sits amongst some quite expensive housing and some of the neighbours were nervous when they saw the sign flagging a Homeswest development," Hans said. "There are usually teething problems, but a lot depends on getting the balance of tenants right.

"Now you'd hardly be aware that the project is there. Tenants have organised things such as street parties where all the neighbours have been invited. There hasn't been a single complaint in the last three years. We sometimes find that when we transfer a tenant that has been having problems to Haig Park, they do much better—the nicer surroundings seem to help, and they tend to take better care of their unit."



balance

"Now you'd hardly be aware that the project is there. Tenants have organised things such as street parties where all the neighbours have been invited. There hasn't been a single complaint in the last three years."

As well as accommodation, the Haig Park units contain four studios for artists resident in the complex. These are allocated after consultation with the Artists Foundation of WA, which nominates artists who can benefit from the unique living space/working space arrangement.

"It's been very successful," said Nikki Russell. "Currently we have a glass artist, a photographer and a cartoonist in residence. There hasn't been a lot of turnover since the complex opened because it's such a good set-up for artists on low incomes."

Although there are generally no ongoing problems with neighbours of City Housing projects, some residents were concerned when the organisation opened a lodging house in Subiaco.

"We did some community consultation, inviting the neighbours to come down for some cheese and wine," said Hans. "We just told them what was going to happen—warts and all. We didn't try to cover anything up or say 'look these are going to be beautiful people—you'll love them!'

"If you go down that route, you'll shoot yourself in the foot. You have to lay it out as it's going to be. At the end of the evening, the person who had been the most vocal opponent said 'right, what can we do to make this work?'

"But you also have to have the mechanisms in place to deal with problems quickly. That's why we have staff on site at our larger lodging houses. Most problems are not too severe, a 'heart to heart' usually sorts things out."

City Housing rarely has problems integrating tenants into the wider community; neighbours adapt and in some instances the tenants make a positive contribution to the community.

John, a tenant in one of the organisation's lodging houses, organised a group from his house to go bushwalking in King's Park and take dance lessons. After the group put up flyers advertising their activities, locals starting attending and the City of Subiaco then started a program called 'Subiaco Heroes' that tied in with what the tenants' group was doing.

"Having great staff is essential for the work we do," said Hans. "Nikki Russell is a good example; her background in mental health means she can identify potential problems with tenants and pre-empt them. She liaises closely with the site managers and is able to sort out a lot of situations before they flare up.

"It's one of the ways that we're able to avoid evicting people—something we really try to avoid as... where do they go? We don't have a hard and fast policy on eviction, every case is considered on its own merit. We still have problems with arrears, but since Centrepay—where rent is debited directly from the tenant's pension and paid to the landlord—has come on stream, it's less of a problem."

Violence is another story. Where there is an incident of physical violence towards another tenant or a staff member, City Housing has a 'one strike and you're out' policy.

However, violence is decreasing in City Housing lodging houses and Nikki and Hans attribute this to the quality of the site managers. Sometimes tenants that don't get along are simply separated by relocating one or the other. The result is that both are usually happier.

According to Hans Gerritson, getting the mix of tenants right is critical:



*Housing Mgr Nikki Russell
with Lynette-Kay Wood*

Subiaco Rd group housing for young people with mental diagnosis



an integral part of the community
• an integral part of the community •
• an integral part of the community •

"Tenants with mental illness generally want to live in Bennett Lodge because it's close to Graylands hospital," he said. "But when 90 per cent of the tenants in a house have severe mental illness, they tend to 'feed off each other'. To prevent this we try to get the mix in the lodging houses right."

Because City Housing's lodging houses are classified as emergency housing, it is one of the few associations that is also a SAAP agency. As such, it receives \$80,000 annually from the Department for Community Development.

"The bulk of our revenue however comes from our own income generation," Hans said. "We turn over more than \$1 million a year—that's what funds our projects, although Lotteries does give us grants for the initial fit-outs.

"The State government is keen to consolidate the community housing sector and we support this. There are a lot of community housing organisations. Different groups have different strengths and combining these strengths will improve the whole sector."



taking the

Face paint mum and daughter



longer view

INTERVIEW WITH CO-EXECUTIVE OFFICERS KATHLEEN GREGORY, SIMON ROY AND INDIGENOUS TENANCY LIAISON OFFICER JOSEPHINE COLBUNG.

The Eastern Metropolitan Community Housing Association (EMCHA) is a relatively new and small community housing association, established in 1997 and currently operating a portfolio of 82 properties. It is a not-for-profit organisation that provides affordable rental housing for people on low to moderate incomes living broadly within the Perth eastern metropolitan area, extending through the local government areas of Swan, Mundaring, Kalamunda, Belmont, Bayswater and Bassendean.

The Eastern Metropolitan Community Housing Association houses a range of tenants, including the elderly, young people, young single mothers, low-income families and high-risk tenancies under the Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP).

As it responded to local needs, EMCHA became known for housing Aboriginal people and making them comfortable with the way it worked. The organisation has fostered this by employing Indigenous staff and maintaining a welcoming and non-bureaucratic culture.

“We regard housing as people outcomes rather than bricks and mortar outcomes,” Co-executive Officer Kathleen Gregory said. “We believe we house people rather than simply provide houses.”

“The perspective taken when housing people is sometimes too short-term in outlook—we try to take a long-term view,” said Kathleen. “Some tenants go through a period of instability, but once this has peaked there is usually a gradual transition to normality. It can take a commitment of years, rather than months, for things to settle down.”

Most of EMCHA's properties are head-leased from the Department of Housing and Works (DHW). The organisation takes a long-term view regarding arrears and rarely evicts. Neither Kathleen nor Simon Roy can recall evicting for rent arrears, preferring to negotiate a repayment plan.

“It makes sense from a financial perspective,” said Simon. “Suppose a family has rent arrears of \$1800, a \$1000 water bill and there's wear and tear damage to the property caused by the big family. If they vacate, it may cost us \$3000 to \$4000 to get the house ready for the next family—meaning total costs of almost \$7000. If we take a longer view financially and maintain the tenancy, it can actually save money—as well preventing or reducing negative impact on the rest of the system.”

The 95 per cent success rate has proved that the long-term approach does result in good outcomes for tenants. To illustrate this EMCHA offered the following examples.

“Quite a lot of our Indigenous tenants have come from backgrounds where there has been a lot of overcrowding,” said Josephine Colbung. “Some young mothers are bringing up their young children while still living with their parents, or with other relatives.

“When tenants are housed more appropriately, they usually do really well—one woman, who we housed after she was released from prison, is looking after her daughter, a granddaughter and another grandchild.

“We initially housed her in one of our three-bedroom properties and she did fantastically well; got on with all the neighbours, took good care of the house and paid her rent and bills on time. She did so well that we have now relocated her to one of our more established four-bedroom properties.”

Josephine said another young mother with four young children had been equally successful—developing excellent relationships with her neighbours, maintaining the property and taking care of the bills in time. This young woman is also being relocated to a larger property.

Not all EMCHA tenants are young. Josephine described an elderly Indigenous couple who have been living in a unit, but are now waiting to be transferred to a house.

“It’s not simply a reward for being such good tenants—although they can’t be faulted in any way at all,” said Josephine. “The move will free up a unit that is more suited to some of our younger tenants—possibly a single mother with a baby and pre-primary school aged children.”

The organisation housed a single mother of two, approximately seven years ago. She asked if she could do some volunteer work, and today she is employed as EMCHA’s Finance Officer.

The association is also doing a pilot with a few tenants to support identified potential high-risk families in their first or second tenancies.

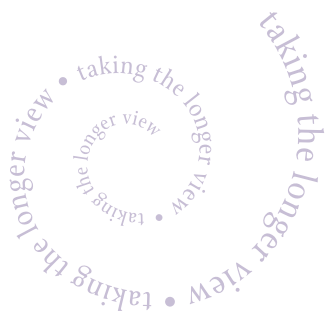
“The project is about early intervention,” said Kathleen. “If we can provide support to at-risk people in their first tenancy, we hope to help them achieve stable and successful tenancies and pre-empt problems later on. The target group is young families and the Health Department’s ‘Best Beginnings’ program is providing support and documentation.”

EMCHA’s tenants are encouraged to think about rights and responsibilities. The message is that it’s not just a house, it’s a home and that when you take pride in where you live it boosts self-esteem and helps you deal with other problems.

The association is publishing a Good Neighbour Guide that they hope will provide neighbours—if there is a problem because of their lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture—with a set of reasonable expectations for when an Aboriginal family moves in. The guide will outline to both parties what constitutes acceptable boundaries and behaviour.

“As far as formal tenant participation in community activities, we don’t think that just because somebody is our tenants they should have to participate,” said Simon. “We prefer to identify a need and then provide the opportunity to meet that need. For example, one of our indigenous tenants wanted to start a women’s self-help group, so we provided her with access to training in corporate governance.”

Kathleen said that a recent joint venture involving seniors’ accommodation in Bullsbrook took a lot of effort to get up and running, but now that it is completed and occupied, is a very easy project to manage.



intervention

"We regard housing as people outcomes rather than bricks and mortar outcomes," co-executive officer Kathleen Gregory said. "We believe we house people rather than simply provide houses."

A group of local seniors originally voiced the need for some housing for the aged in the area and EMCHA began consultation with the City of Swan. A parcel of ex-RAAF land—that could only be sold to local government, or for some public use—was identified and the City of Swan raised a self-supporting loan for EMCHA to purchase it.

A joint venture submission was made to DHW and 12 units were constructed. The seniors group was involved throughout the project and it has been a great success for all concerned.

"The City of Swan is very keen to repeat the model," Kathleen said. "They want to facilitate the process and house more seniors, but they don't want to be a housing provider. I think the project was the first time a community housing provider had worked so closely with a local government body that had provided a self-supporting loan. It's a great model of how community housing can work with local government."

The Bullsbrook project demonstrated some sustainability benefits too. The area has an itinerant, fluid population, primarily servicing the RAAF base, and the only stable sector of its population was the local farmers. But as this group aged, they were forced to move closer to Perth to find suitable accommodation. The provision of additional seniors' accommodation helps remedy this drift, thereby reinforcing the social capital of the community.

"We're currently running a pilot project to get more Aboriginal families into the private real estate market," Kathleen said. "The idea is to break down some barriers by giving the families a bit of training and helping them to get good references."

EMCHA has head-leased six properties from 'mum and dad' investors and sourced funding to offset the cost of managing the properties. The DHW has provided a \$30,000 contingency fund to cover any problems that may arise.

"A reference group made up of three local real estate agents will monitor the tenancies and tenants will receive tenancy training during the six to nine months they're in the properties," said Kathleen. "When they leave, the tenants will have a references from us and from the real estate agents. Once they have good references, moving into private accommodation will be much easier."

Rental property



EMCHA team pic

easing into

FCYS housing staff



adult living

INTERVIEW WITH SARAH WARD, YOUTH WORKER HOUSING SUPERVISOR.

Fremantle Community Youth Services (FCYS) is not-for-profit part of the city of Fremantle that manages 10 Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP) houses for the medium-term (12 months maximum) accommodation of young people who cannot live at home for various reasons.

One of the main benefits for young tenants of FCYS is experiencing a 'compassionate' landlord and easing into the private rental market. The organisation provides eligible youth with a 'training ground' for the real world of renting and independent living. Support workers help the young people work towards this goal and through larger issues, which may have led them to being in the program initially. During this time the young person benefits from the low-cost rental accommodation—where rent is set at a maximum of 25 per cent of their income—that FCYS provides.

"We believe the best way we can help young people prepare for the 'real world' of rental accommodation is by getting them to realise that there are rules that they have to live by," said Sarah Ward, FCYS Youth Worker Housing Supervisor. "They need to know that they have responsibilities—such as paying the rent and looking after the property."

However, because the organisation is often dealing with 15-year-olds or other people who have limited rental experience, some leniency and guidance is needed. This may include FCYS Housing managers helping the young person understand that sometimes a friends' behaviour can jeopardise their tenancy.

"It's a delicate balance," Sarah said. "If we are too lenient, we're just setting them up for failure when they leave."

"A great example of this concerns one of our ex-tenants who, after some years, returned to her former accommodation to see the caretaker who had initiated her eviction for consistently breaching the Tenancy Act when she'd been a tenant. She told the caretaker that she was married, had kids and was well on the way with her career. She apologised for her behaviour and thanked the caretaker for not putting up with it—and thereby forcing her to sort herself out."

Sometimes the process of warning, breach and notice leads all the way to court and eviction. However, FCYS tries to avoid this outcome by educating tenants about their responsibilities.

"It starts at signup," Sarah said. "We go through both the tenancy agreement and the strata rules with them. When necessary, we try to put things in language they can understand and provide examples."

protection

“If it says ‘language that embarrasses others is unacceptable’, we tell them exactly what sort of language we’re talking about. If the issue is appropriate dress, we specify that a towel around the waist is not enough.”

Once someone has been housed, every effort is made to keep him or her in the tenancy. The property manager and support worker work closely to preclude serious problems that could jeopardise the tenancy. If there are budgeting issues, the support worker will take the tenant to a financial counsellor or to Anglicare, whose BillAssist program can help the young person consolidate debts, and keep paying the rent.

“We also encourage our tenants to start a savings plan that will afford them greater opportunity and possibly allow them to get into private rental,” Sarah said.

The organisation has also provided tenancy courses where young people learn about leases and their legal responsibilities. Brochures produced by the Tenants Advice Service, such as Tenants and the Law, Shared Tenancy in WA and Renting for Young People in WA, are used as manuals.

“In terms of antisocial behaviour, we try to be even-handed and we don’t prejudge,” Sarah said. “If a tenant is accused of breaching the rules we go and talk to the neighbours and get all the facts—sometimes the problem has been coming from another unit altogether.”

In some cases it’s the tenants’ family that creates problems and FCYS has strategies to deal with this. Keeping unwanted visitors out of the unit is the first step, calling the police if the problem persists is the next.

“We have something we call Key Support, which has been helpful, particularly with Indigenous young people,” said Sarah. “We ask the young person to identify someone within the family who has some authority. When relatives come to visit and outstay their welcome, the tenant can call that Auntie or Uncle and ask for help.”

Entrance and exit interviews are also useful tools that FCYS uses to improve service delivery. When a young person puts his or her name on the waiting list for accommodation, they fill out an ‘expression of interest for housing’ that provides the organisation with valuable information about its clients.

“We have defined assessment criteria to see if they are eligible for the housing program,” Sarah said. “These include the applicant’s age, gender, dependents, previous rental experience and their support needs.”

“This information lets us know who’s going into what property and what support they are going to need,” said Sarah. “When it comes to signup, we go through the Tenancy Agreement and the bond—which is lodged with the Department of Consumer Employment Protection.”

Exit interviews, conducted with all supported clients, are designed to provide the organisation with more information that will improve its services. All young people are asked whether they had felt safe in the accommodation, whether they were they happy with their support and if they felt they had achieved the goals they had set with the support worker.

"We ask a lot of questions to gauge whether they're prepared for life in mainstream accommodation," Sarah said. "Suggestions on how we might improve our program are something else we look for."

A couple of valuable programs have developed from the exit interview process. A FCYS worker and the Willagee Child Health nurse helped some young mothers, who often felt isolated and stressed, to form a group that would get together to socialise and to give each other invaluable mutual support. A bus would pick up group members and take them to barbecues, kids' birthdays, trips to the beach and other social outings.

"Another program called 'Look Good, Feel Good' got a number of young mums together for some primping and pampering—the facilitator was a hairdresser—and confidence-building fashion help.

"The bubs were being looked after in a crèche while this was happening, so they had some fun times socialising and doing things that made them feel good about themselves. As well as the 'feelgood factor' they were also given advice on healthy diet, handling stress and raising kids on your own," Sarah said.

"One of our success stories concerns a young mum who is studying at uni and also working for a firm in the City. Her situation was initially very difficult but she benefited by not having to face expensive rental accommodation, assistance from a support worker—and somewhat atypically—good family support. She got on with her family but couldn't raise her child while still a child herself in her parents' home."



"We also encourage our tenants to start a savings plan that will afford them greater opportunity and possibly allow them to get into private rental," Sarah said.

"The young women were each given \$50 and taken round to several op shops," said Sarah. "They were under strict instructions that they had to spend the money on clothes for themselves—not their babies—which was a shock for some of them.



tenant consultation



Gardening crew

proves vital

INTERVIEW WITH KAZ STERNBERG, COORDINATOR FREMANTLE HOUSING ASSOCIATION AND DAVID FERNLEY, PROJECT WORKER.

Fremantle Housing Association tenants are all low-income, Homeswest eligible people. FHA has 200 properties throughout the Fremantle and Rockingham areas.

The Association consults rigorously with tenants before undertaking projects that affect them. One good example of this was the redevelopment of an old lodging house in Rockingham.

The Palm Beach Lodge redevelopment involved the replacement of an old 12-room cottage that housed single men in Rockingham. The project was FHA Coordinator Kaz Sternberg's first joint venture submission for the association.

"I decided to start a consultation process with the residents before putting the submission together," Kaz said. "A lot of them had been there for over ten years—it was a long-term type lodging house with very low turnover.

"Tenants were all single men, about 50 per cent of them elderly. They'd created a community down there—and it seemed that the best place to start was with them."

Some of the tenants wanted a one-bedroom unit, while others said they would prefer to share a two-bedroom. Most were keen to get involved and to contribute to the design.

"We held fortnightly meetings where we would talk them through the process," said Kaz. "There was a lot of fear, initially: about the redevelopment, where they would go during the 12-month construction phase and what would happen to them once it was completed."

Finding temporary accommodation for tenants during the building period was difficult, as local real estate agents were not keen to rent to the lodgers. Finally, two agents agreed to get involved, as long as FHA would be the lessee and assume responsibility for the utility bills. Kaz said there were actually no problems whatsoever in the subleased accommodation, and 11 of the 12 original tenants moved back into their new homes a year later.

"The change to independent living was a big one for the former lodgers, so we arranged with two Rockingham support agencies—Southwest Housing Options and Crossroads—to assess their support needs and living skill issues where they might need support. We made sure they would have access to any medical support that they might need later on."

FHA found having fortnightly meetings with tenants very useful. Tenants' questions were answered and their preferences for facilities at the complex were considered—and in almost all cases, delivered.

"We tried to sort out all the issues before they moved back in so we wouldn't have to do it on the run," Kaz said. "About 80 per cent of the tenants who moved back in July 2001 are still there now, so even though it was the first time we had done something like this, it was obviously quite successful."



Kaz said 'tripartite' joint ventures (JV) could be difficult. In a recent project, also in Rockingham, the association was the middle party in a three-way JV with local government and the Department of Housing and Works to provide 21 units for aged residents.

"Local council provided the land, we did the community development, assessment, submission process, all the amalgamations and works that were needed, and the Department of Housing put up the money for the actual construction", she said. "It got quite complex.

"It took about a year and a lot of lawyer's fees to resolve all the issues! Hopefully, what we went through can be used as a template for future projects of this kind.

"It's great to be able to work with local government and to access land through them. If we could simply buy land outright, we'd probably be better off, but we are too small at the moment to do that."

The Garden Project is another example of how the association puts consultation first. While the scheme benefits everyone involved, the FHA's Independent Living Program tenants get to enjoy the positive changes every day.

"We have about 105 properties under the ILP, which is for people with psychiatric disabilities," said David Fernley, the project worker.

"A lot of these properties are new constructs from Homeswest and the only landscaping that's done is a little bit of garden at the front. The backyards are just left as sand, and some of the blocks are huge."

After deciding that volunteers would be essential in a project to improve the backyards, the association joined volunteer agencies in Fremantle and Rockingham.

"We needed somebody to coordinate the project and train the workers," said David. Fortunately, Jobs West, a Commonwealth-funded employment and training organisation came on board.

"We put in funding submissions on a six-month rolling basis to do the project—so teams do six months in Fremantle, then six months in Rockingham.

"Each team has a supervisor and six to eight people—generally on the Work for the Dole program—learning brick paving, how to build pergolas, do reticulation as well as the horticultural aspects of gardening. We also pay for participants to acquire other skills, such as their fork-lift licence."

Before any work begins, a representative FHA asks tenants what they want to see in the garden.

"It may be a veggie garden, a sandpit for the kids or a lawn," David said. "We put in native plant varieties that don't require much attention, but we still give the tenants some training in looking the watering and fertilising.

"We've had some great people working on this project: a good mix of men and women, people of all ages who are really keen. At the end of each project we all get together for a barbecue."

FHA went through a major restructure in the last two years and a lot of tenant consultation was done during the process; the organisation even consulted tenants on the feedback process.

"We asked tenants to decide how we should get their feedback and what the broad categories should be that we seek feedback on," said Kaz. "Rather than just sending out a survey and hoping that they fill it out and send it back, we ran some workshops and got them to determine how we were actually going to do it.

"It's simply the best way to go; otherwise, the information that you get back may not include things that they really want to tell you and the feedback won't really inform your service delivery process.

improve

“ We’ve had some great people working on this project: a good mix of men and women, people of all ages who are really keen. At the end of each project we all get together for a barbecue .”

“It’s the same as with the Garden Project: if we just stuck a garden in without consulting the tenants, they probably wouldn’t look after it, or feel any sense of ownership or involvement with it.

“And it’s also the same with the Palm Beach Lodge redevelopment—if we had just gone in and put in a submission and just made all decisions in the office about what we were going to do, I think we would have lost a lot of those long-term tenants.

“Anything major that we are doing now, we start with the tenants. Not all the tenants, we can’t consult with all 220 or so, but we take a selection of tenants that are representative and ask them to tell us how to do the job we want to do.

“Things are so much more likely to succeed if tenants have a sense of ownership.”



Backyard before



tenant consultation proves vital • tenant consultation proves vital • tenant consultation proves vital • tenant consultation proves vital • tenant consultation proves vital



Backyard after

success through

'Jenny and Rose' – Rainbow Program tenants



partnership

INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA VIDOT, MANAGER OF THE RAINBOW MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM.

The Hills community support group's 'Rainbow Program' offers housing and related support to people with chronic mental health issues in the Swan region.

The Rainbow Program is funded by the Office of Mental Health to provide housing support and respite to people with psychiatric disabilities and their carers. The program has 56 properties in the community, of which four recent additions are in Northam, making the organisation a semi-rural provider as well.

The primary eligibility criterion for the program is serious and persistent mental illness, which is managed through the clinical system and through the Rainbow Program, which focuses on social support.

"It's the partnership that makes success possible," said Rainbow's program manager Sandra Vidot. "We're assisting around 66 tenants to live in the community. Support can be anything from helping with daily living tasks, showing clients how to clean the house, budgeting and money management, right up to paralegal advocacy.

"We have gone to court with people, advocating on behalf of tenants to prevent the loss of their driver's licence, for example, or in one case, to prevent imprisonment. So it's a whole range of psychosocial support that assists people to live in the community. The respite side is a bit different; we receive funding for respite so we can engage with the carers. Quite often, the support they provide goes unrecognised.

"We work with both the carer and the person with the psychiatric disability," Sandra said. "The carer may choose to have a worker in the home to work with the person with the psychiatric disability while they attend TAFE. Or we might link them into a specialist carer program in the community. Whatever is most useful for the carer, we'll do."

There are numerous examples of recovery—of how the Rainbow program has helped its clients. Sandra Vidot's favourite involves a young woman who came to the program with a very troubled background.

"She was pregnant when we first housed her and provided her and her baby with a lot of support," she said. "She went on to study at TAFE where she received high distinction marks and is now halfway through her Social Work degree at University. She's also doing a placement with a human service agency and we have great pride in her achievements. It just a great example of what can be achieved with a little support. And how it's possible for someone to be accepted in the community and access all the things that other people can."

Some years ago, some tenants said they had nothing meaningful to do during the day and Rainbow staff asked what they would like to do. Gardening and maintenance work was the response. After the program received a 'seeding grant' from the Lotteries Commission to buy equipment and a vehicle, a group of tenants, with a supervisor, started to go out and perform gardening and landscaping jobs in the community.

The scheme, called the Work Options program, has become very successful. There are now four teams, each with a supervisor. They win tenders, work throughout the community and the program is now mostly self-sufficient.

About 12 tenants have been involved in the scheme and eight are currently taking part. Participants receive award wages and enjoy participating in a very supportive work environment. If someone becomes unwell, for example, and has to take a break from normal duties, he or she doesn't lose the job.



options

"About 12 tenants have been involved in the scheme and eight are currently taking part. Participants receive award wages and enjoy participating in a very supportive work environment."

"We also ventured a little outside the 'mental health funding box' when we applied to the Community Arts Network who are funded by the Lotteries Commission to run an arts program and exhibition at the Mundaring Art Centre," Sandra said.

"It was a 12-week course and I employed an art psychotherapist to lead our group of eight. It culminated in an Opening Night and two-week exhibition for the general community at Mundaring Art Centre. Some of the excellent artwork produced was used on the Mental Health Week posters and postcards and two or three of the talented artists are now involved with 'Industry I', an art program run by DADAA'. They plan to open a gallery in Midland, so there has been some flow-on effect it wasn't just a 12-week program that went nowhere when it ended."

Another area where Rainbow has been innovative came about due to community donations. Many tenants come into the program with next to nothing. The Lotteries Commission provides Moving In Grants to buy furniture and white goods, but they need essentials such as crockery, cutlery, pots, and towels. So Rainbow successfully sought donations from the community.

"We finally have a dedicated space to store donations," Sandra said, "And we're now trying to develop this further so interested tenants can separate the good stuff from the rubbish and cost the goods. Our idea is to let the tenants run it."

¹DADAA—Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia, aims to integrate people with a disability into mainstream society through the use of art and culture.



*Enterprise East Work Options crew:
(l-r) James, Alfred, Joyce, Paul & Saul*

success through partnership • success through partnership • success through partnership

“As we get more than we need, we give quite a bit back, to anybody in the community who needs it. This includes EMCHA, the housing association in this region that also houses low-income people.

The Hills Community Support Group recently commenced ‘triple bottom line’ reporting; focusing on environmental, social and economic outcomes in their operations.

“We want to be a forward-looking organisation using ‘best practice’,” said Sandra. “There is no shortage of reportable social dividends created by the Rainbow program over the eight years it’s been running.”

The Hills Community Support Group celebrated its 20th anniversary last year. It is a unique group that started with one volunteer at a desk in a recreation centre and now has an annual \$6-\$7 million recurrent budget.



‘John’ Rainbow client watering garden

“There are many and varied examples of best practice,” said Sandra. “But I believe one of our best examples is having a tenant working in the program. I think it’s great when someone you have been able to provide assistance to establish a home and support through difficult times reaches the position where they are able to help others who are in need.”





*Volunteer trainee carpenters (Milligan clients/tenants)
doing restoration at Fairbridge (names tba)*

two services in one

INTERVIEW WITH NAOMI WHITE, FOUNDATION MANAGER.

The Milligan Foundation has 61 properties under the Independent Living Program (ILP), a mental health support initiative, three under the community Disability Housing Program (CDHP), 43 under the community Housing Program (CHP) for low income tenants, and four properties under the crisis Accommodation Program (CAP)

The Milligan Foundation was established in 1994 by carers and health workers seeking alternative accommodation for children and partners with a mental health diagnosis. They wanted them to be able to remain in the Mandurah area and live independently.

"There are really no other options down here," said Naomi White, Manager of the Foundation. "There are no mental health beds; if they have to go into hospital, it's Fremantle-which is a long way away for families.

"So one of our priorities has always been to keep people out of hospital. In the almost ten years we've been established, Milligan has helped a lot of people maintain or increase their independence from their carers-without moving too far away."

Tenants are encouraged to see Milligan as more than a housing provider. They can drop in anytime and to use the resource rooms and get involved with a wide range of activities, including massage and crafts. Several have formed a sewing group whose services are requested whenever the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre is mounting a new production. Volunteers provide their own sewing machines and also get involved in construction at the theatre.

"There are lots of examples of the benefits of not having people with a mental health diagnosis shut up in institutions," Naomi said. "One of our tenants, who is very unwell, has maintained her ability to live in the community in our housing for more than eight years. She looks upon us as her family and when she does have to go into hospital for a while, we take care of her daughter and her dog. We think that if we can keep her in the community, we're doing well."

Milligan Foundation has a housing service and a support service under one umbrella. Because its workers are local they often provide extra services outside office hours. Naomi said having both services under one roof is a real advantage.

"It works perfectly as long as you keep them separate. We tell the tenants 'if you fall off the rails, call the support service; if your door falls off, call the housing service'. Our support service advocates for clients, so if a tenancy is going badly and we're considering eviction, the support service advocates on the tenant's behalf."

community

The 'dual but separate' role model also has advantages for the housing workers: if a routine housing inspection reveals problems outside their domain, they suggest to the support service that they schedule more visits to the property.



"The ability to rectify something almost immediately is really great," Naomi said. "If we were dealing with an external support agency it could take six weeks to remedy a problem. Here it's likely to be fixed the same day."

"These tenants have still got their computers, they're still connected and they now have an on-line community," Naomi said. "Instead of phoning us, many now keep in touch by e-mail; if they want to communicate and it's 5am, they can do so. Having a computer in the house also benefits kids still living at home who need a computer to do their homework."



"About 12 tenants have been involved in the scheme and eight are currently taking part. Participants receive award wages and enjoy participating in a very supportive work environment."

Many of the Milligan Foundation's programs have a common aim: the alleviation of their client's isolation. The First Click computer program is one example. Using funding from the Department of Education and Training, support staff and a group of local computer experts were able to provide refurbished computers and Internet access to Milligan tenants.

Many of the recipients were older women, most of whom had never used a computer before. After the computers had been set up in their homes, the tenants were taught how to use them, including the Internet and e-mail.

Milligan also produces a quarterly magazine called Spike (after Spike Milligan-the Goon Show comedian and depression sufferer) that publishes tenants' work and helps keep them informed and connected. Another program involves restoration work at Fairbridge-a collection of old buildings outside Pinjarra where children from Britain were safely housed during World War Two.

"Many of our tenants have been going out to Fairbridge with a support worker and doing volunteer work," Naomi said. "They have learned how to do plastering and basic carpentry as they restore the buildings. As well as developing useful skills and increasing their self-confidence, it helps overcome isolation."

Milligan provides ILP tenants with funding and encouragement to attend TAFE courses such as art and woodwork. Naomi said that the Foundation is always looking for ways clients can develop skills, but it never pushes them into employment they can't handle.

"We're always on the lookout for ways to improve the day to day lives of tenants," she said. "We don't get regular funding other than for wages, but the support service is always getting small grants-for carers, for women-that's where things such as the massages come in: they feel pampered, feel better, and that makes for a better week."

Milligan doesn't only house ILP tenants. Shortly after joining Milligan, Naomi White decided the Foundation needed to cast its net wider and also take in Community Housing Program (CHP) tenants.

"One of the problems Milligan had originally was that we couldn't house anyone with a mental health diagnosis unless they were over 18. So there were people with a 10-year-old child with a mental health diagnosis, but we couldn't help.

"We became a regular Housing Association so that we could pick up the CHP people as well as look after our ILP tenants," Naomi said. "Now if we have a CHP tenant with a child with a mental health diagnosis, we support them; we can help those that had previously been falling through the cracks."

Naomi said Milligan is currently exploring ways to assist another group that is still 'falling through the cracks'.

"There are some people that we can't house under either CHP or ILP, but we want to help them. A fairly typical example is a man who's a screamer: he just starts screaming and shouting abuse-usually at night. Not surprisingly, the neighbours don't understand.

"But his unusual behaviour never goes beyond screaming, and all he needs is someone to tap him on the shoulder and let him know he's doing it. He needs more than ILP support, so he's had to go back to mum and dad, who are ageing badly. He doesn't need someone living with him '24/7', but he does need someone friendly nearby.

"There aren't lodging houses here like there are in Fremantle," Naomi said. "And we're moving away from that kind of accommodation and from the institutions and the cluster homes. Although independent living is great, not everybody fits the model. We need a variety of accommodation and support models in the community if we are going to address the needs out there."



Volunteers making/holding quilts

a community's



Julie Christensen (right) with tenant Mrs Nametocome

vision

INTERVIEW WITH CEO JULIE CHRISTENSEN

With a population of around 6,000, Narrogin is a thriving commercial and administrative centre of the central southern region of WA and is at the heart of the state's richest farming land.

Narrogin Cottage Homes (NCH), which caters for rural area senior tenants, was founded just over 40 years ago when the community started to look at affordable housing for seniors, independent of councils and other regulatory bodies that could have a negative impact on decision-making.

The local council donated the original land and the Country Women's Association provided seed funding. Construction of the initial five independent living units was financed by extensive fundraising and individual community donations. Development has taken place in stages and NCH now accommodates almost 100 residents in its 35-bed hostel and 54 independent living units.

"Many of our residents spent many years in isolation, living on widely dispersed rural properties," said CEO Julie Christensen.

"When they move here, we're able to expand their life and add some character to it. Instead of being isolated, they now have neighbours close by and they're heavily into 'cup of tea' afternoons and socialisation."

The physical consolidation that NCH provides has created a 'community within a community'—a cohesive social entity that exists within Narrogin, which is also a closely-knit community.

"Our residents have the most amazing 'community watch' you have ever seen," said Julie. "If someone's curtain hasn't popped up by 9am we get a phone call asking whether they're OK. Although many residents may not have seen a lot of each other in the intervening years, they've gone to school together 60 years ago!"

As well as forming or rekindling close personal relationships, residents usually see more of their families than they did previously, as they combine a visit to Narrogin to shop, pick up parts for machinery and to see mum and dad. Residents without family in the area are sometimes 'adopted' by those who do have family members at NCH.

"It's not unusual to see residents blossom after moving here," Julie said. "One example was an older couple who came here from a fairly isolated farm. They had always been regular footy goers, very busy on weekends, but not doing much throughout the week.

"After losing their driving licenses and consequently their mobility, they moved into a two bedroom unit. Now, we hardly ever see them at home any more! They have blossomed physically and emotionally; they've come out of their shells, developing new friendships and reinforcing old ones. If we have helped create a community that extends someone's life—that's what we're here for."



life

Narrogin Cottage Homes has played a role in reversing the traditional paradigm whereby older farmers in the area would move to the coast after retiring and selling the farm. Now far fewer are adopting the 'retire to Dunsborough' scenario, and many who do take that path subsequently decide they have made a mistake and move back to their roots.

"Over 50 per cent come back," said Julie. "There's no support for them there, whereas here they constitute the social history of the whole area. If someone is researching a book of local history—whether it's Wickepin, Williams or Pingelly—they come here to interview our residents."

The eight new units will provide the amenity and meet the standards the community now expects: no stairs, handrails, wider doorways and larger light switches are among the features considered essential by NCH.

"It's interesting that the Department doesn't consider these features standard for aged housing," Julie said. "They're standard in disability housing, but not for seniors. We think most of the features are also necessary for seniors, so we pay the extra to have them incorporated in all our new units."

"We have to plan 10 to 15 years ahead—if we don't it's simply a waste of our dollars, and it's not our money, it's the community's."

"When they move here, we're able to expand their life and add some character to it. Instead of being isolated, they now have neighbours close by and they're heavily into 'cup of tea' afternoons and socialisation."

NCH does more than provide a safe haven for elderly retirees. Continuous improvement and adapting to rising expectations has been a primary concern of the organisation. A walk around the facilities reveals some of the more visible changes that have taken place in the last 40 years.

"We would never build anything now like we did then," Julie said of one of the original buildings. "Look at the stairs, steep ramps, tiny rooms and bathrooms that don't meet current standards."

"Replacing the old units is a gradual process: we're doing a joint venture with the Department of Housing and Works now. Five old units will come down and eight new ones will replace them."

Julie Christensen believes local, non-private providers have a different agenda to commercial operators who need to make a profit.

"NCH is here for the long haul, we're not going anywhere," she said. "We are not just located in Narrogin, we're integral to the town."

NCH's board is made up of a broad cross-section of the community and Julie Christensen says decision-making is more streamlined than it would be if the local government was running things.

"I think local government do a great job, but I think they are hamstrung by the need for documentation and local government rules and regulations. Obviously we need to comply with regulations too, but the bottom line is that if I want to do something and I can persuade the board that it makes sense, I can do it! If it doesn't work, I wear it. If it does, we move on and get better."

The board has a representative from the town and from the Shire. The remainder is comprised of a mix of local farmers, shopkeepers, a former mayor and local government representatives, a gardener and two retired ladies. The fourteen members have known each other a long time and get on well.

"It follows the old farming scenario," Julie said. "If it's broken, everyone just jumps in to fix it; we don't have to go through a lot of channels first."

As well as demonstrating a visible commitment to continuous improvement by replacing outmoded accommodation, NCH believes that attractive grounds are vital to the wellbeing of tenants.

"We think that the gardens are such a essential part of lifestyle, especially for seniors," Julie said. "No matter how wonderful the units are, it's no good if the environment around them doesn't create an atmosphere of homeliness."

Julie Christensen says everyone involved with NCH is proud of what has been achieved and is keen to protect the autonomy that has made the organisation effective. Investment in capital works is the principal area where some autonomy has to be traded away.

"In the past our hostel has operated at a profit and subsidised the shortfall associated with the independent living units," she said. "Joint ventures are the way to go, and Homeswest is quite good in terms of what they contribute," she said.

"But a facility such as NCH, that has spent 40 years building something up, stands to lose an awful lot of ownership by going into joint ventures. New legislation means that we hand over the land to build, but we'll never own the properties. Some find that concept hard to swallow.

"Our services will not be compromised if we lose some autonomy, but what could change is public perception: a lot of people help us because we're seen as a community organisation. If that perception changes, they might not be so generous."



facilitating



Outcare staff pic

a new start

INTERVIEW WITH ACCOMMODATION MANAGER ERNIE HANSEN.

Outcare's tenants are all newly released ex-offenders, both men and women. Every year Outcare assists over 200 people make the transition from prison to the community. The organisation offers support before and after release with supportive accommodation and assistance with education and employment.

Outcare believes that support in accommodation is an effective form of crime prevention—a very good way to keep people from re-offending.

The organisation's Community Re-Entry Program assesses offenders in prison who are due for release and provides them and their families with support for the three months before they are released and for six months afterwards. Ex-offenders are picked up from the prison and taken to Centrelink, Homeswest, the Community Justice Office and local shops—and shown how to use public transport.

“Some have been imprisoned for anything up to 15 years, and a lot of things change in that time,” said Accommodation Manager Ernie Hansen. “They can be completely lost, and don't know which way to turn—quite literally sometimes—even crossing the road, they may forget to look out for traffic. All the little things we take for granted are new and strange. Unfortunately, not being able to cope often leads to recidivism.”

Outcare takes the ex-offenders shopping and supplies food vouchers and all-day public transport tickets so they can travel on public transport without having to worry about not having the correct coins. Phone-Away cards allow clients to keep in contact with family and friends and to feel less isolated.

“We have an arrangement with St Vincent De Paul's,” said Ernie. “So, if they're going for a job interview, we can get them suitable clothing. At the accommodation we provide a bicycle and a helmet; this really makes a difference. They're not reliant on public transport, get some exercise and they can explore their new-found freedom. Many just take off and are gone all day!”

Outcare clients can take the reconditioned bicycle with them when they leave the accommodation. They can also keep the computer that has been provided to help them keep up the computer skills they have developed in prison.

"We also give them a CD to practice the theory section of the Learner's Permit, so they can get a drivers license," Ernie said. "They can do this at home or at the on-line Open Access Centre in our employment section, where they can also upgrade their computer and job interview skills."

Where tenants are in a house, they can look after the garden. Often they get on well with the neighbours and take care of their yards too. This helps prevent boredom setting in whilst waiting for a suitable job.

"We have had some problems between our tenants and neighbours—one bad apple can wreck a lot of good work," Ernie said. "But the neighbours know our tenants are ex-offenders, and usually when somebody new comes in they introduce themselves.

"I'm on 24-hour call, so if the neighbours have a problem they can phone me at any time. In the past months, since the Re-Entry started, there have been fewer problems."

Re-Entry staff, all qualified professionals, go into the prisons and interview prisoners who have applied for Outcare accommodation. Applicants are screened carefully, with particular attention placed on where high-risk and sex offenders will be housed.



reconcile

"Basically, we want the people who are going to get on with their lives, people who don't want prison any more; they just want to get back to work and their families and lead a crime-free life," Ernie said. "We accommodate about 180 ex-offenders each year. This includes men and women. We're accommodating more indigenous clients now because we have three full-time indigenous staff members, who mostly concentrate on indigenous clients.

"Some of our ex-tenants perform volunteer work for us. We have helped them in the past and quite often they volunteer to work at our accommodation places. Our team of full-time volunteers has a fully-equipped maintenance van and a trailer. They fix locks and windows and do painting and other small maintenance jobs. They save us a lot of time and money and we couldn't do without them."

The Re-Entry Program commenced in April 2004; when the program has been running long enough to make statistics reliable, the Department of Justice is planning to assess the program's impact of the Western Australian recidivism rates.

Outcare also offers a range of other programs for ex-offenders, including the St. John of God Women's Program, the Addictions Counselling and the Blood Borne Virus programs, Family Support Centres and the Reconnect Program for young people.

"If we have a problem in one area we can talk to the staff involved with other programs about what's going on with the tenant and find out where things may be going wrong," Ernie said. "It's very valuable to have all these people in the one agency."

Outcare has 30 full-time staff and many more volunteers and handles 23 places of accommodation, most of them shared. Seven are exclusively for women, four for indigenous clients, and the rest for single men—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—who make up most of the prison population.

“ Basically, we want the people who are going to get on with their lives, people who don't want prison any more; they just want to get back to work and their families and lead a crime-free life “

Outcare has found that having indigenous staff is extremely helpful in dealing with indigenous clients, who will not often express themselves openly other than with an indigenous officer. Outcare's indigenous staff members know many of their client's families and can sometimes reconcile an ex-offender with his or her family.

“Some of our indigenous clients can't go home after release because of serious overcrowding there,” said Ernie. “So they have to use us as a stopgap; we can often get Homeswest to move them up the priority list. Otherwise, when they leave our crisis accommodation they are regarded as homeless, as they don't have anywhere else to live. Unfortunately, because of the demand for our accommodation, they have to leave to make room for someone else who's just been released.”

Outcare's Reconnect Program is intended to reduce re-offending and to prevent homelessness among young people. It provides support to those between 12 and 18 who have had involvement with the justice system. The program helps the young person work things out with their family and connects them with employment programs. Reconnect also assists with accommodation, access to benefits and training options and encourages young people to remain at school.



Outcare client on bicycle

“When our clients move into Outcare accommodation they're expected to interact with the organisation's employment section where they obtain help with resumes, Centrelink issues and access to the job network,” said Ernie. “Our qualified career counsellors have contacts with employers that employ ex-prisoners, if they fit the bill. There are never enough jobs for these guys, unfortunately, but we are always looking for more employers who are willing to put them on.”

partnerships

*CEO Bob Chown with tenant Sue Yarran celebrating the opening of an eleven unit Seniors cluster development (funded by SCH and DHW under the Joint Venture Housing Program) (SCH's first shared equity project).
Photo courtesy Comment News.*



prove invaluable

INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE OFFICER BOB CHOWN AND HOUSING MANAGER SHEILA SHENTON.

South City Housing (SCH) has over 90 units. Its main target group is people with chronic mental health issues. In partnership with a local women's refuge, SCH also assists women and children escaping domestic violence and it also partners with Activ, My Place, and Mosaic to help people with disabilities. The association also works with Mission Australia to house homeless youth.

South City Housing provides tenants with housing; it does not provide direct support but has formal arrangements with other organisations that do. A memorandum of understanding with each external organisation clearly spells out the agreement whereby SCH performs the landlord function and they provide a specific type of support.

"Housing Manager Sheila Shenton and Housing Worker Stephanie Carlyon work at 'the coalface', making sure that these partnerships work well," Executive Officer Bob Chown said. "The partnerships haven't been trouble-free, but we've been able to overcome most of the issues."

Sometimes the external organisations have not had the time or the funding required to give tenants the support they need and SCH has been forced to take on both roles. But by formalising the arrangements through the memoranda, the organisation has managed to clearly define each partner's area of responsibility.

"We strengthen the partnerships with regular support meetings and maintaining good lines of communication," said Housing Manager Sheila Shenton. "We have coffee mornings to get the support workers in here and we get problems ironed out before they snowball."

"We have had difficulties with confidentiality, particularly with clients who have mental illness; support teams sometimes wouldn't give us information we needed," Bob said. "Through development tools like Confidentiality Release of Information forms, the tenants now understand that our workers are entitled to talk to support workers and vice versa about issues affecting the tenancy."

According to Bob Chown, targeted training is critical. SCH workers are trained in housing management, not in mental health. Two courses have proved very helpful: the first, at Graylands hospital, taught SCH workers how to protect themselves from damaging and violent behaviour from upset clients. Another valuable course, run by the Department of Housing and Works, focused on dealing with housing issues for people with mental health problems.

"We've worked hard with our partners to get away from old paradigms," Bob said. "Such as the old welfare approach: that the tenant is always right, no matter how bad they are! If the rent is four weeks overdue, it doesn't help anyone if the support worker says 'don't worry, they'll let you off for another two weeks.'"

success



“We’d prefer they say to the client ‘look, we’re in a partnership with South City Housing to help you maintain your tenancy, because without a home you’re going to be in dire straits. Can we find a way for you to resolve your arrears problems with South City in a reasonable time?’ We try to raise the awareness in our partnering support agencies that our aims are identical: that in order for a family to get well, they need to maintain their tenancy.”

SCH is very keen on strong support and landlord partnerships because unlike many organisations that focus on one or two specific target groups, its partnerships cover a wide range.

Bob Chown says SCH is having good success with all six of its partners: “Our relationship with Mission Australia, for example, is excellent—possibly because they manage their own properties as well as providing support, so they’re landlords as well as support people and can see both sides of the picture.”

The organisation canvasses tenants for feedback on a range of issues through Annual Tenant Surveys. The questionnaire sent to tenants includes a stamped, addressed envelope to make it easier for them to send it back. Meetings and barbecues with support partners and tenants are held at least twice a year. Nothing that comes out of these meetings is dismissed and all suggestions are taken back to the committee.

“We have tenant participation forums for seniors too,” Bob said. “When we had problems with one complex, we organised meetings with residents and the local police to discuss security and what was happening on-site.”

Tenants also get involved with the management of SCH; one is on the board now and another has nominated for the next AGM: “In all likelihood we’ll soon have two tenant reps on the Housing Management committee,” Bob said. “We like to get as many tenants along to the AGM as possible, so provide transport to bring them here and take them home.”

With homeless youth, SCH has a process whereby the young person lives in a hostel for six weeks and after they have stabilised their income, they can go through to short-term and medium-term housing, and then possibly move into a permanent unit—all managed by SCH.

“It’s a seamless approach whereby a young homeless person can achieve full independence in a relatively short time and only deal with one support worker and one housing worker,” Bob said.

Bob Chown said that among the organisation’s success stories there are two that stand out: the first involving a woman who came to the organisation from a refuge, unable to speak English and fleeing horrendous domestic violence.

With the help of one of SCH’s support partners, the woman was soon doing so well that she didn’t need any further support. The family was well settled, the children doing well at school, and she was learning English. She loved the property where she was living and her family was getting on so well with the neighbours that she didn’t want to move.

supporting tenants



Bart with CEO Lynne Evans and Housing Manager Brian Deegan

through life's changes

INTERVIEW WITH CEO LYNNE EVANS AND MENTAL HEALTH COORDINATOR BRIAN DUGGAN.

St Barts is an incorporated body, associated with the Anglican church. It houses 54 male tenants in supported accommodation, 10 in community aged care and 20 in residential aged care. There are three six-person crisis units, 61 houses on the Independent Living Program (ILP) and five 'exit' properties on the supported accommodation program. Most of the properties are head-leased from DHW

"One of the advantages St Bartholomew's has is that we can move people from one service to another when it's advantageous," said CEO Lynne Evans. "A good example of this is the Jimmy and Bart story.."

"Bart is St Bart's resident Irish elkhound. He's very friendly but he developed a special relationship with Jimmy, one of our older residents.

"Jimmy arrived in 1996 with an alcohol problem. He'd been a miner, worked on the railways and he loved Bart and used to walk him every day. Bart slept on the armchair outside Jimmy's room in one of our supported accommodation hostels.

"Jimmy got cancer and although he wanted to live independently, he was too unwell and we moved him to our Residential Aged Care facility. Bart and his armchair went along with him.

"During the six months Jimmy spent there he deteriorated badly and when he went into a hospice, we thought he'd probably die. However, Jimmy decided that nobody was looking after Bart and as they'd given him quite good pain relief, he would discharge himself and come back here to the hostel.

"After deciding that hostel life was no longer for him, Jimmy moved into one of our Community Aged Care flats in Maylands. But he continued to come to East Perth every day to walk Bart and they became local celebrities.

"When Jimmy could no longer walk Bart, we used to take the dog to his flat and when he had to return to the hospice, we'd take Bart to him there. Jimmy died in July 2004 at the age of 73 and is buried at our plot at Karrakatta.

"This shows the broad spectrum of our services, and how we were able to care for Jimmy as his situation changed," Lynne said.

The Jimmy and Bart story has a spin-off. As they became well known in the community, some residents of the increasingly gentrified neighbourhood who had been critics of St Bart's actually became supporters.

Although Safer WA East Perth had been pursuing St Bart's over various issues, a group of women from the committee (who call themselves the Dream Team) sent a letter of support and are now going to totally redo the rundown gardens at the James Watson Hostel. This community project will benefit local residents as well as St Bart's.

The organisation is always keen to be involved with the community. For the last two years St Bart's residents and East Perth Rotary members have combined to cook an Australia Day breakfast at Victoria Gardens.

Developing a good working relationship with Centrelink has benefited many of St Bart's tenants:

"A lot our guys would queue up at Centrelink, only to be told they hadn't filled something out properly and to go the end of the queue," said Lynne Evans. "They'd tell the Centrelink worker to 'go forth and multiply' (and they would have their payments suspended).



"The Centrelink Community Team are just brilliant; they come and listen to each individual's story and help him fill out his forms. They let tenants have their benefits early so they can pay their rent and avoid having to move on to other lodging. Our guys are learning that life is about filling out forms and that if you treat people nicely, they'll treat you nicely: it's a development thing."

Previously, St Bart's had a policy whereby if a tenant had 'blown his dough' and couldn't pay for his room, he still had three-night's credit. Because they couldn't get their benefit for another week, tenants would plead for an extension so that they wouldn't have to move on to another hostel. Now that Centrelink will provide a weekly benefit, this situation arises much less often.

"Some of the guys do the cleaning to pay off their debts and also to save for a bond for private rental," Lynne said. "The hostel is much cleaner now because they're cleaning for their peers and they let them know if they aren't doing a good job!"

benefit

"one of the advantages St Bartholomew's has is that we can move people from one service to another when it's advantageous"



A mosaic project at the hostel was another success: "We did a joint venture with Department of Housing and Works to replace the old night shelter with a new 21-bed hostel," said Lynne. "We wanted to do something special with the new facility and created a mosaic artwork in the courtyard."

Volunteers from the Lorikeet Clubhouse mental health support group assisted with the project. The names of contributors who had donated more than \$100 were inscribed down one side of the beautiful mosaic.

Lynne Evans said St Bart's always tries to be flexible with tenants. A resident in the Independent Living Program, who lived in a second floor one-bedroom unit but didn't look after it well, had repeatedly asked for a unit with a garden.

"Based on the way he looked after his unit, we weren't too keen," said Lynne. "But eventually we decided to give him a go. He's been there two years and has done wonders with the garden(he actually won a DHW 'Best Garden' award. Prior to the move, he didn't leave his unit other than to collect his pension and buy food; now he's out and about all the time. He's doing maintenance work for us and after the 'Dream Team make-over' he will look after the James Watson gardens."

St Bart's Independent Living Program (ILP) clients hold regular tenants' meetings, have a social club, go bushwalking in King's Park and out on social excursions. Tenants have also started a newsletter and attendance at tenants' meetings is on the rise. St Bart's staff got most of the activities started, but the tenants are now doing most of the

organising and work themselves(for example, deciding on the articles, the design and the layout of the newsletters.

"An art group was formed at our Bentley Crisis Units and has expanded to include ILP tenants," Lynne said. "One of our artistic support workers at the crisis centre helped the residents mount an exhibition called 'Stuff', during Mental Health Week 2002. The show was held in Victoria Park and they sold a lot of paintings.

"One of the girls involved had been quite unwell, but she now has an art scholarship and is finishing her diploma in art studies. The group is going to have another exhibition at the opening of the new Victoria Park shopping centre in October 2004."



Jim and Bart the wolfhound

communication



Wesley Action Group tenants meeting (names tba)

the key

INTERVIEW WITH WESLEY HOUSING SUPPORT OFFICER ZONA WOODS, AND TENANT AND WESLEY ABODE GROUP LEADER, PAMELA HUBERT.

Wesley Housing is a program of uniting care mental health and is supported by the Lotteries commission. Most tenants of Wesley Housing are people with mental health problems. The stable, secure, long-term accommodation provided means that many tenants break a history of unstable accommodation, and even homelessness. On gaining such independence, many find the confidence to venture into further education and vocational training that in turn has enabled some of them to move into part-time work others are using this training as a means to expand their friendships and enhance their socialisation.

Among the many strengths of Wesley Housing are the excellent lines of communication it maintains with tenants. The Wesley Abode Group, a tenant-run group that meets on a monthly basis to discuss outstanding issues, to socialise and to 'have a few laughs', also serves as a user-friendly conduit that helps keep tenants and Wesley staff in touch.

Pamela is a Wesley Housing tenant. A young mother with a school-age child, like most of Wesley's clients Pamela has a mental illness. But this hasn't prevented her from leading the Wesley Abode Group for eight years.

"One of the most positive aspects of running the group has been the improvement in my powers of communication as I've learnt how to help others and advocate for tenants," Pamela said.

"The group is one of the best ways that Wesley Housing empowers its tenants. It provides a forum, and if we have issues or just want to talk about how things are going, we can. It's pretty informal, a staff member or two may pop in to see how things are going, but the tenants run the meetings themselves."

Housing Support Officer Zona Woods is a strong supporter of the Wesley Abode Group and the newsletter it publishes each month.

"Pamela puts the newsletter together and if we have something we want to get out to the tenants, we ask if we can use the newsletter and she'll put it in. It's a really easy and effective way for us to contact all the clients," she said.

connected



As well as keeping the tenants informed about issues that affect them, the newsletter promotes and advertises upcoming activities such as picnics in King's Park and outings to the movies. The group has developed good connections with some of the cinemas, which provide group discounts that help make the day out more affordable for the tenants.

Pamela keeps her fellow tenants interested in coming to the meetings by choosing a theme each month:

"We had an 'Olympics versus Masquerades' theme meeting during the Athens Games, she said. "This involved discussing the Olympics, as well as a mask-making workshop. Another time it was Mexican. We always try to find topics and to have a wide-ranging discussion, rather than getting stuck on issues relating to our tenancies. That definitely helps to keep people coming to the meetings."

As well making clients feel more connected and involved by supporting the tenants' group, Wesley Housing also strengthens communication by encouraging tenants to phone or visit the office during office hours and uses several other strategies to foster stable tenancies:

"First and foremost, we make our tenancy allocations according to our 'best fit approach'," said Zona. "This means we seek to match prospective tenants with an accommodation opportunity where they can thrive.

"All our tenants live independently, they're in the Independent Living Program. When a property becomes available its location dictates which one of the five mental health clinics that we deal with.

"The Clinic then nominates their next applicant on their list for accommodation and we work through the application to make a preliminary assessment as to the quality of the match between the applicant and the unit. Sometimes it is obvious that this is not a good match and we counsel all parties to this effect."

Examples of the association carefully matching tenant and accommodation include not housing a mother with three children in a flat, or someone who has had problems with drugs in inappropriate accommodation.

Similarly, a person who is suffering from depression and possibly suicidal, is housed on the ground floor rather than being put at risk in an upstairs flat.

Wesley's mental health clinic partners also have a say in this: "They keep the wait list and we essentially keep the houses. We're essentially 'property managers with a difference'æsupportive landlords," said Zona.

Wesley Housing rarely has to evict a tenant. In the three years Zona Woods has been at Wesley Housing she has only had to evict two people. In both cases the problem was inappropriate housing in the first place, the tenants not being ready for independent living.

"We deal with the tenancy side," Zona said. "If a tenant becomes unwell or needs help, we go back to the referring clinic and ask for some help. Sometimes tenants are able to go to a mental health support agency such as Ruah, to get help themselves."

When there are problems with antisocial behaviour or conflict with neighbours, Wesley acts immediately—the same day if possible. Dialogue between tenant and their Wesley support worker is usually enough, but sometimes more intensive support and consultation with neighbours is needed. Discrimination issues involving neighbours are infrequent.

“As well as making clients feel more connected and involved by supporting the tenants’ group, Wesley Housing also strengthens communication by encouraging tenants to phone or visit the office during office hours and uses several other strategies to foster stable tenancies.”

“Regular property inspections also allow tenants to provide feedback to Wesley Housing via discussions with their support worker,” said Zona. “All these mechanisms are designed to fit tenants to appropriate housing so we’re able to give them the solid foundation that allows them to move on to education or employment.

“We had a client who was totally incapacitated but who has now left the program and is working. Two other clients are now at university. The successes make you feel good, and the work is mostly very positive. Of course they’re not all success stories—some people will always need our help.”



about the author

Michael Wearne is a photojournalist who has worked in the media, entertainment and advertising industries for more than 15 years. This includes nearly a decade with the Fremantle Herald—during which time he won the Senior Media Award in 1996. He has also been the Media Liaison Officer for the Department of Contract and Management Services (CAMS). Currently he is the Community Media Liaison Officer with the Department of Housing and Works and also works as a freelance photojournalist. He lives in Fremantle and, of course, is a Dockers fan. Contact: mwearne@inet.net.au

