

Emerging Solutions Homelessness Research

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING – BRINGING AN INTERNATIONAL SOLUTION TO AUSTRALIA

A three year research project has found that supportive housing can break the cycle of homelessness for people who have been chronically homeless, improve their quality of life and reduce costs within broader emergency, justice and health service systems.

The report, *A Housing First approach to homelessness in Brisbane: Sustaining tenancies and the cost effectiveness of support services*, demonstrates that people with extensive experiences of homelessness and complex needs are able to successfully transition to housing, with linked support to address the issues which have proved barriers to sustaining housing in the past.

Funded by the Ian Potter Foundation, researchers Mason and Grimbeek, worked with Micah Projects, a community organisation in Brisbane, to follow a cohort of 12 formerly homeless participants over a three year period as they transitioned from chronic homelessness to a range of housing options, including supportive housing.

The research was timed to coincide with the opening in July 2012 of Brisbane Common Ground, the first single site supportive housing development in Queensland, and one of the first in Australia.

What is supportive housing

*Supportive housing is an innovative and proven solution to some of communities' toughest problems. It combines affordable housing with services that help people who face the most complex challenges to live with stability, autonomy and dignity.*¹

Supportive housing is a distinct housing model involving the intentional and long-term connection of secure and affordable housing with support focussed on tenancy sustainment and coordinated access to other specialised and community-based services. It sits within a Housing First approach, where people experiencing homelessness are supported to access housing first and foremost. This is in contrast to existing housing readiness models that see people move through crisis accommodation, transitional housing or rehabilitation programs before they are permanently housed.

Principles of Common Ground Supportive Housing

A model for supportive housing, Common Ground was originally developed in New York by Rosanne Haggerty. In Australia, the model has been adapted and nine Common Ground buildings are now completed and operational in five Australian capital cities – Adelaide, Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Hobart.

Prior to implementation Micah Projects identified 6 key principles for the Common Ground model:

- **Design:** Designing or renovating buildings thoughtfully to create a dignified and positive home environment and including in the design community spaces that can be utilised by tenants and the wider community.
- **Permanence and affordability:** Housing is permanent, affordable, and self-contained with rent less than 30% of income.
- **Tenancy mix:** There is a mix of tenants with half being people who have experienced homelessness and half people who have never been homeless. This mix ensures a vibrant community and a diversity of tenants.

¹ Corporation for Supportive Housing, (2014), What is Supportive Housing, Accessed at <http://www.csh.org/supportive-housing-facts/introduction-to-supportive-housing/>

- **Safety:** A concierge service is provided 24/7 to ensure a welcoming but controlled access to the building at all times.
- **Support services:** On site supports including holistic case management and co-ordination of access to mental health, primary healthcare, recreation and other specialist services to prevent people becoming homeless again and to support people to achieve their goals and aspirations.
- **Social inclusion:** Each element of supportive housing from building to support service design aims to create the greatest degree of empowerment and independence for people, as well as a thriving community for tenants and neighbours.

Mason and Grimbeek found that Brisbane Common Ground had been implemented in accordance with these principles. They further distilled success factors for sustaining tenancies in supportive housing from the perspective of formerly homeless people themselves:

- Safety
- Control of visitors
- Easy access to on-site support services
- Permanent tenancies
- High standard of premises
- Good relationship modelling by tenancy managers and support staff
- Development of micro communities among tenants of particular floors
- Tenant mix of 50% formerly homeless and 50% low income
- Community building activities for tenants
- Thoughtful design with open space

Towards a Queensland supportive housing policy, program and funding framework

In the United States and Canada, supportive housing as a housing response for individuals and families with complex needs is widely researched, well articulated in policy and programs, and explicitly funded. In the United Kingdom, the Supporting People Program takes a similar approach, investing in support targeted at sustaining tenancy and integrating support with housing.

There is also diversity in program approaches, including single site supportive housing (where all living units are located in a single building or complex) and scattered site supportive housing (where tenants live in social or private housing, with rental subsidies, and a primary support service outreaches to them in their home).

Queensland needs a supportive housing framework to articulate the policy for supportive housing, to define

program models and to direct funding for housing-linked support. This framework could incorporate and more clearly define existing disability, mental health and family support initiatives which prioritise housing by exception to people with identified support. Enabling supportive housing as a defined housing type to go to scale in this way would ensure delivery consistent with established evidence, transparent targeting to those people who require housing with integrated support, and effective matching of the appropriate type of supportive housing to the level of need.

The current research noted the shortcomings of support services aiming to sustain tenancies in public and community housing when they are not framed as part of a formal supportive housing program. Some of the formerly homeless individuals tracked through this research moved in to public and community housing with support services from Micah Projects. Tenants and support workers identified a number of shortcomings. These included:

- The design of the housing accessed varies, and is rarely designed with community building in mind.
- The distance travelled by support workers cuts down on support time.
- Housing stock was not operated under a supportive housing framework, but under a business model aimed at maximising the percentage of rent that could be charged.
- As support staff are working with multiple landlords/tenancy managers, the time available to be spent on relationship development and coordination between support staff and property managers is reduced.
- Allocation from the social housing waitlist results in a uniform high-need tenant mix, with all tenants experiencing multiple vulnerabilities.
- Security measures are limited in most complexes.
- There is limited shared vision between property managers and support staff.

This research has highlighted the benefits of intentionally designing supportive housing programs such as Brisbane Common Ground, and the shortcomings of attempting to support vulnerable individuals in housing without program design that provides affordability or the intentional connection of housing and support.

The commonality between these approaches is the intentional connection of affordable, long-term housing with support services. **If we seek to achieve outcomes for chronically homeless individuals, supportive housing policy and programs that achieve permanency, affordability and this intentional connection are a critical element of the systemic response.**



JESSICA'S STORY

'I've always taken photos of high-rise units and always wanted to live in a high-rise. I've just got a fascination, it's the way I am.'

I'm a bit wary about the other people here because of the domestic violence, especially blokes. I'm happy we have security guards.
If I was anywhere else I'd be scared, wouldn't feel safe.'

Photography: Katie Bennet, Embellysh.

Excerpt taken from Creating Homes: Lives Changing. Jessica was not a participant of the research study. Please turn the page to read Jessica's Story. Read more about how supportive housing makes such a difference. Not in data and statistics, but in the lives of real people - http://www.micahprojects.org.au/resource_files/micah/Creating-Homes-low-res.pdf

Jessica's Story

I was born in Royal Brisbane Hospital. I went to a state school for a year but Mum and Dad put me in a special school as I had learning problems. I didn't really want to, I wasn't happy. I had more friends at the state school.

Both Mum and Dad died in my 20s, heart disease and cancer. Dad caught me smoking once and made me smoke a whole packet. I'm glad I never smoked since.

Alcohol is in my family. Every time I say I'm an alcoholic someone gets angry at me. They say that an alcoholic is someone who craves every day for a drink. I'm more of an ex-binge drinker. My husband when he was alive was open about being an alcoholic and he got very upset when I said I was too.

My ex-boyfriend was abusive, very violent, and wouldn't let me go to AA. Said I'd meet a nice alcoholic like my husband. Now he's out of my life I'm going back to AA cause he can't tell me what to do no more.

Everyone begged me not to move in with him. I thought he'd change, that he'd stop abusing me when I moved in with him. I'd leave but I kept going back to him cause he's legally blind. And I had a cat Katrina that I loved and he used her as a weapon against me.

I got another cat there too, Charlotte, a little sister for Katrina. I've still got her. My caseworker got me to call DV Connect and we managed to get the cats in a shelter. I went to a refuge at Ipswich and Katrina and Charlotte went into the RSPCA. Katrina died at the RSPCA but the workers told me I could keep Charlotte at Common Ground. I didn't believe them at first,

thought it was a hoax. It was too good to be true. The workers were brilliant and I want to send them some photos of my new place here.

I've got bipolar and get depressed without a cat. Charlotte loves it here. She's still in a kitten stage and runs around the flat. The room is excellent and you get the city lights.

My ex-boyfriend gave away a lot of my furniture. With housing you get nothing but this place has everything. I'm a Catholic and said it must be a miracle. I've bought a couple of pot plants since moving in and want to get back into my gardening.

I've always taken photos of high-rise units and always wanted to live in a high-rise. I've just got a fascination, it's the way I am. I'm a bit wary about the other people here because of the domestic violence, especially blokes. I'm happy we have security guards. If I was anywhere else I'd be scared, wouldn't feel safe.

I'm looking forward to going back to AA next week. Alcohol ruins lives, gives you hangovers. There's a guy there who's been dry 40 years. I like helping them out, buying coffee and sugar. I'm going to go to Girl Power as well, a women's group for people with disabilities. And I want to volunteer at the RSPCA. I'd love to help out with the cats and dogs.

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Breaking Social Isolation
Building Community

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