

## **OPENING DOORS OF HOPE:**

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### **Workshop session: - Meeting the needs of Indigenous Australians – Challenges for Public & Community Housing.**

Building for diversity, sustainability and delivering HOPE in the rural and remote communities of south-west NSW became the new millennium challenge for social and crisis housing providers of Homes out West & Vinnies Homelessness services.

Throughout the late eighties and nineties Homes out West or Deniliquin Community Tenancy Scheme together with Vinnies Homelessness Services or Deniliquin Emergency Accommodation Program as both services were then known, were struggling to provide adequate housing and support provision. The match between supply and demand of both housing and support options was at odds with market and community expectations. Given the changing environment of auspice and contractual arrangements at that point in time it was evident that additional funding was not an option, ongoing viability for both organizations was a paramount concern.

A time for change to initiating opportunities for doors of hope to be opened was clearly evident. Both staff and management of the respective organizations recognized that a new approach was necessary for both providers to move forward in order to deliver upon community aspirations of appropriate and affordable crisis and long term social housing options.

External catalysts also prevailed and prompted actions. Changes hypothesized within the Mant Report (NSW Housing reform) together with compliance with National Competition Policy suggested a shift in housing focus for established community housing providers, from that of a transitional housing provider to the delivery of long term sustainable tenancies. Simultaneously Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) in developing the SAAP IV agreement was moving towards a greater emphasis upon a crisis response that encouraged self-reliance and choice, together with client's independence and prompted models of intervention that were responsive to changing patterns of need.

At the turn of the century both Homes out West and Vinnies were small independent organizations that utilized separate office spaces within the Deniliquin Neighborhood centre. While Homes Out West was managing a limited housing portfolio of thirty properties Vinnies Emergency Accommodation was struggling to deliver upon its core

business of providing opportunities to women, children and young people escaping domestic violence. Surviving on a budget \$50K, Vinnies was hard pressed to deliver upon community expectations of providing safe crisis accommodation options across a geographical region of some 60,000 square kilometers. There were no housing options for youth of Deniliquin and/or the region and minimal youth support networks prevailed. The closest refuges for women located some 200-300 Kms away while minimal transport options precipitated accessibility from Deniliquin.

Deniliquin is a small agriculturally based community located reasonably close to the Victorian border & the Murray River. Although not remote itself, Deniliquin acts as the service centre for a much broader community that experiences transport and communication hardship, compounded by remoteness of opportunities particularly for its young and marginalized community members and those of the surrounding area. Cross border anomalies and Sydney remoteness constantly remain an ever challenging arena for small communities along the southern NSW (Newcastle Sydney Wollongong) border. This has been particularly evident given the 'Sydney Centric' arena which has been the overall foci of the Carr Government throughout the last decade.

In an attempt to address unmet demand and offer some service to young people, Vinnies Emergency Accommodation were successful in being selected as a pilot service under the Prime Minister's Youth Homelessness taskforce. With a focus of early intervention in preventing homelessness, this endeavor introduced staff and management to the practice of action research as a mechanism to drive continuous improvement.

Findings from the reflective cycles of the introduced action research processes have underpinned all organizational operations from that point in time. These findings were unearthing a story of client complexity regarding access to adequate and appropriate housing options. The evidence base accompanying the action research process identified the need for a more streamlined approach. Clients involved in the Action Research process identified the need for flexible links between housing and support provision. Clients also identified the need for housing provision along a continuum, inclusive of early intervention, crisis, and long term housing. The emerging evidence hypothesized a platform of change, creating the formation of a housing alliance to deliver a suite of housing and support options across the south west region.

Research identified that a dedicated but flexible alliance of providers could deliver a suite of services along a seamless transition from early intervention through to sustainable long term housing. The research also identified that vertically integrated options offered along a continuum of intervention strategies provided a mechanism to contribute to the reduction of homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

This is now attainable at 'Opening Doors' from the first moment a client makes organizational contact regardless as to their position along the continuum. The creation of the Opening Doors Alliance coupled with co-location of the three key service providers (Homes Out West, Vinnies Homelessness Services, Vinnies Reconnect) within a newly developed shop-front setting of the CBD area, provides an innovative environment for resource pooling and strengthening of product base. Choosing the

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<sup>1</sup> Chamberlain, C & McKenzie D 1998 *Youth homelessness – Early intervention and Prevention*, Sydney Australian Centre for Equity through Education.

generic name of Opening Doors provides a metaphorical description of the services offered by all three programs. Ongoing research has identified that as a vertically integrated housing provider, soft entry points are more easily accessed when clients have an established and ongoing relationship with service providers.

A clearly defined Memorandum of Understanding has been crafted to distinctly articulate the objectives, strategic themes, roles and responsibilities of 'Opening Doors' partners. Safeguards have been written into the document to preserve and protect the individual integrity of partners. The goals of the Memorandum of Understanding are outlined as

- Provision of housing options along the continuum of early intervention to long term housing stability
- Enhanced service provision by sharing of designated tasks, whilst maintaining individual program integrity.
- Position the services within the central business district of Deniliquin .
- Provide an appropriate supported work environment to staff and clients
- Enjoy the benefits of co-location ie cost sharing, enhanced team approach, minimize the occupational health and safety risks of sole workers.
- Enhanced capacity to deliver individual service aims and goals.

So what is 'Opening Doors' point of difference from other co-located services you may ask?

- **Integration**, built upon mutual respect and trust of individual and collective skills, fostering a unique capacity to deliver and sustain housing services from the cradle to the grave.
- **Developing a common vision** of service providers that is based upon sound principles, values and ethics that recognizes uniqueness, values diversity in approach and compliments the skills of the workers to the strengths and skills of the clients.
- Holding firm to the belief, the **client is the expert of their own situation and determine their goals of intervention**, practitioners within the Opening Doors structure encourage clients to seek opportunities, choices and support to find solutions to their housing dilemmas and stress.
- **Utilizing Action Research**, involving clients and stakeholders in organizational processors, utilizing those findings to improve practice in a manner that builds trust and confidence thereby empowering participants by the process.<sup>2</sup>

This strength's based approach to service delivery combined with the cyclical nature of Action Research process that anchor and underscore the continuous improvement mechanisms of Opening Doors, enables inclusive involvement of all stakeholders. The cycles of plan, action, observe and reflect ensure all stakeholders are integral to and

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<sup>2</sup> Wadsworth, Y. (1997), 'Everyday Evaluation on the run' 3.

involved with the direction and development of the organizational culture. Regular surveys, newsletters to tenants, clients, partners and stakeholders acts as an information tool to keep all stakeholders involved with Opening Doors up to date with latest developments and trends. 2,000 Newsletters are dispatched at eight weekly intervals. With interesting and topical articles the newsletters are designed to encourage self help seeking behaviors combined with updates and organizational subject matter dissemination.

From a small town focus the formation of the Opening Doors alliance has enabled individual partners to take on a regional model of service delivery, providing a suite of services to communities across the south west Riverina region. Regional diversity in service delivery has lead to regional representation and vicissitude of management board structure and skill. This enhanced diversity has complimented client/tenant representation on boards of management with that of financial, legal, accounting, welfare, local government and government departmental representation. Skill transference that occurs at board level is interchangeable to compliment day to day living skills, encouraging and facilitating robust, vigorous and passionate debate to matters of governance and life skills thus building sustainability in communities and its members.

Following the completion of a Regional Housing Needs Analysis and delivering upon recommendations contained therein, new housing partners have been created. Housing provision has been extended to the Indigenous communities of Moama (located 80 Kms south of Deniliquin) and a noteworthy – received recognition in NSW Department of Housing Annual Report 2004, housing project completed to meet the needs of a group of disabled young people of Balranald (located 200 Kms west of Deniliquin). Newly connected housing partners have been encouraged to adopt a similar business approach to Opening Doors with like principles articulated within the development of clearly defined service agreements and Memorandums of Understanding that align the work plans.

Community and organizational connectedness has been central to the Alliance's key themes of developing sound client outcomes in a structured and holistic manner. While enhancing client trust and respect of confidentially coupled with compliance to Privacy issues, clients are able to access appropriate services relative to their needs without the stress of telling their story over and over.

Throughout the brief five year life of the alliance all partners have experienced significant growth in their service delivery capacities. Since the year 2001 the overall organizational budget of the three partner services has expanded to almost \$1M and provided a boost to local employment options.

Key drivers that have enabled Opening Doors to move from strength to strength are captured in the 7 'P' **Planning, performance, passion, perseverance, patience, people and partnerships.**

**Planning:** Opening Doors partners have become strategic in their vision and service culture. Strategic Plans captured with the Memorandum of Understanding, developed to articulate the workings of the alliance underwrite the operational framework. Within this context individual Business Plans and unit Work Plans are shaped and framed to capture client needs. Diverse stakeholder input is sought to continually reshape the organizational structure utilizing Action Research process to provide the evidence base

for change. A commitment to planning on a regional perspective has been initiated and sustained.

**Performance:** Clearly articulated key performance indicators are identified and monitored within the strategic and business plans. Regular and routine monitoring ensures the desired outcomes are achieved. Both partner organizations have been recognized for their individual and collective achievements at a local, state and national level. Opening Doors was awarded the 2004 Deniliquin Business Achievement Award – Service Industry Professional, NSW Community Housing 2004 Awards, - Partnership, National Award Minister’s 2004 Award of Excellence for Rural and Regional ‘Award of Excellence’ - Training New Apprentices . Homes Out West is recognized as an ‘A’ registered housing provider, while shared learning experiences have enabled Vinnies to receive a treble ‘A’ ranking for its Reconnect service.

**Passion:** The staff team are passionate and committed to working along side client’s in achieving the best possible outcomes, while remaining true to core business elements and program integrity. The organization has structured a process which enables staff to work in the client’s preferred environment. The passion of staff towards clients is recognized by external partners to the alliance and has an osmotic effect.

**Perseverance and patience:** Realizing that many small steps will get you to the objective, rather than large ones which can have an unbalancing effect. Perseverance and patience are fostered and developed within the organizational practice of working within a strength’s based and solution focused framework, complimented by action research practice.

**People and partnerships:** Have been the critical and most successful element of Opening Doors success. Summed up in the words of Michael Jordan “*Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.*” Partners to the alliance are equal and involved in all decisions. Collective wisdom and a willingness to explore opportunities together have been key elements to Opening Doors success.

The story of “*Jack*” demonstrates the benefits of collective wisdom offering HOPE. *Jack* aged mid thirties diagnosed Schizophrenic for many years *Jack* has been struggling in dealing with his illness. He had been on and off the homelessness circuit for a significant part of his adult life moving from refuge (shelter) to refuge and living ‘rough’ throughout regional NSW and country Victoria. On some occasions *Jack* would venture to the big cities but for most part he avoided this action. Unpacking *Jack*’s homelessness pattern identified he would generally remain in one centre for approximately six weeks. With the assistance of Vinnies Outreach team *Jack* approached Homes Out West for long term housing assistance. After some months of coming and going *Jack*’s application for priority housing with Homes Out West was successful. Initially *Jack* was excited, although a little apprehensive about his move to living on his own. After some weeks an incident arose with neighbors causing concern as to ‘*Jack*’s behavior’. Apart from engaging Homes Out West to deal with the issues, the neighbors involved the Police, the local Hospital, the body corporate of the apartment block, the landlord, other apartment landlords and local politician and Mayor. Initially it appeared that *Jack*’s days of tenancy were doomed, however, the housing provider, support agency, mental health and landlord

were prepared to support *Jack* to assert his tenancy rights. *Jack* utilized the options placed before him and demonstrated his capacities to work through the issues that prevailed and had previously placed his tenancy at risk. *Jack* has sustained the tenancy for almost two years now – the first time in his adult life he has had any form of stable housing. There have been many smaller incidents where *Jack* has briefly chosen to terminate his tenancy, however with the collective support of his established networks and the housing manager *Jack* has been able to work through these issues and remain connected with his housing and the community.

*Carlie's* story is another excellent example of how positive and collective intervention can have sustainable benefits. As a young fifteen year old Indigenous girl *Carlie* was referred to Vinnies by the local McDonald's Manager. *Carlie* had been living in a caravan with another friend and this arrangement was causing difficulties for both *Carlie* her friend and other residents of the Caravan Park. *Carlie* had lived a very transient life drifting between kinship groups and both her parents who had also experienced a long history of short term housing arrangements. Initially *Carlie* was referred to the Reconnect Service for early intervention to assist the living arrangements at the Caravan park and to connect *Carlie* with her mother. Soon after the involvement of the Reconnect service it became evident that *Carlie's* living arrangement was placing her in an 'at risk' environment. Unable to offer any alternatives the local DoCS office was at a loss to assist, crisis accommodation seemed the only alternative. *Carlie* moved into Vinnies emergency accommodation for a trial period. The developing housing trial had mixed experiences for *Carlie*, but over time the tenancy was sustained for some months. This in turn enabled *Carlie* to register for social housing both with the department and Homes Out West, as *Carlie* had now turned sixteen. Well connected with Opening Doors staff, *Carlie* moved into her own unit. Naturally sustaining a tenancy at sixteen years of age is not an easy task, there have been numerous incidents where the tenancy has been in jeopardy however, given the connectedness of Opening Doors *Carlie* has now managed to sustain a tenancy for almost four years - a longer length of time than her parents! She now affords her beautiful daughter a loving and friendly environment.

Offering HOPE - Helping Other Possibilities Emerge has not only been a catch cry for Opening Doors but has shaped and framed a unique environment for clients and the services involved in the partnerships alike. All three partners have gone from strength to strength, in their endeavors to deliver upon community aspirations.

Homes Out West now manages eighty five properties across the south west Riverina region. The housing portfolio, experiencing a 90% occupancy rate and offers a diverse suite of housing options, from bed sits to four bedroom properties. A regional focus of properties in three communities covering 60,000 square kms, 33% of tenants identify as Indigenous. The organization experiences satisfied tenancies with minimal property turnovers together with very low bad debt ratios and /or arrears. Emerging from 21 hours of work five years ago Homes Out West now employs a full time housing manager and a part time housing assistant. As an accredited housing provider Homes Out West is the only Type 2 housing provider to achieve 'A' Rating in Housing Registration across NSW.

Vinnies Homelessness Services has experienced similar growth over the life of the alliance. From a sole worker position six years ago the Service now employs ten staff

members on a full and part time basis. Having provided four units of accommodation in 2000 and operating a modest brokerage model of assistance the service now administers a budget in excess of \$600K affording 198 families HOPE in their housing issues over the past twelve month period.

Given the recognition Opening Doors attracts at both a local and state level the Alliance is valued as a community partner to a broad range of service providers. Enjoying healthy relationships with providers of health services particularly mental health, educational providers both secondary and tertiary providers together with elected members and staff of local governments across eight local government regions.

Helping Other Possibilities Emerge has subsequently translated into great community benefits and opened momentous doors of hope and connective ness for people.