



a working life

Innovative programs run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence are helping people get work and get their life working, as the House of Representatives Employment Committee found out during a recent visit.

Story: Peter Cotton

I'm the only one in my family to actually be employed at the moment," says Yalarna*, a woman in her 20s living at the Collingwood public housing estate in inner-city Melbourne. "Mum's been on a pension all her life, so it's something really different for our family to have someone working."

Yalarna's new job came thanks to one of a series of innovative employment programs developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a Melbourne-based community organisation with the stated aim of working towards an Australia free of poverty. The Brotherhood's efforts, concentrated on Melbourne's Atherton Gardens Public Housing Estate in Fitzroy and Collingwood Housing Estate, were outlined to members of the House of Representatives Employment and

Workplace Relations Committee when they visited recently as part of their inquiry into increasing participation in paid work.

Of the 2,000 residents of Atherton Gardens, 95 per cent are on income support, with 26 per cent of them single parents, 17 per cent on disability support and 24 per cent on Newstart. The rest are mostly aged pensioners.

Atherton Gardens, like its counterpart in Collingwood, is culturally and ethnically diverse with a population comprising 39 per cent Vietnamese, 11 per cent Chinese, 4 per cent Turkish and 10 per cent from other ethnic groups.

The length of unemployment among estate residents ranges between two and 15 years.

Over the past 18 months, the Brotherhood has helped secure jobs for Yalarna and almost 100 other estate residents.

Many of these jobs involve gardening and maintenance on the estates. This source of employment is thanks to a clause inserted by the state government of Victoria in its public tenant employment contracts, which require successful tenderers for cleaning and gardening contracts at estates to allocate 35 per cent of positions to the estates' unemployed.

According to the Brotherhood's Enterprise Development Manager, George Housakos, the more local the job, the easier it is to get someone to do it.

"We're bringing the jobs to this community rather than asking

At Atherton Gardens, Fitzroy. Photos: Ponch Hawkes and Brotherhood of St Laurence

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people to travel,” says Mr Housakos. “These are people with complex needs and it can therefore often be very difficult for them to travel.”

As well as the 14 residents now employed cleaning and gardening on the Fitzroy and Collingwood estates, Brotherhood programs have seen another 24 estate residents placed in work and training with the Office of Housing, 20 have been awarded entry level government traineeships, another six have

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been employed in a not-for-profit cleaning company established by the Brotherhood, and 12 young people have been placed in youth traineeships with government and community organisations.

The Brotherhood invests \$100,000 a year in its employment and training programs, and these funds are supplemented annually by another \$300,000 in state and federal government grants.

According to Mr Housakos, the jobs the Brotherhood has created for the long-term unemployed in the two Melbourne housing estates have so far saved taxpayers about \$1 million in social security payments.

Yalarna has lived at Collingwood Estate for 18 months. She recently completed a Brotherhood course in office administration and is now employed part time as an administrative assistant in the state government's Office of Housing.

“I'd been unemployed for quite a few years before this,” says Yalarna. “I'd been homeless for five and a half years before I shifted here. It's been good to live on the other side, in a working life. Being unemployed for so long, you don't realise what it's like to actually be employed and have money.”

George Housakos explains the guiding principle behind the Brotherhood's employment programs: “People don't go from long-term unemployment to a sustainable job overnight,” he says. “They need time to learn new skills and habits—to build confidence, to deal with personal or health problems, and to ease into new work environments.

“A patient, supportive approach has better long-term outcomes for this group than a simple ‘work-first’ approach. For lasting results, employment program funding needs

to be structured to allow services to invest time with people.”

And the results achieved by Brotherhood programs are impressive. The long-term unemployed who find work through the Brotherhood have a job retention rate of about 90 per cent. “Five per cent just walk away saying they're not ready for it,” says Mr Housakos. “Five per cent drop off, but later choose to re-engage with us.”

Says Project Support Officer Nick Marandos: “Teaching someone physical skills is fairly easy so that's not really the main aim of what we're trying to achieve here. We're trying to achieve some sort of confidence and once we've got that, the physical skills flow quite easily. Employment gives people a sense of purpose, but it shouldn't be considered as something that's only a financial concept. It gives you a social outlet, a purpose in life, and something to



Atherton Gardens Public Housing Estate, Fitzroy. Photo: Ponch Hawkes

While the training regime helps estate residents acquire the capacity to do the jobs on offer, the Brotherhood's former Executive Director, Father Nic Frances, says the programs resonate with participants at a much deeper level.

“They get a salary and so therefore have a whole bunch of pride, and workmates, and all the things that come with that,” says Father Frances. “It changes their self esteem because the work they're involved in is actually tied to their local community. They become leaders and spokespeople. They become people who tell their neighbours who might not have work: ‘No! We shouldn't put up with this! We can change it!’. Our programs are about how individuals in communities fulfil their potential and help deliver on the potential of their own community.”

look forward to. Something to feel meaningful about.”

George Housakos agrees that confidence is the key to getting the long-term unemployed back to work: “If someone loses their job, their confidence ebbs away and, in the end, they find they're unable to compete for a job,” he says. “If you apply for lots of jobs and are constantly knocked back, it knocks your confidence. It's a re-enforcing cycle. Our program is a way of breaking through that.”

Newly-employed Yalarna reflects on how her confidence has grown since she found work through the Brotherhood. “Going from being unemployed to having a job, I've realised that a lot of people seem to like me, which is quite a big spin out,” she says. “It makes you feel better about yourself in a lot

of ways. Now I know I've got more options open to me and a lot of people are really impressed that I got a job."

According to George Housakos, the current decline in unemployment makes now the optimum time for governments to tackle long-term unemployment. "Unemployment has been reducing in recent years but long-term unemployment has stayed fairly constant. We argue that as more job opportunities come up, we have to ensure



that the long-term unemployed have a capacity to get those jobs. Conditions couldn't be better to get the long-term unemployed into work."

The jobs created by the Brotherhood have a greater impact on the lives of estate residents than simply bringing in a much-welcome pay packet.

The residents of Atherton Gardens Estate in Fitzroy live in four high-rise tower blocks, each tower comprising 200 flats.

"A job we initiated as part of one of our employment programs was a concierge position at the base of each tower," says Mr Housakos. "The concierge is essentially a customer service person and security officer. They meet and greet community members entering the block.

"We have no firm statistics on this, but we believe that putting a person in that position has resulted in a decrease in crime on the estate. One indicator of this is the fact that the [Victorian government's] Office of Housing says there's been a 40 per cent decrease in the number of calls related to criminal activity on the estate in the past year."

As well as reducing the fear of crime on the estate, the concierges deter anti-social behaviour, deny tower access to unauthorised people, remove graffiti and generally attempt to foster social inclusion.

Estate residents say they feel safer entering and leaving their buildings since the concierges have been on the job.

There are now plans to wire each tower to allow intercom communication between the concierge desk and each unit, as well as the capacity for swipe card access.

Improved job prospects and security are also thought to account for a slowing in the turnover of residents on the estates. "Two years ago, we were looking at a 25 per cent turnover in the population [of the estates] every year," says George Housakos. "That's now decreased and jobs may provide part of the answer as to why it's happened."

According to George Housakos, the Brotherhood's employment programs have no boundaries. "We stay with an individual for as long as they need us," he says. "Even people who make the transition and sustain employment independently still need an occasional conversation with one of our people. Our contact with these people is not capped in any way. Some people have high needs. We may need to support someone in a pre-employment course and also give support to that person's spouse who may not understand why their partner has to go to work every day."

Before joining a Brotherhood employment program, Frank* had been unemployed for 10 years. He now works on the Atherton Gardens Estate as a maintenance officer employed by the Department of Human Services. "As a maintenance officer, I do all sort of jobs on the estate," says Frank. "Anything anybody asks of me, I can do it. It's very fulfilling, it's very exciting and very rewarding and I enjoy doing it very much."

Frank says his job has completely changed his life. "It's a big deal for me. I've become part of society which I wasn't before. My lifestyle used to be totally different to what it is now. I was an insomniac. Now I'm quite fine. I was someone who didn't really care. I had given up. You might say I was lacking

the opportunity, the encouragement and the support.

"We had training over a 13 week course and it was quite enjoyable. We did fire training, we did computer studies. We learnt how to operate office facilities. All of that was new to me. I now operate a computer. For nearly 10 years I was really isolated. Since I started this program, everything's turned around for me."

The Brotherhood has found that its work with unemployed individuals has had a broad impact within the housing estates. "We find that we start working with one member of a family and pretty soon we're involved with the whole family," says George Housakos. "Those families often suffer due to inter-generational unemployment. We worked with a woman and got her a job. She then referred her husband to us and he subsequently got a job. The son has now been referred.

"Having seen the success of the program, the disabled people and single parents of Atherton Gardens are coming to us and saying they want to participate. This has made us look at issues like childcare to help the single parents."

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is at pains to point out that its employment programs are not a form of welfare. Says the

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Brotherhood's former Executive Director, Father Frances: "We're not exploring welfare. We're exploring how we support communities to create real opportunities for their residents to contribute to their community and their way of life." ■

* Not their real names

For its inquiry into increasing participation in paid work, the House of Representatives Employment Committee has received more than 100 submissions and held 17 public hearings. The submissions and transcripts are available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ewr or for information email ewr.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4162. For more information on the Brotherhood of St Laurence and its programs visit www.bsl.org.au/employment

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