

## **A PROPOSAL FOR A DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE—BROTHERHOOD OF ST LAURENCE**

**The framework for the proposal takes the following order: assumptions, objectives, planning factors, recommendation, implementation.**

### **Assumptions underlying a developmental program for homeless youth**

1. The numbers of homeless disadvantaged young people will increase.
2. That some young people are disadvantaged by the unequal and unjust distribution of opportunities for personal development in Australian society.
3. That resources, in particular temporal and physical space, are requirements for personal development.
4. That independent living skills can be learnt through skill transference, experimental learning and participation in decision making about the choice of life-style to be pursued.
5. That experimental services of this type are essential to provide knowledge for policy development and social action programs to change those institutions which contribute to the unequal distribution of opportunities for young disadvantaged people.
6. That links with families and friends are maintained and existing networks strengthened if accommodation services to young people are locally based.<sup>1</sup>

### **Objectives of a developmental program for homeless youth**

One of the lessons which has been learnt from the recent demonstration projects conducted by the Brotherhood, for example, the Family Centre Project, SPAN and the Neighbourhood Employment Development Project, has been that a multiplicity of goals is a deterrent to successful outcomes in an experimental program. The objectives, or goals of a program must be simple, clearly expressed, and few in number. Martin Rein has expressed this idea in the following way:

A proliferation of goals in a program usually reflects low confidence in major achievements. Multiplicity and alteration of goals often substitutes for effectiveness of action.<sup>2</sup>

With Martin Rein's comments and Brotherhood experience in mind, the following objectives have been devised:

1. To provide an environment for disadvantaged, homeless young people in which they can master the social, practical and relationship skills necessary for independent living.
2. To ensure that young disadvantaged people can remain in this enabling environment until they choose to test newly acquired independent living skills in the community.
3. To test the techniques of skill transference, mutual support, self-help and participation in decision making as the means of developing independent living skills.
4. To improve the access of disadvantaged unemployed young people to the community's permanent accommodation resources by developing a network of accommodation alternatives, and providing information and funds to enable their utilisation.
5. To help young people develop and/or strengthen their links with the community into a support network which will sustain them when they move into permanent accommodation.<sup>3</sup>
6. To ensure that the information obtained from the program is used to change government policy towards homeless young people to improve accommodation and support services for them.

## Planning factors

When a new program is being devised, there are several questions which must always be considered despite the type of program or the system in which it intervenes. A discussion of these common questions as they relate to this particular program follow:

### Location

Should the program be located centrally in close proximity to other programs conducted by the auspice; or in the area demonstrating the greatest need?

(a) A locally-based program would mean that the young people may already have contacts with relatives and friends upon which they could build to form a permanent support network.

(b) The Brotherhood experience in the King Street Job Centre and in the Unemployed Rights Service has shown that a central location does not always offer the best service to consumers.

(c) It is more possible for a program based in a local area to become part of the local network of services with the consequent advantages of mutual support and the exchange and integration of services. For example, if the program was situated in Northcote, it would form part of a network of services for the young unemployed which includes Northcote Unemployed Resource Group, the Unemployed Workers' Union and SPAN, enabling the young people in the Boarding House to participate in, and exchange, services with all of them.

(d) The Youth Accommodation Coalition Co-ordinator has advised that the regions with the greatest need for emergency accommodation are the north-east and the north-west, but that all regions have a need for long-term accommodation.

### Auspice

Questions about auspice are constrained by the funding already collected; clearly, the Church of England and the Brotherhood must be involved. However, both organisations either are, or can be, regionalised.

In a recent seminar about Children's and Youth Services conducted in the Inner Urban Region,<sup>4</sup> two prominent Victorian social workers, produced evidence to show that 'community services should have a regional or local community base'<sup>5</sup> and, wherever possible, should be 'accessible, have local input, encourage participation, and have local decision-making responsibilities over funding and policy issues'.<sup>6</sup>

From the Brotherhood's own experience in the 'SPAN: A Community Project for Older and Retired People', and the Neighbourhood Employment Development Program projects, community involvement is the main factor which is producing successful outcomes. There are, of course, different levels and types of community involvement and the exact arrangements should be clear from the outset. From the Brotherhood's point of view, it would be an interesting departure from previous practice to attempt to involve the local community in service delivery at the outset, rather than 'hand over' the service to the community after it is established.

### Service or Demonstration

Arguments considered under this heading are:

(a) The need for long-term accommodation has been demonstrated already by reports and other services. All that will be tested is the method of providing the service.

(b) There is a great deal of statistical evidence that the need will be ongoing.

(c) The Brotherhood has always provided some type of service for disadvantaged youth and with the change in Action and Resource Centre's goals will have to continue its service commitment in some other way.

(d) Innovation is not unique to demonstration projects. Rothman lists the various characteristics of innovative organisations, all of which can apply to services, in particular, he has shown that any organisation with many linkages to external influences can be innovative.<sup>7</sup>

- (e) In a critical analysis of demonstration as a strategy of change, Martin Rein claims: 'The assets of the demonstration project are that it is fashionable, politically attractive, rationally appealing, inexpensive and not binding'. He sees the disadvantages as promoting unequal distribution of money and resources, distracting from national policy and overemphasizing success.<sup>8</sup> Although Martin Rein is discussing broad national demonstration programs in this article, his comments do have some application.
- (f) Demonstration programs require, by their very nature, much greater research inputs. For example, the Brotherhood Unemployment Rights Service (a service program), has had little research input other than data collection, whereas the SPAN program (a demonstration project) occupies half the time of one full-time researcher.

### **Target Group**

The evidence presented in the VCCSD report showed that young girls, 18 years and younger, were the largest group to seek accommodation assistance from the organisations surveyed. The report states:

For whatever reasons, the fact is that young girls are subject to housing crises and the concomitant economic, social and moral difficulties, at an earlier age than their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

However, part of independent living is to be able to live with persons of both sexes, and this should be one of the skills learnt in the program, therefore, the target group should include a mixture of sexes. Similarly, a mixture of age groupings is important.

The only other social characteristics the participants should possess are that they are unemployed, and disadvantaged to the extent that they are likely to benefit from the skills transference program. It is also preferable, although not mandatory, that the participant is eligible for unemployment or other benefit as part of the program will be to learn financial management skills.

### **Length of stay and follow-up**

Length of stay is governed by many variables; individual differences, level of disadvantage, readiness for independent living, more permanent accommodation. However, it should be quite clear at the outset that length of stay is limited and some contractual arrangement should be made with each young person at the beginning of the stay. Although length of stay will vary with the person, the average length of stay is expected to be six months. The young person should decide on the actual date of departure within the general terms of the original contract.

The eagerness of young people at this age to learn, and test themselves out in the real world will automatically limit the duration of stay. However, mistakes will occur and the task of one of the workers in the house will be to support the young person in the new accommodation and to keep the door of the house open if return is indicated. It is expected that returning to the house will be quite common and at least one space should always be open for such emergencies.

### **Size**

Six to eight people is the optimal size of a group for the transference of skills, for mutual support, and for communal living. Apart from some large boarding houses, this size approximates the size of the various types of living arrangements in the community. However, a rather large house will be required if accommodation for 6-8 people of mixed sexes, plus staff, and an 'emergency' bed, is to be provided. A smaller group may decrease the cost of premises, but increase the staffing costs by decreasing the staffing-/participant ratio. In summary, a house which will accommodate 10-12 people will be required.

## **Staffing**

A great deal of the physical work in the house (cleaning, cooking, shopping, gardening) will be carried out by the participants as part of the skill learning program. Thus, the number of staff will be small and their tasks very specific, mainly requiring support/relationship and networking abilities. Staff should be residential and chosen according to the tasks and abilities required, but a mixture of ages and sexes would be desirable. It is probably important that one staff member is indigenous to the group of participants; if possible, an indigenous person who has had some experience or training in work with young people.

One of the indigenous youth workers from Action and Resource Centre who has had in-service training is the type of worker required. Another staff member should have administrative, organisational and community development skills.

The proposal has been designed on the basis that there will be only two employed staff members. However, the experience of other programs suggests that at least three staff members will be needed. If resources allow this level of staffing, the third person would be allocated some of the tasks envisaged for the two staff members already described. It would be particularly useful to have more input in the following areas: the development of community linkages, the initiation of alternative accommodation networks, the ability to select and support volunteers.

It is important that unemployed volunteers (such as teachers) are used in the house for skill transference and relieving duties.<sup>11</sup> Many of the tasks overlap and it will be difficult to write exact job descriptions for the various people involved in the program. It should also be remembered that skill transference may occur between participants, between neighbours and participants, as well as between expert volunteers and participants.

## **Research**

Expertise is required in this area, and researchers capable of social research are difficult to find; the Brotherhood has this expertise and as one of the groups represented in the auspice, could be expected to provide this resource. The research input would be similar to that available to all Brotherhood services, that is, the setting up of a data collection system and evaluation carried out periodically. The type of evaluation used in a demonstration program —monitoring and research feedback —is considered inappropriate as it could produce a 'hot-house' effect which is not used in accommodation houses and which might influence the program's outcomes.

## **Recommendation**

That the Brotherhood of St. Laurence initiate a new service for homeless, disadvantaged, unemployed youth as part of its contribution to welfare services and to reaffirm its on-going commitment to disadvantaged young people. The service will be located in a large house which will be known as a boarding house.

The service will be composed of three elements:

- (a) it will provide long-term accommodation for 8-10 young people of both sexes between the ages of 15-18 years;<sup>12</sup>
- (b) it will provide a skill transference program to assist the young people to obtain independent living skills;
- (c) it will provide a follow-through service —seeking out and developing a network of alternative, permanent living arrangements in the community in which the house is situated and offering support during the transition between the boarding house and permanent accommodation alternatives.

The auspice for the new service should be a steering committee composed of persons working with young unemployed people in the chosen area, plus representatives of Action and Resource Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Church of England.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Church of England should guarantee funds for the service, but the local steering committee should make all policy and funding decisions.<sup>13</sup> Funds

should be supplied, or resources obtained: to employ two staff members; to meet the shortfall between the costs of running the service,<sup>14</sup> and the contribution of the young people; to form a bond loan fund.<sup>15</sup>

The house will be managed by the young people.<sup>16</sup> The staff, although residential, will work as resource people assisted by volunteers who will be unemployed people with specific skills. At least one staff member should be indigenous to the group for whom the service is designed.

Service delivery methods should include local involvement, mutual support, self-help, skill transference and consumer participation in decision making—all methods which are useful in the pursuit of independent living skills.

A data collection system should be installed in the service at the outset and a research consultant should be available to the house at staff or participants' request.

## **Implementation**

1. The first draft of the proposal was circulated and commented upon by relevant people within Brotherhood of St Laurence and Action and Resource Centre. It was then redrafted. The proposal proceeded through the normal channels for approval within the Brotherhood where the Executive decided that the most appropriate areas to test the proposal were Thornbury, Northcote, Fairfield, Kensington, Port Melbourne and Brunswick.
2. The proposal in its redrafted form will be circulated to relevant people and organisations within these local communities and a reasonable time limit set for comments. An offer to discuss any aspect of the proposal with its designer will also be made. On the basis of these comments and discussions, one area will be chosen for the site of the Boarding House. The proposal will then be submitted for final approval to the Brotherhood Board and the relevant committee within the Diocese of Melbourne of the Church of England.
3. A steering committee will be formed, composed of people with relevant experience, from the local community suggested by the groups already circulated, plus representatives of the Brotherhood, the Church of England and Action and Resource Centre. The main criteria for selection of committee members should be their ability to act as resource people to the house when it is properly functioning.
4. The first task of the steering committee will be to select a staff member with administrative skills for the boarding house.
5. The staff member, in consultation with the steering committee, will then seek out a suitable building in the local area. (The General Manager of the Housing Commission has already offered assistance in purchasing a suitable building.)

The following steps in the implementation process are offered merely as suggestions. The Steering committee may prefer a completely different course of action and its wishes will prevail.

1. At the same time, the Steering Committee and the staff member will explore government funding possibilities, for example, the Department of Youth, Sport & Recreation through its Special Youth Development Program offers a subsidy for the employment of full-time youth workers by community agencies; and the Commonwealth Government offers assistance to youth organisations through the Program of Assistance to Youth Organisations (PAYO) grants. The fact that the program already has some funds committed to it will assist in this task.
2. After exploring funding possibilities, the Steering Committee and the staff member will compile an accurate costing of the boarding house and the program. Some guidance for this task is available in the report written by Eilish Cooke in 1977 for the Social Welfare Department, entitled 'Emergency Housing Service Program'. One important factor in devising a budget for the program is that the young people living in the house are charged the type of rental they will eventually have to pay in the community.
3. The staff member will occupy the house and a second staff member (probably an indigenous worker) will be appointed, at least one staff member will live in the house. At the same time, referrals for accommodation will be accepted from local community contacts. The first group of young people to occupy the house will be chosen by the two staff members in consultation with the steering committee. Subsequent applicants will be chosen by the existing occupants and the staff. It is assumed that, by this time, the first group of occupants will have learnt the appropriate skills for selection.

4. As soon as the house is occupied and the staff members appointed, a research worker from the Brotherhood will be allocated to the program to set up a data collection system with the staff, and to be available for consultation whenever required. The Steering Committee, the staff and the participants may all require such consultation from time to time.
5. After the first group of occupants have arrived, a skills transference program will be developed in conjunction with the young people. People with the expertise to impart the skills for independent living will be contacted (these people could be Steering Committee members, volunteers, or professionals). In particular, volunteers who are unemployed and who have the required and needed skills will be recruited. In this context, it should be remembered that the young people themselves have skills and that part of the program will be for the young people to learn the necessary tasks involved in running a house —cleaning, working, shopping, washing, etc. One of the special skills to be learnt is the ways in which linkages into the community can be developed and existing networks with relatives and friends strengthened.
6. One of the goals of the program is that the young people will run the program themselves, and part of the skills transference program will be to impart the necessary skills for them to do so. It is expected that the boarding house will always have a core group who can transfer skills to newcomers.
7. After the first group of participants have 'settled down', the appropriate staff member will embark on the task of collecting information about existing permanent accommodation in the local community, e.g. private boarding arrangements, communal households, Housing Commission flats, etc., and in developing new, permanent accommodation possibilities. This information will be shared with the young people and eventually 'matching by mutual consent' will occur. The 'support' staff member will be responsible for overseeing the move into permanent accommodation and maintaining contact with the young person accommodated. The participants should feel secure in the knowledge that they can return to the house if the arrangement proves to be unsuitable.
8. Every effort should be made to produce a normal living situation, rather than a protected artificial environment, for example, the house should be 'elastic' enough to accommodate the occasional friend who wants to 'crash' on the sitting-room floor because this behaviour is part of the pattern of living of young unemployed people.
9. A full-scale evaluation of this service should occur after it has been fully operating for two years. However, the participants must agree to this evaluation and the reasons for it must be fully explained to them. Evaluation rather than an action-research program is suggested because the program is a service and not an experimental program, and in order to keep at a minimum, 'fish bowl' effects on the participants.

### Endnotes

1. This sixth assumption is stated with some reservation. Although network theory is currently fashionable, it has been the author's experience that a great number of disadvantaged young people do not develop or maintain networks due to the mobility of their families —mobility caused by the inadequate housing provision for low-income people in Victoria.
2. Rein, Martin. 'The Demonstration as a Strategy of Change', *Social Policy: Issues of Choice and Change*, Random House, New York, 1970.
3. This objective supports the argument for a local program and acts as a mitigating force against institutionalization of the program and dependency of the young people on it.
4. Held in the Carringbush Library, Richmond, on October 29, 1980.
5. Graeme Gregory, *The Power and the Glory*, paper delivered to an Inner Urban Region Seminar, October 1980.
6. Jeeny Wills, 'Children and Youth in the Inner Urban Area', *Ibid.*
7. Jack Rothman, *Planning & Organising for Social Change*, Columbia Press, 1974, p. 457.
8. Martin Rein, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
9. Victorian Consultative Committee for Social Development, Youth Accommodation Report, August 1979.
10. Such often being an important part of experiential learning.
11. It has been suggested that unemployed volunteers might not provide the skills or the continuity which this program requires. Family Centre Project experience belies this. Some unemployed professional people were volunteers in the Project, particularly teachers, and welfare workers between jobs. Frequently, they became so involved in the project that they continued as volunteers after they found work. It is the suitability of the volunteer which is the most important factor, not his employment status. The selection and support of

volunteers during the program will be crucial. In addition, offering a caring service is often very beneficial to the confidence and self-esteem of the unemployed person, while his unemployed status assists him to understand some of the difficulties experienced by the participants in the program.

12. It is often assumed that there are legal complications in housing a young person under 16 years. These difficulties are discounted in the following article, 'Teenagers Leaving Home: The Legal Position', Helen Gamble, in *Living Together*, Dorothy Davis et al (eds). Centre for Continuing Education, A.N.U., Canberra. 1980.

13. Graeme Gregory in the paper quoted previously makes the following observation: 'None (traditional welfare agencies) to my knowledge, have said to a community 'We have the resources, you have the need. Here is the money, you determine its use, you fully manage the service, or facility, or organisation that meets your need.'

14. It is envisaged that the young people would pay the 'communal living going rates' for their board, but the program will entail charges which are not usual, e.g. out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers, accommodation of staff, etc., so that the board paid by the young people cannot fully meet the costs entailed in running the house and the program.

15. Those people who work in the field report that loans of bond money to young people for accommodation have a high rate of return.

16. Initially, management by participants will be difficult and it is expected they will need a great deal of assistance until a core group has learnt management skills, after this phase it is expected that participants will transfer skills to each other.