

"It's taken nearly all of this year for me to fully grasp the reality that this is my home, that I am safe and secure and I can live here as long as I like" Susie, ESCG resident.

Elizabeth Street Common Ground Supportive Housing

Bulletin - July 2012

Progress update

Elizabeth Street Common Ground (ESCG) has been a secure and supportive home to some of Melbourne's most vulnerable homeless people for 22 months now. Entering into a more settled and mature stage of development, the current focus is on continuing work with tenants to stabilise their lives, maintain housing stability and to take up opportunities for social connection, training and work.

While staff and tenants at Elizabeth Street Common Ground continue to deal with the challenges you would expect when it comes to housing and supporting over 60 people facing issues such as substance abuse, disability, mental illness, entrenched disadvantage and significant trauma, there have also been many positive outcomes and highlights, with many tenants continuing to experience significant improvements in their lives.

The fact that many tenants are sustaining housing stability and experiencing improvements in their quality of life, after decades of disadvantage and chronic homelessness, proves that homelessness is a solvable problem. While change is slow-moving and incremental, nearly two years on we can see first hand the difference that opportunity and choice can make to a person's life. Elizabeth Street Common Ground is proving itself as a model that can end homelessness even for those who were most entrenched in it.

Creating housing stability

That many of the tenants who moved into Elizabeth Street Common Ground have sustained their tenancies for nearly

two years is a major achievement and accomplishment in itself. For many formerly homeless tenants, Elizabeth Street Common Ground is their first experience of a permanent home as an adult. In the past, many have been unable to sustain any housing for more than a few weeks.

Quality housing and individually tailored long-term support services are the two key factors contributing to housing stability for tenants. The development of a robust Allied Health and Ancillary Services Program, comprising therapeutic, health, recreational, vocational and educational programs and services, has served to complement the team of support workers. Most of these ancillary services have been delivered on-site, providing a presence one or more days per week.

The primary focus with these services has been on building rapport and trust with tenants, leading gradually to engagement. While this may sound like a straightforward process, in practice it is complex; requiring patience, resilience, compassion, empathy and professionalism. The calibre of ancillary staff supporting the tenants of Elizabeth Street Common Ground is outstanding, reflecting the aspirations of all who have supported this innovative model.

Partnerships

Elizabeth Street Common Ground is a ground-breaking example of a collaborative approach between governments, non-government organisations, businesses and philanthropic groups towards ending homelessness.



Above: Stephen and CAE teacher, Julia at the Common Ground CAE showcase

Philanthropic supporters over the last year have included John T Reid Charitable Trusts, The Collie Foundation, the Rotary Club of Melbourne, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Dino Grollo Community Fund and the Dumbarton Fund (through the Australian Communities Foundation).

Program partnerships have contributed to a suite of robust ancillary supports illustrating to other agencies and services the value of being co-located on-site. Program partners over the last year include Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Persons Program, Melbourne GP Network, Centre for Adult Education (CAE), Brotherhood of St Laurence, Second Bite, Rotary Club of Melbourne, North Richmond Community Health, North Yarra Community Health, Doutta Galla Community Health, Turning Point, Green Collect and Wesley Mission.

"Having returned this month from a year's leave, I have been struck by the often subtle yet significant changes in many of the residents and an overall sense of positivity, community and stability which exists in the building.

There is a definite acceptance and genuine peace that this is their home, and a place where they belong, despite ongoing challenges and their histories of housing instability." Linda Staehli, After Hours Coordinator, Elizabeth Street Common Ground.

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Elizabeth Street Common Ground



Tenants and staff at a Wellbeing class at CERES Farm, East Brunswick. L-R Stephen, Chysanne, Suky, Adrian, Malcolm and Stephen

Lessons

We always strive to learn from and improve what we do at Elizabeth Street Common Ground. The Common Ground model is about investing in and believing in people and their capacity for change. Meaningful change is incremental and takes time. While this sounds obvious, there is a continuing need to bear this in mind, especially when challenging and complex situations arise.

The development of relationships and the establishment of trust and rapport between workers and tenants are essential for creating and maintaining housing stability at Elizabeth Street Common Ground. Managing and maintaining these relationships is challenging at times, and a balance often needs to be struck in meeting the requirements of a large community of individuals with diverse and differing needs. Ensuring consistent processes for input and participation by everyone is crucial for creating this balance and sustaining a sense of community and ownership.

A time of transition

Changes to the model

There have been changes to funding for Elizabeth Street Common Ground from 1st July 2012. HomeGround has been in negotiation with the main funding body, Housing and Community Building at the Victorian Department of Human Services and agreement has been reached on funding for an altered service model that will ensure that Elizabeth Street is sustainable in the long-term. It will continue to provide permanent housing and flexible support to people who were previously chronically homeless and retains all the fundamentals of the Common Ground model. As well as a change in funding, the model reflects a move from the establishment phase to the ongoing operational phase, and will allow us to implement the lessons we have learned.

What has changed?

As of the 1st of July, the Elizabeth Street model has shifted from an individual case management model to a team support model, comprising ancillary health providers and HomeGround support workers.

This team support model works as follows:

- Three senior workers are providing support to tenants during business hours, Monday to Friday
- The team approach is underpinned by a duty roster system
- After hours and external support resources are being referred to and coordinated as required

Changes to front desk and after hours support:

- The front desk has been contracted to a concierge company
- There is a HomeGround support worker on duty at all times 24/7
- After hours support is being coordinated by the Elizabeth Street After Hours Coordinator

New resources have also been brought in:

- HACC funding has been secured for a personal care worker in collaboration with the Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Persons Program
- A mental health nurse role has been introduced
- ACSO are moving into premises next door to Elizabeth Street and will provide employment pathways and support to tenants with Justice issues
- Other on-site support resources are being explored

The following services will continue:

- The Programs Coordinator, allied health, CAE and recreation programs

- On-site nurse four days a week
- On-site psychologist one and a half days a week
- On-site psychiatrist one day a week
- GP half a day a week
- Masseur one day a week
- Physiotherapist fortnightly
- Alcohol and drug counsellor half a day a week
- Dietician fortnightly

What else will stay the same?

The fundamentals of the Common Ground model are still in place. We are continuing the 24/7 concierge/front desk and support provision with a focus on providing permanent housing and support to the most vulnerable members of our community. A social mix between formerly homeless and general low income tenants is also being maintained. Each previously homeless tenant has access to tailored support services.

What are the impacts on tenants and staff?

Changes to the model have reduced the total number of HomeGround staff employed at Elizabeth Street. There are also changes for tenants as many have created strong links with individual members of staff over the last year and a half who will in some cases no longer be there. Tenants are being supported through this transition period.

Looking ahead

These changes will ensure Elizabeth Street Common Ground has a sustainable funding base for the future and that it can continue to sustain the housing of people with long and extreme histories of homelessness.

More information

Visit www.homeground.org.au for more information about Elizabeth Street Common Ground.