



Understanding our work

Caring for older Australians and people with disabilities

As Australia's population ages, many Australians enjoy longer and healthier lives, but some older people face problems linked to low income and assets, frail health and limited social contact.

Facts and figures

- Some 2.5 million Australians are 65 years or older (ABS cat. no. 3101.0, June Q 2003)
- The population aged over 65 is projected to be 4.2 million by 2021 (AIHW 2002, p.5).
- Only about 5% of people aged 65+ (2001) live in residential aged care (AIHW 2002, p.84)
- A quarter of older Australians do some kind of voluntary work; they contribute 17% of all the volunteer hours (2000 figures, AIHW 2002, p.16)
- While over 80% of older Australian households are home owners, others (13%) who pay rent are likely to be less secure: 71% of older households renting privately pay more than 30% of their income for housing (and nearly a quarter pay more than 50%) (1999 figures, AIHW 2002, pp.22–23)
- Of older people with a severe or profound disability (restricting self-care, mobility or communication) 20% live alone (1998 figures, AIHW 2002 p.7); 56% of care packages recipients live alone (AIHW 2002, p.80)

Community care

Increasingly, care for older people focuses on helping them to stay in their own homes.

Care packages

With Commonwealth and state government funding, the Brotherhood of St Laurence provides individual support through "care packages" for more than 400 people in the southern region (Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula) and in the northern region (from a base in Preston). Staff also piloted a program to provide care packages for Koori elders: this has since been handed over to an Indigenous organisation.

While most older Australians prefer to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible, the Brotherhood has found that

many people who receive Care Packages feel very isolated. This is not surprising, considering that the current value of a Care Package often only covers physical care needs. The Brotherhood is working to understand and respond to broader needs:

Due to limited finances and multiple medical issues, Marie was confined to her Office of Housing home. The television was her window to what was beyond the front door. The ironing board was her coffee table which she could raise or lower as needed, and where she ate her meals and wrote poetry. Marie and her care manager worked toward the goal of 'keeping independence'. Basic services including delivery of meals, home care and taxi transport were organised. Funding was secured for the expensive custom-made shoes which Marie needed to be able to leave the house. Involvement in telelink groups also helped to reduce her social isolation.*

(*Marie is a pseudonym used to protect privacy)

Day care and respite programs

Established in 1946 as Victoria's first senior citizens' club, the Coolibah Centre in Fitzroy continues to provide meals, welfare support and social and leisure activities for older people living in insecure accommodation in inner Melbourne. Clients can also use visiting health services, including eye-testing through the Victorian Eyecare Service.

On the Mornington Peninsula, Banksia Services for Seniors cares for frail older people and people with dementia, also giving carers a much-needed break. Clients may attend a day program in a centre; for others who find a large group confusing, the 'host-home' program offers day care in the home of a trained staff member. Families can obtain overnight, weekend or in-home care for their relative who is frail or has a disability.

Socialisation

Brotherhood Community Care is using numerous activities to connect socially isolated older people and people with

disabilities with their community. Realising that many clients were keen on art and craft and music, BCC staff formed a partnership with the Art Shed gallery, to offer an eight-week arts course for small groups, tailored to individual needs, with transport provided by Mornington Council. The students include people with dementia, multiple sclerosis and complex health problems, as well as family carers. Despite these differences, they have developed friendships and a new confidence to access local community art groups.

Funded by the Department of Human Services, Brotherhood Community Nexus provides recreational and self-development opportunities in the community for adults with an intellectual disability. Participants choose activities which suit their own interests and talents, and people are encouraged to join groups within reach of their homes.

Retirement living

Father Tucker's dream of settling low-income families on small plots at Carrum Downs developed into a 'village' of units available for low-cost rental by older persons. The GK Tucker Settlement offers independent accommodation and secure tenure for people from the Frankston-Cranbourne area who would struggle to pay market rents or are at risk of becoming homeless. Residents enjoy varied activities and outings.

For inner suburban pensioners with few assets, the Brotherhood operates Sidney Myer House (with 15 rooms in 3 clusters) and 9 furnished 'bedsits' in Fitzroy, and 29 units in East Brunswick. Residents also use the Coolibah Club's services (see above).

Residential aged care

The BSL operates several facilities providing accommodation for older people: Sambell Lodge (43 beds, in Clifton Hill) and Sumner House (40 beds, in Fitzroy) care for low-income residents from the nearby inner suburbs, while Cox/Collins Court has 50 rooms in the semi-rural surroundings of the Settlement at Carrum Downs.

On alternate Sunday evenings, Sambell Lodge residents (some of whom were once homeless themselves) venture back onto the streets in the Margaret Oates soup van (supported by St Vincent de Paul), to share a meal and swap stories with people who are living rough. These outings have enabled the residents to contribute to others and regain self-respect.

Research and advocacy

A major challenge for the aged care sector will be staffing, for both residential aged care and community care services. Recent BSL research found that recruitment methods and working conditions may need to be changed to attract enough people to take on these vital caring roles. In another study, partly funded by the Brotherhood, NATSEM researchers predicted that the number of informal carers (relatives, friends and neighbours) will not keep pace with the number of older people needing support.

Another research focus is social isolation. In partnership with La Trobe University, the Brotherhood studied older people who had been assessed as needing community care services; it was found that difficulties in taking up these services most often occurred where the older person was socially isolated or reported feeling 'a bit down' or 'miserable', or where their carer reported high stress.

The Brotherhood works with other organisations to urge Commonwealth and state governments to increase (well-targeted) funding, especially for the most vulnerable groups of older people, who are at risk of homelessness, are estranged from family or suffer chronic ill-health. Analysing the needs of those older people who not only have low incomes but also have few assets and do not own their own home will help the Brotherhood to advocate on their behalf when making recommendations for government policy.

Sources

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