

PUBLIC TENANT ADVOCACY PROJECT

EVALUATION OF A PROJECT FUNDED BY THE RENTAL HOUSING SUPPORT PROGRAM

APRIL 2000

Background

The Rental Housing Support Program (RHSP) is funded by the Victorian Government (Office of Housing) to provide information, support and referral to public housing tenants and applicants throughout the state. The Brotherhood of St Laurence manages the RHSP in the Southern Metropolitan Region. There are approximately 12,500 tenants and approximately 16,000 applicants in this region.

In 1998 the Manager of the RHSP identified that there was funding available within the budget for a short-term project. There has been growing interest within the Brotherhood in supporting initiatives which could provide a basis for community development. The Manager sought suggestions from the RHSP tenant workers in relation to possible projects. In early 1999 it was agreed that the funding would be used to run a Public Tenant Advocacy Project. This use was endorsed by the Office of Housing. RHSP staff were invited to express interest in coordinating the project on a 0.5 basis; the position was filled by a tenant worker from February to October 1999. The budget for the project was \$29,272, with approximately half spent on salary and oncosts, and half allocated to costs associated with participants' initiatives.

Public Tenant Advocacy Project

The overall aim of the project was to support the strengthening of community for the benefit of public housing tenants. Through the process of evaluation it emerged that there were different understandings amongst the various people involved about what the specific objectives of the project were.

Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) managers operated on the assumption that the formal objectives were those considered by the Service Development Group, a body within the BSL which guides new initiatives within the Community Services Directorate. The project Coordinator, however, worked on the basis of objectives he was asked to develop by the steering committee. These objectives were approved by the Manager and Senior Manager responsible for the RHSP. The Coordinator said he was not aware of the Service Development Group process.

While the broad intention of each set of objectives is the same, the emphasis is slightly different. There were a number of preliminary discussions between the Coordinator, the Director of Community Services and the Manager of the RHSP where the objectives of the project were broadly discussed. However, there was no formal process for agreeing what the formal objectives of the project ultimately were. This has been a source of some tension.

The objectives considered by the Service Development Group emphasise the development of initiatives or opportunities for community strengthening. They are as follows:

"The project's aims are to empower public tenants and to support and assist the development of community for the benefit of all public tenants.

Its objectives are:

- *To conduct a number of workshops tailored to the expressed needs of the (public tenant) participants*

- *To resource key community workers so that they have the skills with which to promote activity in their own community*
- *To develop a focus for future public tenant community strengthening work, particularly aimed at building stronger local networks*
- *To develop and establish a small number of low cost local community strengthening activities which improve the quality of life for public tenants and build social capital*
- *To provide opportunities for key community members to discuss and develop their own views on the causes, scope, effects and possible solutions to issues affecting their communities*
- *To provide short term practical assistance to key community members through assisting developmental work in their community."*

The objectives developed by the project Coordinator and given to project participants emphasise the development of individual skills and knowledge. The documentation given to participants reads as follows:

"The Advocacy Project encourages public housing tenants to become advocates on their own behalf and for their communities. Its objectives are to:

- *improve the skills of participants*
- *increase the competencies of participants (using their skills to the best advantage)*
- *make participants more aware of how the social and political system around them operates*
- *encourage participants to put this knowledge into effective practice for the benefit of other public housing tenants."*

It was agreed that for the purposes of this evaluation, the project would be assessed in relation to the first set of objectives. In considering the various perspectives on how successful the project was, it is important to remember that the Coordinator operated on the basis of the second set.

At its inception the project was loosely structured. This was a deliberate decision on the part of the Coordinator who wanted the project to be informed as much as possible by the interests and needs of the participants. The only activities agreed to prior to the project commencing were an initial weekend residential, an undefined number of workshops and meetings and individual discussions with the Coordinator. In addition to participating in these events, participants were required to "devise and coordinate a small project ... to bring about positive social change and to plan, coordinate and run a workshop with some of the other participants."

A steering committee was formed to guide the project. The committee was made up of the Director of Community Services, the Manager of the RHSP, the Senior Manager responsible for the RHSP and two public tenants from within the region. Project documentation states that the steering committee had the following tasks:

- overall design of the project
- developing a position description for the project Coordinator
- identifying sources of information and contacts for the training component of the project and guiding the direction of the project.

The committee did not, in fact, undertake the first two of these tasks. The project design and position description were developed by the project Coordinator, the Manager and the Senior Manager of the RHSP. The public tenant committee members were identified after the project design had been completed and the Coordinator had been appointed. The first meeting of the committee took place well into the project, after participants had been selected and a plan of activities had been developed for the project. The committee met four times during the project.

Potential participants for the project were sought through the RHSP tenant workers. Fifteen people were interviewed; 12 started and 8 continued in the project until its completion. Seven of the 8 participants were female sole parents; this was not intentional. The participants who completed the project are public tenants in Frankston (3 people), Port Melbourne (2), Elsternwick (1), Highett (1) and Prahran (1).

Of the 8 initiatives, some have made considerable progress, others have made some progress, and two participants have indicated that they do not think they will pursue their initiatives.

Towards the end of the project the participants agreed to form an incorporated body, the Proactive Tenants Support Network. The purpose of the Network is to provide formal support to individual initiatives of public housing tenants, both those who participated in the Advocacy Project and possible future participants. Specifically, participants wished to have a body to auspice their activities. At the time of writing this report, incorporation was about to be finalised.

Two of the project participants and a number of BSL staff members took part in two workshops at 'Crossing Thresholds', a national conference on adult learning which took place in Melbourne in December 1999. The purpose of the workshops was to discuss the learning, both individual and organisational, from the Advocacy Project and another community development project funded by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (the Craigieburn Community Strengthening project).

The evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to make a broad assessment of what was achieved through the Public Tenant Advocacy Project. Given the Brotherhood's interest in extending its activities in community development, we would like to document our learning. It is useful to know what the strengths and weaknesses of this project were and what we would do differently in future projects.

A further and more specific aim of the evaluation is to establish whether the model used in the Advocacy Project is a suitable one for increasing community leadership and strengthening local communities.

The evaluation is based on interviews with the following people:

- 4 people who commenced but did not continue as participants of the Advocacy Project
- 7 of the 8 participants who completed the project
- the Coordinator of the project
- all 9 RHSP tenant workers
- the Manager of the RHSP
- the Senior Manager responsible for the RHSP and
- the Acting Director of Community Services.

Questions for the participants were developed in consultation with them and with the project Coordinator, the Manager of the RHSP and a researcher in the Social Action and Research Directorate of the Brotherhood. Interviews were mostly conducted in person with the exception of the participants who did not continue and the tenant workers, who were interviewed by phone. One participant was not interviewed. The two public tenant representatives on the steering committee were also not interviewed.

The feedback given in the process of interviewing people has been divided into two sections: 'issues' which arose during the course of the project and 'suggestions' for future projects of a similar nature. Comments evaluating the project are made following the 'issues' section. A number of participants

made comments which they requested be addressed in internal discussions. These discussions have taken place.

This paper attempts to represent the views of the people interviewed. For those issues on which there was no consensus, the intention has been to convey the differing perspectives of those involved.

A ISSUES

Decision making around funding of the Advocacy Project

A number of tenant workers commented on their perceived lack of involvement in discussion about how the money available within the RHSP budget in 1998 could be used. Though communication was sent to all RHSP offices in relation to the identified funds, some workers felt they were not adequately consulted and said they only became aware of the allocation of the money to the Advocacy Project after the decision had been made. They indicated that they would have liked more discussion about this use as a group of staff.

The model of the Public Tenant Advocacy Project

The model used in the project was one in which participants were required to develop an individual initiative which would contribute in some way to social change within their local public tenant community. The focus of the workshops was on increasing individuals' skills and knowledge to assist in establishing these initiatives. This model was promoted by the Coordinator, who intended that involvement in the project would give participants an experience of good process in relation to community activism.

Participants expressed mixed views about this model. In general, those who were already working on an idea before they became participants in the project were comfortable with it. Some of those who had not already embarked on some activity found the emphasis on having to work on a specific project difficult and experienced a sense of pressure to 'make something up.' A few suggested they would have preferred a less individualised approach, possibly working on an idea as a small group or developing skills in a less project-oriented way.

Most of the tenant workers expressed positive views on the model as articulated at the beginning of the project. One tenant worker commented that this model has been used before in community development and that we need to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses before adopting it again. Some expressed the view that models can "look good" on paper but be difficult to implement.

BSL managers felt that individual initiatives were possibly over-emphasised in the project. A suggested alternative approach was to consider social action and learning processes more broadly without the expectation that each participant would have an individual project.

Selection of participants

There was widespread and varied comment on the selection of participants for the project.

The most common response amongst tenant workers was that they did not feel very involved in the process and were not particularly clear about the selection criteria. A couple of tenant workers were critical of the choice of participants with strong educational backgrounds and previous experience in community development. Their view is that such people already have skills and a degree of confidence in community work; their preference would have been for the project to have identified tenants who have not had any such experience but are highly motivated to work for their communities. (One of the stated objectives of the project was in fact to identify participants who were already 'key community members' in their local communities.)

Some tenant workers felt that the project should have had a higher number of participants and suggested that it could have been run at the same cost with a greater impact across the region covered by the BSL Rental Housing Support Program.

Some interviewees – participants, tenant workers and managers - commented on the choice of participants who had significant personal issues which affected their ability to be involved in the project. It was felt that since funding for such projects is not often available, it is important to have participants who are in a position to put their skills and learning into immediate practice in their communities. A few participants stated that they found it difficult to remain focussed on the project due to their personal situations.

The coordinator's view on the selection of participants is that

people needed an opportunity to try even if they were not successful. The risk is unknown – everyone should have a chance. Some people haven't completed their projects, some haven't started them, but it is still worthwhile. When their circumstances are different they will be able to put the skills they have gained into practice.

Other comments from the Coordinator related to the pressure he was under to find people in a short period of time. His preference would have been to promote the project more widely and identify participants from all parts of the region.

The relationship between the Advocacy Project and the RHSP

There were important differences in perspective among different people on what the relationship between the Advocacy Project and the Rental Housing Support Program could or should be.

Most project participants did not see any link between the RHSP and the Advocacy Project; generally, they were not very familiar with the RHSP and did not feel it was particularly relevant to them. They were more interested in the relationship between the project and the BSL as a whole, discussed below.

The participants' views were possibly partly informed by that of the Coordinator, who felt that "the project is not linked to the RHSP in any direct way – it stands alone. It's just where the money came from."

The RHSP Manager and most of the tenant workers expressed the view that there should have been a closer relationship between the RHSP and the Advocacy Project. The Manager's view is that the RHSP should be actively engaged in empowering public tenant communities; in her view, this project represented an opportunity to extend the RHSP's work. Some of the tenant workers said they would have liked there to have been more communication about the project within RHSP; a few felt that as tenant workers they had skills and knowledge which the project could have drawn on; and a few said they would have liked to have met and had ongoing contact with the participants.

The relationship between the Advocacy Project and the BSL

There was also a significant difference of views amongst the various groups interviewed on the relationship between the project and the BSL. As mentioned, participants referred to the BSL rather than the RHSP as the body which funded the project. Most participants expressed the view that they would have liked more support from the BSL. This was articulated as access to BSL resources, including staff, networks and name. The questions asked in this evaluation did not cover whether or not the participants tried to gain access to these resources.

The relationship between the project and the BSL became a contentious point following a request from a participant that the BSL auspice her initiative. Initially BSL managers said that the Brotherhood

would not provide an auspice on the grounds that this was not an appropriate role for the organisation to take. They recommended that participants find local auspices for their activities and suggested that this would be a useful learning experience for future initiatives. When the participants expressed strong disappointment with this decision, the managers agreed that the BSL would provide a temporary auspice while local support was sought. The disappointment experienced by project participants through this event continued to be a source of discontent during the life of the project.

While the Coordinator described the project as "standing alone," he nevertheless expressed the view that the BSL should have been more involved in and supportive of the project. His view was that the BSL was not responsive enough and should have been there as a "bridge" at the times that it was needed.

The RHSP manager commented on the importance of discussing the relevance of the overall mission of the BSL during the project. She indicated that she assumed that the relationship between the project and the BSL would have been presented in a positive light during the life of the project.

The Senior Manager and Acting Director described the role of the BSL in relation to the project as one of supporting the project in a hands-off way: the BSL's role was to be "a catalyst and a facilitator." They felt it was important for the participants to come up with solutions themselves in order to achieve autonomy. This position informed the response to the auspicating issue; it was felt that it was essential that the participants learn to draw on local resources and networks to support their initiatives rather than approaching the funding agency in the first instance. The perception among some BSL managers was that during the auspicating issue the emphasis on making progress with individual initiatives had interfered with an opportunity for learning about the importance of creating local support for developmental activities.

The role of the project Coordinator

There was consistency in feedback on the role of the project Coordinator. The participants were very positive about the extent to which the Coordinator made himself available and the level of support he offered. The tenant workers similarly spoke highly of the Coordinator's commitment to the Advocacy Project and the encouragement he gave project participants.

Several participants expressed some criticism of the extent to which the Coordinator did things on their behalf. Specifically, they said they would have liked to have taken more responsibility for some aspects of the project themselves, such as identifying speakers and making logistical arrangements for the workshops. Their view, certainly not shared by all participants, was that at times the Coordinator "took on too much."

This tension was raised by the Coordinator himself, who said that, in the "balancing act" of being a good community development worker, he sometimes found it difficult to judge whether he was doing too much. A second tension the Coordinator articulated relates to his awareness of the different nature of his involvement in the project to that of the participants: "I see myself as one of the gang. [But] there is a difference ... I was getting paid to do what I enjoy; they were not." A few of the project participants made reference to this difference also, suggesting that as someone who does not live in public housing, the Coordinator could not be fully aware of what this meant and made his decisions based on assumptions different from theirs.

Finally, the third area of discussion in relation to the role of the Coordinator was his relationship to the Brotherhood of St Laurence. The assumption of the managers interviewed was that the Coordinator, as a seconded staff member, would identify as part of the organisation and assume a position of explaining its processes and position. The Coordinator suggested he did not see himself in this way: "I see myself as a go-between between the project and the BSL. My job was to relay questions and bring back answers." This difference in perceptions of the role of the Coordinator was important in relation to how issues of participant support and the BSL's response to the request for auspicating were addressed.

Outcomes of the project

A list of the individual initiatives and their achievements by April 2000, the date of this report, is attached as Appendix 2.

It became evident during the interviews that people's views on the outcomes of the project related closely to their understanding of its objectives.

The participants generally articulated their motivation for being part of the project in terms of their desire to increase their skills, to gain support and to access resources. When asked what was most positive about being involved in the project, overwhelmingly participants spoke about peer support. The second most common response was gaining confidence and an ability to recognise their own qualities as skills. The ability to effect changes in their own communities was articulated less frequently. Overall, the participants were positive about achieving their personal objectives.

The views of the tenant workers were diverse and informed by the exposure they had to the project and the participants. Those who had little or no contact with participants felt they were not in a position to comment on the outcomes of the project; some said that they would have liked to have known more about what it achieved. Of the tenant workers who had direct contact with project participants, there was a range of responses: the project was fantastic and should be run again; the project was too short for any really noticeable results; and the project did not lead to the development of leadership skills. The RHSP Manager expressed concern that the project operated separately from the RHSP and its staff, and that interaction between the two was limited. Some tenant workers felt there was too much emphasis on the development of personal skills without adequate attention given to how those skills could be used in community building and leadership roles.

When asked about his views on the outcomes of the project, the Coordinator suggested we need to reflect on "how we define success." He suggested that the personal development of participants was more important than other, perhaps more tangible, outcomes: "process is what is important – showing people that there is a way to get through, to achieve the outcomes you want." The evaluation did not specifically elicit the Coordinator's views on the outcomes of the project for the participants' communities. This would be worth exploring.

The organisational view on the outcomes of the project, as expressed by the various managers responsible for overseeing conceptualisation and implementation of the project, is that it appears to have been very successful for the individuals involved. Each of the managers perceived that the participants had gained a great deal from their involvement. They suggested that the original and broader objectives of the project, which emphasised the strengthening of local networks and community involvement, were not met as well as expected. They acknowledged that changes in the project objectives in the course of its implementation were not discussed or formalised by the steering committee.

An important outcome of the project, mentioned earlier, is the establishment of the Proactive Tenants Support Network. The participants hope that this network will not only provide a legal structure for their own initiatives but will provide support to future initiatives of a similar nature taken by other public housing tenants. There is general agreement that the Network needs to be 'nurtured' if it is to remain viable.

Other issues

Child care was the single most common issue mentioned by participants as problematic. Most participants said that their concern about child care detracted from their full participation in project activities at various times. This concern was highest at the first residential weekend where many participants felt the care provided was inadequate. Subsequent childcare arrangements were more

satisfactory to some but not all of the participants. All agreed that this issue needs to be addressed with sensitivity. It was suggested that if a similar project were to be conducted, time needs to be structured within the project for parents to interact with their children. Two participants spoke of the beneficial effects of their involvement in the project in terms of their relationships with their children.

Another issue mentioned by a few participants relates to the financial support available to them within the project. Most had understood that at the commencement of the project \$300 would be allocated to each individual activity; however, this was not specifically made available to each person. Some participants felt that there was not sufficient communication about this issue. Related to this, a number of participants spoke of the difficulty in being reimbursed for expenses rather than being given cash up front. They said that given their financial circumstances even small expenses could present problems for them.

Finally, the role and effectiveness of the steering committee was mentioned as an issue during the project. The feedback from the Coordinator, the RHSP Manager and the Senior Manager, all of whom were on the steering committee, suggested that the committee did not play a very active role in the project.

B EVALUATION

As mentioned, the Advocacy Project has been evaluated with reference to the original objectives approved by the Service Development Group within the BSL. Each of those objectives is considered here in the light of feedback received during interviews.

1. To conduct a number of workshops tailored to the expressed needs of the (public tenant) participants

Five skills workshops and two weekend residentials incorporating workshops took place during the project. Topics and facilitators were identified following discussion with participants about their interests. Inevitably perhaps, there was not complete consensus about what topic areas were priorities and some participants suggested that some of the workshops were "too heavy" and too theoretical to be of any practical assistance to them. There was no disagreement, however, that the Coordinator organised facilitators and workshops on the basis of the participants' expressed needs.

2. To resource key community workers so that they have the skills with which to promote activity in their own community

Most participants felt that participation in the Advocacy Project helped them to improve their skills. Areas of skill included dealing with authorities, establishing useful contacts and articulating ideas. Some participants spoke of gaining skills in specific areas related to their projects such as permaculture or website development.

While some participants felt they already had significant skills prior to their involvement in the project, most spoke in positive terms about their increased ability to make use of their skills. Commonly they expressed feelings of increased competence and confidence. A number of participants spoke of feeling empowered by being acknowledged as community leaders:

I didn't recognise I was a leader until I went through the course and it told me I could do this. We got a qualification of what we've done. I can take things that I learnt in the group into my personal life. I can wear different hats at different times. Everyone out there is approachable - it has given me a lot more hope.

The best thing is that [my project] is going to happen. The project instilled confidence in me and made me answerable to a dream.

Through the training and workshops provided in the project, participants were exposed to community workers and activists with significant experience in community development. This evaluation did not ask specifically whether participants felt they had developed a deeper understanding of their socio-political environment. However, many did say they had gained a greater understanding of public housing issues, in particular through contact with other public tenants:

I learned a lot about the system and that there are lots of people in this situation.

The perception of the Coordinator was that participants had certainly increased their skills. One of the tenant workers who knew participants was particularly impressed with the extent to which one person has increased her skills:

I sat in a meeting last Monday where one of the participants absolutely knocked me out; 12 months ago she wouldn't have been able to do that. I can see the confidence she has gained.

BSL managers distinguished between participants increasing their skills and being resourced to use these skills to promote activity in their own community. Some questioned how well equipped participants were at the conclusion of the project to undertake community action without further financial or organisational support.

3. To develop a focus for future public tenant community strengthening work, particularly aimed at building stronger local networks

This focus may have been created through the establishment of the Proactive Tenants Support Network. The Network was formed in response to the needs of this group of participants. As has been suggested, part of the intention of the group is that it provide support for individuals or groups of public tenants who wish to undertake community strengthening work in the future. The degree to which there is a clear focus depends on the viability of the Network.

4. To develop and establish a small number of low cost local community strengthening activities which improve the quality of life for public tenants and build social capital

There is consensus amongst those people interviewed that the Advocacy Project has been successful in supporting participants to identify or further define a number of initiatives which are now at different stages of development. These have been mainly low cost initiatives. The degree to which these initiatives have improved the lives of public tenants and 'built social capital' at the conclusion of the project is difficult to ascertain. The indications are that most initiatives were at a fairly embryonic stage and not affecting a broader community in a visible way by December 1999. This objective may not be realistic for a short term project. The picture at April 2000 is different again. The possibility, perhaps likelihood, is that in the longer term some of the initiatives will improve quality of life for and strengthen a larger group of people.

5. To provide opportunities for key community members to discuss and develop their own views on the causes, scope, effects and possible solutions to issues affecting their communities

There are two components to this objective: to provide opportunities, and to provide them to 'key community members'. Apart from workshops, regular meetings were organised for participants of the project to meet and discuss issues relating to public tenant communities. While there were issues relating to the number and times of the meetings, all participants were satisfied that the opportunities were there to do so.

It is more difficult to assess whether this opportunity was being made available to 'key community members'. A few participants were already active in some way in their local communities before

becoming involved in the project; most, however, were not. Issues relating to selection of participants are discussed in Section A of this evaluation.

6. *To provide short term practical assistance to key community members through assisting developmental work in their community*

Keeping the issue of selection in mind, the general consensus from the interviews conducted is that the project achieved this objective *to an extent*. As mentioned, some participants felt the assistance provided could have been more practical; they expressed interest in such things as gaining skills in organising workshops by themselves, looking after the finances of the project and working together in a very practical way on their initiatives (eg. digging a garden as a group). Most participants agreed that overall the combination of the workshops and the formation of a peer group assisted them to some degree in pursuing the work they wished to within their community.

Other observations

In addition to comments relating to the stated project objectives, four observations about the project emerge from the evaluation.

1. The development of an informal peer support group appears to have been one of the most valuable aspects of the Advocacy Project. Participants identified their shared experience of living in public housing, with all the implications this has, as the overriding factor in developing a bond as a group. Most participants are sole parents; this may also have contributed to a sense of shared life experience. It remains to be seen whether this informal group continues to exist outside the structure and support of the project.

2. It is important to acknowledge the impact some participants' personal issues had on their involvement in the project. Some participants described their personal circumstances during the project as very challenging emotionally and/or financially. Most participants referred to the impact of relationship and health issues on their ability to stay focussed on the project. It is important to keep this in mind not only in relation to evaluating the Advocacy Project and selection criteria for participants, but more generally in understanding what we are asking of people when we invite them to be part of community development activities.

3. The importance of a good group dynamic is essential. While the group formed a strong bond in general, some participants felt that certain aspects of the group dynamic were not conducive to building trust and a sense of equality. There are many unknowns in terms of how a group of people who do not know each other might work together; for a project of this nature it seems very important to take this into account when identifying participants.

4. The experience of the Advocacy Project suggests that it is important to distinguish between short term and long term outcomes in community development projects. The Coordinator's view is that the outcomes of the project may not be seen until much later and that personal development is what ought to be expected in a short term project. Some tenant workers commented that in their view "the project was too short for a really noticeable result." Consideration needs to be given to how - or whether - we can achieve the objective of working with larger communities in the short term. The outcomes of the project suggest that as an organisation we need to make a longer term investment in community development activities:

The follow through of what was started is very important - time needs to be allocated to it... otherwise the 6 months would just be a waste. In terms of community development, 6 months is not really enough; it's just a start of people gaining confidence. (tenant worker)

C SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

The following suggestions for future community development projects are based on the feedback discussed above.

1. Be clear about the objectives of project

The experience of the Advocacy Project suggests that a distinction needs to be made when designing community development projects between short and long term objectives. Consideration needs to be given to how activities initiated during the life of a project are sustained so that they result in longer term change or development.

In terms of the BSL's objective of supporting activities which benefit larger groups of people, the tension between the objectives of individual development of skills and broader community strengthening must be addressed. An expectation of broader community benefit may be unrealistic in a short term project. If this is the conclusion we come to as an organisation, we need to be clear about this in any future projects. If we expect short term projects to make a significant contribution to the strengthening of communities, we need to rethink the model and processes used in this project. This reassessment must take into account the resources - human, financial and other - the project has drawn on.

This evaluation has brought home the importance of effective communication between everyone involved in the formation of and changes to project objectives. There is consensus that the changes made to the objectives for this project were not managed well. The objectives need to be discussed regularly with participants over the course of any project.

2. Be clear about the relationship between the BSL and the project

The issue of ongoing support for project initiatives requires the Brotherhood to articulate clearly what it wishes to achieve in being involved in community development. To date this has not been articulated in any comprehensive way. Our stated position is that as an organisation we want to have a catalytic role in community development initiatives but place importance on enabling these to become autonomous. To prevent misunderstanding, it is important that the practical implications of this position are addressed before we embark on future projects.

Depending on the nature of the project, it may be important to link project initiatives with already existing BSL services or activities. In the case of the Advocacy Project, the 'natural' link would have been with the RHSP tenant workers. Links which can continue beyond the life of a short term project can increase the sustainability of project initiatives.

3. Establish structures for effective guidance of projects

One of the weaknesses of the Advocacy Project was the steering committee. The experience of this project suggests that consideration be given from the outset of any future community development project to how the project will be guided. What kind of body (reference group, steering committee) does the project require and what specific responsibilities should this body have? The relationship between a group and the project worker must be clear. The usefulness of reference groups or steering committees depends on the membership of the group and on how committed members are individually to the development and outcomes of a project; the expectations of group members need to be clearly understood.

4. Be clear about role of the coordinator

Definition of the relationship between BSL funded community development projects and the organisation itself should include discussion of how staff members employed in projects position themselves in relation to project participants. This is a complex area as it relates to individuals' personal views on community development and the organisation as their employer, neither of which can be prescribed. However, it is possible for there to be open discussion about how staff involved in community development projects view their role; what scope they feel there is for them to represent and support the position of the organisation; and how they can balance supporting and challenging participants in such a way that they are able to achieve the project objectives. It is important that these discussions take place in a supportive environment.

5. Develop a project with a wider community

A number of people interviewed expressed interest in the idea of running a project similar to the Advocacy Project but drawing on a broader range of people. Ideas include working with migrant communities and working with a whole community (not just people with low income) within a specific location. It is important that those people involved in any project share common concerns or experiences.

In relation to identifying individual community members, it is important to allow sufficient time to promote projects as widely as possible. Careful consideration should be given to selection of participants in terms of the objectives of the project, the potential group dynamic and the prerequisites for effective leadership.

6. Consider formal recognition for community members involved in projects

The participants who completed the Advocacy Project received a certificate of graduation from the BSL. This certificate is an acknowledgement of their work and achievements of participants but it has no formal status. A number of participants expressed interest in gaining accreditation for their involvement, partly to assist them in potentially finding employment. Consideration should be given when designing projects to possibilities for accreditation and other types of formal recognition for participants.

7. Provide child care in accordance with BSL policy

Where participants of BSL funded projects have children, provisions need to be made for good child care to be made available as appropriate. Where possible, only qualified child care workers should provide care. Where it is inevitable that non-qualified people provide care, the BSL's policy on direct client contact should be observed; this policy requires people in such a position to have a police check. The issue of child care needs to be discussed openly with participants during the project and adequate resources need to be made available to ensure that it is satisfactory to them.

8. Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted within the BSL. Some participants suggested that formal evaluation of the Advocacy Project should have been conducted by them, not by the organisation. It may be useful in future to combine an organisational process of reflection with self evaluation by participants.

Stella Mulder
Service Development Project Worker
Brotherhood of St Laurence
April 2000

D APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview Questions

Questions for Project Participants

1. What do you understand the Rental Housing Support Program to be?
2. How did you find out about the Public Tenant Advocacy Project?
3. Why did you become involved?
4. What was the original idea you wanted to work on within the project?
5. Has your idea changed over time? If so, how?
6. Why do you think the Rental Housing Support Program decided to fund this project?
7. What support did you expect to get from the Project?
8. What support did you expect to get from the Brotherhood?
9. How good was the support you received?
10. Were there any issues in relation to your family, including child care, due to this project?
11. What were the best things about being involved in the project?
12. What were the hardest things about being involved?
13. What have you learned by being part of this project?
14. To what extent did the project help you put your idea into action?
15. What do you think will happen with your idea in the future?
16. Do you think you will be more involved in your community in the future as a result of being in this project?
17. How do you see the future of the Proactive Tenant Support Network?
18. What should we do differently next time?
19. Do you have any other comments?

Questions for Project Coordinator and Manager RHSP

1. What have been the positive aspects of the project?
2. What have been the difficulties?
3. What have you learned?
4. What would you do differently?
5. Do you have any other comments?

Questions for Tenant Workers

1. Do you have any comments on the use made of the extra RHSP funding?
2. Do you have any comments on the model used in the Public Tenant Advocacy project?
3. Do you have any comments on the involvement of tenant workers in selection of participants for the project?
4. Do you have any comments on the relationship between the project and the RHSP in general?
5. What are your impressions of the outcomes of the project?
6. If we have some more funding, what type of project would you like to see it being used for?
7. Do you have any other comments?

Questions for Senior Manager and Director of Community Services

1. Why did you support this proposal receiving funding?
2. What were your expectations of the project?
3. What are your impressions of the outcomes of the project?
4. What do you think the BSL's role should be in relation to a project of this nature?
5. How do you see this project fitting into the BSL's broader interest in community development?
6. Do you think you would support funding for a project of this nature again?
7. Do you have any other comments?

Appendix 2 Participant initiatives and progress at April 2000

1. Establishing a website for tenant associations across the Southern Metropolitan Region

Objectives

1. To establish a network of tenant associations within the region.
2. To develop a home page for the network.
3. To establish a group email facility.

Achievements by April 2000

The focus of this initiative changed somewhat over the life of the project and became increasingly related to the initiative described below. While there is still interest in establishing a website for the region, the immediate objective became to establish Internet access for public tenants living in the Raglan-Ingles estate in Port Melbourne. The estate community facility, recently relocated to a ground floor, has been operating an Internet café since mid April. Five computers, donated by the Infoxchange, are now available to tenants on a daily basis and are in high demand.

2. Improving health and safety on the Raglan-Ingles Estate (Port Melbourne)

Objectives

1. Improving community/police relationships.
2. Increasing the profile/activities in the community flat through an estate newspaper, Internet Café and Homework program.
3. Improving links with the SouthPort Health Centre.

Achievements by April 2000

A relationship has been established with the local police station. A local police officer has joined the reference group for Raglan-Ingles Community Facility and is becoming increasingly familiar with the community on the estate.

A newspaper has been published occasionally as events have taken place within the community. The Internet café has been established, as described above. Preparations have been made for the Homework program, expected to commence in the community facility in May 2000.

A staff member from the Southport Health Centre has joined the Community Facility reference group, providing an ongoing link between the community and the health centre.

Residents of the Raglan-Ingles Estate established a tent embassy on the grounds of the estate from late October to late November 1999 to draw public attention to their poor living conditions and to the long term attempts they have made to have their issues addressed. A high level of media interest resulted in a commitment being made by the State Government to redevelop the estate in the immediate future. This was an extremely effective campaign. It was largely led by the Advocacy Project participant responsible for the initiative described above.

3. Establishing community TV access for public housing tenants in the Southern Region

Objectives

1. Video document the Advocacy Project and individual projects.
2. Produce a broadcast quality video to show on TV.
3. Work towards a weekly housing program on community TV.
4. Teach public tenants how to use handycam so they are able to film their own stories.

Achievements by April 2000

Video recording of Advocacy Project activities has been completed and is currently being edited. The video will provide a unique documentation of the project.

There have been no TV broadcasts so far. However, equipment has been purchased to enable training of public tenants to take place in the community facility. Training for the local community is imminent.

4. Re-establishing a tenant group in Frankston (2 participants)

Objectives

1. Improve relationship between tenants and the Office of Housing.
2. Run a series of meetings for tenants to establish demand for tenant group.
3. Provide information for tenants in plain English.

Achievements by April 2000

The relationship with the Office of Housing has not been addressed in an immediate way though this objective did inform the activities undertaken.

A number of meetings established for tenants in the Frankston area were poorly attended; the participants' experience was that there is little interest and/or confidence in taking action amongst public tenants in this area.

A pamphlet with information relevant to tenants in the Frankston area was produced and circulated and one participant receives occasional calls on from public tenants in the area who have this pamphlet.

5. Creating positive opportunities for children on the Dunkley Avenue Estate (Cheltenham)

Objectives

1. Establish a permaculture garden.
2. Establish a holiday program for children.
3. Establish other programs that allow the children to achieve.

Achievements by April 2000

No formal programs have been established to date. There have been a few planting sessions with children on the estate.

6. Establishing a homicide support group

Objectives

1. Arrange for coffee mornings for families of victims.
2. Liaise with police.
3. Provide support and counselling for families.

Achievements by April 2000

All three objectives have been met and have resulted in the establishment of the first Homicide Victims Support Group of Victoria. The group has met in March and April 2000. It currently received financial support from the Victims' Assistance Program in Frankston and The City of Frankston.

7. Developing a community presence/spirit on the Elsternwick Estate

Objectives

1. Establish a permaculture garden.
2. Make contact with the Russian tenants on the estate.
3. Make contact with the elderly residents on the estate.

4. Program for teenagers on the estate.

Achievements by April 2000

The permaculture garden was officially opened during Housing Week in April 2000. Contributions have been made by Bayside Council, EcoRecycle and the BSL. Russian and elderly tenants as well as young people have been involved in the preparation of the garden. There appears to be a strong sense of community ownership of the garden.