

## **Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative exceeds expectations**

The Mental Health Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative (HASI) is a major project of the NSW Government Action Plan: Framework for Housing and Accommodation Support for People with Mental Health Problems and Disorders. It has been developed in partnership with the NSW Department of Health and Housing and non-government organisations (NGOs) in the mental health area.

Many positive reports are being received on the value of the Mental Health Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative (HASI), just two years since the first round of funding was rolled out to the NGO sector. New Horizons, Richmond Fellowship and neami were awarded tenders and are already successfully delivering the programme to nearly all of the 100 clients provided for, who are living in areas of NSW lacking high support accommodation services.

As planned, the Area Health Services (AHSs) are delivering clinical support and clinical rehabilitation, community housing associations are providing housing and non-government organisations (NGOs) are providing tenancy management and ongoing community support to assist clients with independent living. Most importantly everything is planned cooperatively with a strong commitment to delivering services as a partnership.

Keiran Booth, New Horizons - Support Services Manager for the Central Coast area, spoke of HASI with great enthusiasm. "This is the best project I've seen in ten years of working in the community sector". While options for transition have been available in the past there has never been the level of support services required by clients to help them maintain their tenancy. All 20 places have now been filled in the Wyong and Gosford area. Although some clients did leave the program in the early stages, all are now settling into the community, with a few particular success stories. One client with a seven year history of long-term admission to psychiatric facilities has since been reported by the Mental Health team with significant improvements since the partnership. Another woman who had undergone 3 admissions in the last 5 years including 6 months admission at Morisset has shown such significant improvement that the Mental Health team believes they can withdraw their involvement. She has also been doing short educational courses and is now looking at studying at TAFE.

Other achievements included a group of six men who are now meeting regularly to play squash, with the ongoing plan of involving them in the local squash club. Meanwhile, a 'ladies day' has been developed for a group of women who suggested they would like to visit a beautician. These women who were previously isolated and unkempt with low-hygiene issues have since shown increased self-esteem and an interest in interacting with others.

Shaun Wood, Neami – Manager of South East Sydney area, reports all 37 places managed by Neami are now filled and that they have been working with clients for eighteen months in South Eastern Sydney, South Western Sydney and Illawarra AHS areas. Whilst there are a few clients who are struggling with independent living, the majority of clients have already made many positive and noticeable steps back into the community such as finding jobs, developing relationships and daily living skills, and managing their illness. There are also a few people who have left the program as they realised it wasn't appropriate for them. Shaun is very optimistic about the progress being made; pointing out that this is a program for people with high and complex support needs who may never have lived before in the community.

Quantitative research is also very encouraging with Neami statistics showing that on average, their clients, who spent 160 days per person in hospital in the previous year before HASI, have spent just 41 days in hospital during the first year of being on the program. This means that the 37 clients in Neami programs across South East Sydney, South West Sydney and Illawarra have had on average a 74% reduction in hospitalisation in the year after being on the HASI program.

Julie Snape, Richmond Fellowship - Broken Hill, reported 40 out of 55 spaces have been filled across the Far West, Greater Murray, New England, Western Sydney and Wentworth AHSs and clients are finding their new homes to be calm and comfortable places with a good balance of service support. Due to a late start, she envisages that Richmond Fellowship HASI will be running at full capacity within the next few months.

Freda Gilby, a Carer in the Broken Hill area commends the staff who she believes are managing well and have been very approachable and receptive to her views. Freda admits her 44 year old son Glen is an easy going, well liked man which has probably made it easier for him to settle into his new home. Glen, who at this stage is otherwise house bound, looks forward to the support staff coming to visit and take him on outings. NGOs are providing a range of services to assist with independent living including: advocacy, management of symptoms, budgeting, recreation and social assistance, and vocational rehabilitation including help with study.

It has been a quantum leap of learning for the support workers who are largely 'disability' workers and have been getting trained up on mental health issues. "The staff hasn't had a lot of experience, but they do try hard and have a lot of good sense with an ability to follow procedure in a flexible manner" said Freda. If there was a criticism to be made about HASI, Freda would ask for a reduction in the amount of paper work.

The project's aim of strengthening partnerships between Area Health Services, NGOs, the Department of Housing and consumers and carers is also showing up to be successful with fruitful relationships being developed. Providers report partnerships been very effective in creating a co-ordinated approach to delivering services. Julie Snape said that despite never having worked together in this way, old barriers are being broken down between the different organisations to successfully meet the high level of support needs of the clients.

The newly formed partnership is designed to prevent a purely crisis intervention approach. Gaining access to mental health services or housing for clients was previously difficult for Richmond Fellowship, Broken Hill as organisations usually stand alone and work as separate entities. These same organisations now meet monthly to review, assess and evaluate the program. Client assessment is through a separate process of meetings with service providers and mental health teams. Everyone is kept informed and glitches are discussed.

"The main teething problem was everyone getting their heads around the different priorities, particularly clinical versus non-clinical or support, and finding an agreed balance" said Julie. The importance of getting used to the individual AHSs has also been identified by keeping their particular needs and local focus in mind. Julie believes a rapport based on respect and trust has been established and the opportunities for other points of joint service delivery are not unlikely.

Keiran Booth also backed up these positive comments saying that the Mental Health team are involving them in so much more of the mental health planning and strategy. "We are actually seen as equal players in this partnership - the commitment to the project is very strong". The benefits are two-fold with mental health services gaining a better understanding of levels of support and community staff getting a better understanding of clinical issues. However, relationships outside of HASI in the clinical setting remain fragmented and professional clinicians are not yet open to involving community workers in care planning. Keiran is hopeful that as HASI becomes better known, the silo mentality will be broken down and day to day working relationships will develop.

HASI is showing that people with a mental illness can live in the community when they are provided with the support they need to get back on their feet. Keiran commented that he would never have believed the support provided to clients could have made such a significant impact in such a short time. "We are giving people back the empowerment of self-ability".

## **NSW Health Mental Health Housing and Support Initiative (HASI)**

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales is conducting a formative evaluation of the NSW Health Mental Health Housing and Support Initiative (HASI) due for completion in 2006. The project is a two year evaluation in which the Centre will measure the outcomes and processes from the initiative, focussing on the interests of the people supported by HASI.

The evaluation framework will be developed from September through to the end of 2004 during which time SPRC will be meeting with major stakeholder groups involved in HASI including providers, clients and carers, advocacy groups and government agencies. Quantitative data on the management of HASI and policies and procedures will also be evaluated. The intention is to capture stakeholder interest and to gain from their perspective what the evaluation needs to cover.

The formative evaluation will be designed in early 2005 and will then provide progressive findings, via 3 reports, throughout the 2 year period of which HASI stakeholders will be encouraged to respond.

Visits will be made to some of the HASI sites to interview consumers and carers. Interviews will be carried out on a voluntary consent process and each person will be interviewed 3 times during the evaluation to ensure balanced input.

If you are interested in participating in this HASI evaluation please contact:  
Karen Fisher, Social Policy Research Centre on (02)9385 7800 or email: [SPRC@unsw.edu.au](mailto:SPRC@unsw.edu.au) or visit <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/>