

Creating Capable Communities: From Foundations to Sustainable Solutions

The context

The project works with local residents in highly disadvantaged public housing estates in the Bayside suburbs of Melbourne, including Highett, Moorabbin, Hampton, Sandringham, Elsternwick and Cheltenham. The public housing (for about 1200 families) sits within a local government area that includes the full range of population ages and socio-economic groups, including an industrial zone and some of the most exclusive suburbs in metropolitan Melbourne. Residents of the estates come from a range of diverse cultural backgrounds, and many have experienced a significant history of disadvantage, personal tragedies, family and community violence.

Where it began

The project evolved following a series of tragic events on the estate that led Southern Family Life* to review the most effective use of their limited and shrinking family support resources. Conversations with children and parents highlighted the real dangers they felt in their neighbourhood. Residents felt unsafe and disconnected from their neighbours and the wider community. We heard expressions of abandonment and powerlessness from a community who was disadvantaged not only by their own individual histories but by a system which delivered to these communities a marginal 'piece of the pie'.

After ongoing consultation with the community and listening to their stories and their needs, Southern Family Life* on behalf of residents, applied for funds from the first phase of the Stronger Families & Communities Strategy. This funding from 2001- 2004 helped us to establish with residents the core foundations for a community which provided safety, connectedness and a sense of belonging. Some of the core examples of this in the earlier stages were:-

- Residents gathering in a safe and welcoming space where they can share common stories and learn from one another
- Opportunities for residents to share their skills with others and to build on or learn new skills
- Children and parents linked to a wider network of support via other families and adults, and where needed professional support
- The wider community engaging with and resourcing these neighbourhoods
- A growing sense of community ownership and pride evidenced through more examples of initiative and beginning leadership roles

It was acknowledged that these were promising indications of greater possibilities. Southern Family Life*, key partners, the local community and the residents were adamantly in support of further funds to build on these foundations. We have been given this opportunity through receipt of further funding through 'Local Answers' which will take us to June 2006.

Where do we take it from here?

The overall objectives of the project remain much the same:

- To strengthen the capacity of the wider local community to respond to the needs of these families as a way of improving family and community well-being
- To improve both the parenting skills and relationship skills of the parents of these families
- To skill and support residents to initiate and manage local community projects
- To increase family & social connectedness and reciprocity for the well-being of all

These objectives are being accomplished through a range of strategies and varied activities:

1. Building the network of collaborative partnerships

- A Homework Club has now been running for over 3 years and is well supported by a regular group of volunteers who take responsibility for areas such as a children's library, one-on-one homework support, outdoor games and sport and structured activities.
- In July 2004 the Breakfast Club commenced partnership with two other local agencies and the residents. After six months, Southern Family Life* is providing more of a supportive role with residents running the program independently. The current challenge is to seek ongoing financial support from local business to ensure the future of this project.
- The project's reference group consists of a number of key local services, local police, Office of Housing and residents. We have sought participation of other specialist community resources, such as local housing service and the Migrant Resource Centre.
- Cybec Foundation is a trust set up by a local business person in the community to support a range of community initiatives. ***This trust currently supports a local family's child who participates in the project with a scholarship to attend a local private school. It also funds SFL's* 'Community Bubs'. All clients from this program have linked into Keith St community house programs and built positive social networks as a result.***

2. Building effective parenting skills

A parenting skills program is conducted twice a year for 8 weeks for parents of children 0-3 years of age. This course has had a range of benefits to parents including normalisation of their role, providing a network of support, both at the community facility and in their personal activities, decreasing isolation and social opportunities for their children. Over half the parents reported an improvement in their parenting skills and two-thirds of parents reported an improvement in their relationship with their child. All parents indicated that as a result they had made new friends. This feedback indicates

that supporting and 'growing' parents in their role is more about their connections and resources than simply the acquisition of skills.

3. Building leadership capacity of residents:

- A needs analysis is currently being conducted with a view to providing training for those residents who wish to expand their leadership role within the community. It is anticipated that the training will be in alliance with some of the key competencies of Community Development work and therefore will have an added benefit of supporting residents to pursue future study and employment. This will be a key initiative towards sustainable outcomes.
- Southern Family Life* has a 6 monthly training program for the recruitment of family and community volunteer workers. Residents who are already demonstrating their capacity as leaders in their community have shown interest in participating in the training to become volunteers for the agency. This further enhances future opportunities and contributes to change in the wider community.
- We are seeing more examples of residents taking up leadership initiative in the project. We are seeing an increased contribution particularly in the project's reference group; the Breakfast Club which is on occasions run entirely by the residents; residents being representative on community reference groups; within the Parents Coffee n Chat group at one of the estates which is taking a lead role in discussing and addressing concerns of residents.

Of those parents who provided feedback about their contribution, 92% reported an increase in self-confidence and more than half of those believed this has helped in pursuing family or employment goals; 57% indicated they were also involved in wider community activities as a result.

4. Building effective relationship skills of residents

This is seen to be achieved through a range of formal and informal activities, with a focus on teaching and developing skills and that provide social opportunities for families in the community. For example, we have found some families and individuals do not attend the more structured program but do attend the Community Barbecues we hold at local parks. These informal and regular opportunities build trust, so that some residents have started to attend other more formal activities, whilst others have been referred back to the agency for relevant support. The more structured activities include the Breakfast & Homework Clubs, Parents Coffee n Chat, cooking, and art and craft groups.

Parents and the children feedback indicates that the activities build positive relationships between family members and within the community. Parents indicate significant improvements in particular areas such as:

- 72% of parents reported an improved relationship with their child(ren) whilst 61% reported improvements in their general family relationships;

- 71% reported an improvement in their children's physical health and development and their child(ren)'s language and communication skills;
- 77% percent of parents said they had increased their informal supports through participating.
- and finally all parents indicated there was an improvement in their children's social and emotional development.

Bringing people and families together appears to have multiple benefits which are clearly contributing to the overall benefit to families, and ultimately, the community's health and well-being.

Wider evaluation and findings

In addition, we have sought perspectives and feedback from a range of stakeholders to compliment and elaborate on the local resident's feedback. Interviews, questionnaires and discussions were conducted with key partners in the project and reference group members. Those who worked closely with residents such as the volunteers also gave their feedback through observations they had made. Staff and students on placement also contributed to collecting the data, particularly from residents via focus groups, evaluation questionnaires, informal feedback, worker journals, observations and attendance records. The main findings were:

- increased resident ownership and pride of their community;
- increased number of resident's demonstrating leadership capacity;
- decrease in families and parents feeling isolated in their community;
- improved social networks for families and children;
- significant improvement of the health and well-being of residents, particularly children;
- increased numbers of partners contributing to the project and increased building of relationships with residents;
- acknowledgment of the value of partner relationships with all the stakeholders.

Sustainable Change

The findings from our evaluation point towards the possibilities of building change within the communities which are long-lasting. Not that long ago, on numerous occasions, key workers and actively involved residents questioned whether what we were doing was worth all the effort and when would we see change that we thought may actually last? Enthusiasm and energy would wain at times, but time to think and reflect has served us well. It is through this that we have had the opportunity to realise that the change has been occurring all the time – slowly but progressively. What we are seeing now is the fruits of many incidences of small change that has been happening over time, giving many a sense of hope and optimism for their future. The project may look different in the future, the project may not even exist, but if families and communities are able to keep hope and optimism in their lives, this will be the key to sustained change. The best job we can do is to know that we have had a belief and a presence in supporting change, we have acknowledged,

shared and validated people's experience and we have celebrated their hard-won achievements.

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*Post Script. As of mid 2006 'Southern Family Life' has been trading as 'Family Life'.