

History

Stable aid had its beginnings in November/December 1992 when a resident of East Maryborough, who was dependant on social security payments, could not meet their commitment of bills. They approached the co-ordinator at the East Maryborough Neighbourhood House to ask for help. The co-ordinator rang the material aid agencies in town but could not secure any relief for the resident. After some initial discussions it was found that there were many people who faced the same situation, most were families with children and the nearing of christmas heightened their inability to be able to provide any type of joyous christmas at all.

Other agencies within the town provided material aid to those in need, but their services were considered to impersonal, judgemental and one day a week was considered impractical by the residents. These residents felt disempowered by their lack of choices, something needed to be done. A small group had already formed and using connections, they were able to get in contact with the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence. They identified what they believed to be the shortfalls in the services that other agencies provided, and how they saw the need to provide another agency specifically aimed at, "Re-empowering people excluded from the decisions making which affects their lives." (J McArdel. Community Development - Tools of the trade Community Quarterly, No.16.1989)

The Brotherhood agreed to assist for the immediate need by giving out vouchers for the supermarket and a department store. At the same time the co-ordinator of the East Maryborough Neighbourhood Centre wrote to the Management Committee for permission to provide material aid for the local residents in need, and not to be just another charitable institution. This form of networking is called a need / need response.

"They are linked in the hope they might be able to generate resources that they do not have alone." (I.O'Connor. Social and Welfare Practice.)

At this stage about fifteen people had formed a Self Help Action Group, which McArdle defined as,

"they provide a united voice to create focus for ongoing activities or service."

They also identified at this stage that they did not want, "another middle class service to make people feel warm and fuzzy."

A local welfare worker was approached to mediate at a meeting convened by the Stable Aid Action Group, East Maryborough Neighbourhood Centre, Maryborough District Accommodation Group and central Victorian Community Health with the material aid agencies in the town, being the Salvation Army and St. Vincent

de Paul. It was their intention to bring to the notice the shortfall in their agencies and their attitudes towards their clientele as the clients experienced it. Due to a lack of skills and knowledge the meeting was not as successful as first hoped as the issues that concerned them the most (ie. the assessment for assistance) was claimed to be delivered in the method preferred by the clients. This seemed in stark contrast to what the clients actually experienced. No concrete resolution could be achieved effectively at this meeting.

The Brotherhood of St. Lawrence was working behind the scenes, and provided monies to be distributed throughout Maryborough, \$2,000 to the E.M.N.C, \$500 to The Salvation Army and \$500 to Saint Vincent de Paul. It also assisted with other resources being frozen food, clothing and volunteer training.

During January, Stable Aid had opened its doors in a temporary location in a back room of M.D.A.G.. Permission had been sought to use the stables located at the back of C.V.C.H., some improvements were required and the approval from the council was what delayed the start of operations in the building that they still now occupy. Freezers were donated by some local businesses to keep their supplies in. Food was originally obtained via the Brotherhood, Victorian Relief Fund and Food Bank. It has proven to be a very difficult task for Stable Aid to get any supplies from local food retailers or wholesalers. A meeting was held at E.M.N.C. on the 4th February '93, to elect a "Sub-committee". This was very confusing as it was not connected to any other committee or organisation. We believe that what was set up was a steering committee, to organise the early stages of the setting up and training for the volunteers.

Training was arranged for the volunteers through two half days at Skillshare and one full day at the Brotherhood in Ballarat. Thursday 11th February 9:30am to 12:30pm at Skillshare to learn basic management, book-keeping and organisational skills.

Monday 15th February all day at Ballarat to learn the secondhand clothing trade of sorting, pricing and presentation.

Tuesday 16th February 9:30am To 12:30pm at Skillshare was taken by a local welfare worker who covered the area of referral for clients to either C.V.C.H. or to other agencies. The general guidelines were confidentiality, respect, acceptance, trust, listening skills, problem solving process and the concept of "assisting" people. That is not "helping" as Most people have their own skills and answers to be able to help themselves.

A meeting was held at Skillshare on the 18th February to elect the organising committee, all position were successfully filled. The rooms at M.D.A.G. was becoming to crowded and it was agreed to transfer to the Stables on the 1st March. Some working bees and lots of help saw the stables were ready for the start of business by this date.

Stable Aid generates its own income from the opportunity shop for the purchase of stocks for material aid distribution. They were instrumental in gaining permission for some Brotherhood of St Lawrence bins to be located at the supermarket car parks. Originally they had a key to have access to this clothing, but there were issues about the resale of clothes in the area that they were collected, so now these clothes go to Ballarat and are exchanged on a kilo/kilo basis with Ballarat stock.

Volunteers came from the people who suffered and needed the service, they acquired skills in re-surrounding (linking in with existing services) and in community development (fulfilling a gap in the service, success by creating their own resource base). Most have a great sense of achievement and speak about having more confidence and greater self esteem.

They promote themselves and the agency.

Some volunteers have moved into other volunteer positions or to employment, for some it has provided an avenue to reconnect back to the community as a whole.

One area that was the very original theme, being the lack of money at certain times, was now being addressed. A dinner was planned to generate some funds for what they called the No Interest Loan Scheme (N.I.L.S.). On the night they raised \$300 and the council donated \$500 which was matched by \$500 from the Brotherhood of St Laurance.

Community members who had difficulties in finding largish amounts of money to cover living expenses, eg; electricity or gas bills, could either approach Stable Aid to be directed to, or directly to the welfare worker at C.V.C.H. for assistance. They were interviewed by the worker to obtain some particulars, eg; amount, purpose and how they would repay. This information was taken to an approval panel, who then consulted about the genuiness of the claim. This process is carried out in strict confidence and only the welfare worker knows the identity of the claimant. Monies granted this way are paid directly to the sender of the account and the cheque account name does not allow any link back to where the cheque has come from. This yet again provides the users with the privacy and confidentiality to continue to function with in the community without the stigma of poverty and its associated negativities.

The service evaluates it self by how well it works, allowing it to run itself and by the fact that they are still operating.

6th January, 1993.

"EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE"

This report details the current situation regarding emergency assistance in this district, and considers options for the future.

Recently I was contacted by a number of professional workers from Maryborough re: Emergency Assistance; it appears that these workers have been receiving complaints from the community about how emergency assistance is distributed. Some people are feeling degraded when seeking assistance, and others are refusing to seek out help even though they are in need. The agencies which manage emergency assistance are the Salvation Army and St. Vincent De Paul Society. It was decided to call a meeting between the agencies involved to attempt to resolve these issues and to assess the assistance offered.

The meeting was attended by representatives from the Salvation Army, St. Vincent De Paul, M.D.A.G., E.M.N.C. & C.V.C.H.S. The Salvation Army reported an increase of close to 100% in the number of people seeking assistance over the past 12 months; St. Vincent De Paul has had an approx. 70% increase over the same time period. Both agencies stated that they were meeting the need at present, but would welcome any additional funds or material aid to distribute. The issue of how individuals and families were assessed when presenting for assistance was discussed; the need for a non-judgmental approach was emphasized and both agencies agreed that this was their preferred method, acknowledging that while some people did "use the system", it was important that cynicism did not pervade their workers' practice.

These responses are in stark opposition to remarks from the community and no concrete resolution of these issues could be achieved effectively at this meeting. Hopefully, in being able to highlight these issues to the agencies concerned, some change in attitudes may develop.

Shortly after this meeting, I was contacted by a representative from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (Tim Roberts). Tim stated that the Brotherhood's Ballarat office has funds for emergency assistance to distribute in this district and is looking for appropriate agencies who could dispense the assistance. I believe this is an option C.V. Community Health could pick up quite easily and it could have positive effects for both the community and this agency: For the former, any increase in the amount of assistance available will enable more individuals and families to benefit, and for the latter, more people will have contact with us and thus become better acquainted with the other services we offer.

I believe "The Stables" could easily and cheaply converted to a storeroom and office (downstairs): A good clean out, followed by a 50mm concrete screed on the floor, some carpet and furnishings would be all that is needed. Present staffing levels would not permit the current welfare workers to be involved in any actual distribution or assistance, however, I believe I could train and supervise a group of volunteers who could be the "Front Line" workers (which, in itself, would be an added positive outcome for those involved).

I hope this proposal is considered favourably by the Committee; more detailed information about funds available from the Brotherhood will be forthcoming from Tim in the near future.

Patrick Cox,
WELFARE WORKER.