

StreetCare: A Case Study in Homeless Consumer Participation in Law Reform and Policy Advocacy

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In 2009, as part of its Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS) project, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) established its homeless consumer advisory committee, StreetCare, in recognition of the importance of giving people experiencing homelessness an opportunity to exercise their right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, as enshrined in Article 25 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). PIAC believes that the active involvement of those who are or have been homeless leads to the development of more effective public policy in response to issues facing people experiencing homelessness, as well as assisting in the empowerment of participants.

StreetCare is made up of nine people who have recent experience of homelessness. They reflect the diversity of homelessness in New South Wales (NSW), and include men, women, transgender and young people, and representatives from inner Sydney, outer suburbs and rural and regional areas. StreetCare enables PIAC to obtain direct input. StreetCare also provides a mechanism for PIAC to engage actively with other people who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, to facilitate their input into public policy and law reform initiatives.

Over the last four years StreetCare members have been involved in government policy advisory committees, giving advice to the highest levels of the NSW Government on such issues as:

- the reform of specialist homelessness services (SHS) in NSW
- the development and implementation of the revised Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places, guiding the appropriate methods of

interaction between law enforcement officials and people experiencing homelessness

- the need to improve services from Housing NSW customer service operators and staff of SHSs for people experiencing homelessness with mental illness
- the lack of transitional support services for people exiting in prison without stable, long-term accommodation supports
- homelessness awareness training for NSW police
- the appalling conditions in unlicensed boarding houses and the need for stronger regulation of the boarding house sector.

StreetCare members have represented people experiencing homelessness on the NSW Premier's Advisory Council on Homelessness, and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services expert panel overseeing the reforms of SHSs. Members also meet quarterly with senior officials of the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink to discuss the effectiveness and opportunities for improvement of service operations and outreach services for people experiencing homelessness.

StreetCare members have also assisted in undertaking various direct projects. In particular, over the last two years, StreetCare and PIAC's HPLS have undertaken the following homeless consumer consultation projects:

Beyond the Prison Gates

The purpose of this project was to identify the experiences of people experiencing homelessness who had recently been released from prison. The project involved conducting interviews with 26 people who had exited from prison in the previous two years into homelessness.

Somewhere over the rainbow...

This project sought to present the views and opinions of consumers with mental illness and experiences of homelessness, regarding the difficulties and challenges they faced in exiting homelessness. The project involved the conduct of three focus groups of 25 people in total who had lived experience of mental illness and homelessness.

These consultation projects involved StreetCare members in the design, implementation and development of key themes for the consultation focus groups and interviews. The involvement of StreetCare members in the conduct of the consultation focus groups and interviews was an essential ingredient in allowing participants to be open and expansive in their comments, given their own experiences of homelessness and mental illness and the difficulties they have encountered in securing housing.

These projects resulted in documenting the views and experiences of homeless consumers to NSW Government, and have been instrumental in key reforms regarding additional resources for transitional accommodation for people exiting correctional institutions, mental illness awareness training for frontline staff of Housing NSW and specialist homelessness services, and greater promotion of the automated rental deduction scheme for people in public housing.

For more information about StreetCare visit their website: www.piac.asn.au/projects/StreetCare/introduction

You can also view a short video about the StreetCare and hear from the members: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2d5Vml-z-w&feature=c4-overview&list=UUYfo3ze0ZdUYmXAAWSQkUsQ