

Case study

George Street Neighbourhood Centre Association Inc

A coordinated community house brings new opportunities to South Mackay

Summary

The George Street Neighbourhood Centre (GSNC) opened in 1989 because South Mackay lacked support services in the community. Now 13 programs operate from the centre and more than nine other community groups regularly use the centre. Although more services are needed in the area, there is no scope for the centre's current operational resources to support further initiatives.

Partners

The partners or programs co-located at the GSNC include:

- a Queensland Department of Communities-funded coordinator/community development worker
- the Mackay Regional Financial Counselling Service Inc, funded by the Commonwealth Financial Counselling program and expanded under the Sugar Industry Reform Program, which provides crisis financial counselling to sugar industry stakeholders throughout the region
- the Good Beginnings Home Base Family Support Program which hosts volunteers who support stressed families with children under eight years of age
- a Queensland Department of Communities-funded hub coordinator/family support worker who advises and refers families and children attending playgroups and childcare facilities to government and non-government agencies
- a multicultural families support program funded by Multicultural Affairs Queensland
- adult literacy and numeracy programs funded by the Queensland Department of Employment and Training, including English as a second language, adult literacy programs for women and adult literacy programs for men
- a volunteer tutor training program to offer accredited training to give participants skills to tutor adults in a one-on-one environment
- an access card program which gives free entry for carers of people with a disability to participating facilities or community events
- a consumer advisory group which gives mental health service consumers and their carers a greater say about the way mental health services use a systems advocacy approach
- a tax help program where volunteers offer free, confidential help to assist low-income earners with their tax responsibilities from July to October
- the Mackay Community No Interest Loan Scheme providing access to loans of up to \$800 for low-income earners
- the Mackay Toy Library, a non-profit organisation offering open membership to those wishing to borrow toys for children in their care, and
- two play groups.

Other groups / organisations that use GSNC include:

- the North Queensland branch of Australian Association of Social Workers
- the University of the Third Age

- Machinery Preservationists
- the Australian Breastfeeding Association
- ESA Alpha Rho
- Self-Help Accommodation Link of Mackay
- Seniors Friendship Group
- Dutch Cards Club, and
- Widows Support Network.

Background

GSNC is located in suburbia and can easily be mistaken for a family home. Centre users receive a warm welcome from staff to encourage conversation, confidence, friendliness a sense of belonging and an openness to seek assistance. GSNC is a one-stop shop for community development in the South Mackay area, with some of its services reaching out to the wider region.

The GSNC opened in 1989 in response to the lack of community services in South Mackay. A community development worker and part-time office administrator were employed with the centre's first funding from the Queensland Department of Family Services.

These staff researched local needs focusing on young families and those new to the area. The centre began to house services such as the toy library and playgroups and became a meeting place for community groups providing support, information, referrals and resources. The centre's clientele grew and smaller groups requested that GSNC become an auspice body to enable smaller groups to seek funding and establish themselves as stand-alone organisations. The Mackay Children's Contact Service is one of the new stand-alone services. The Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre was also housed at the centre for almost two years prior to receiving funding for premises.

Drivers for collaboration

Meeting community need was a key driver to bring services together and seek funding.

The collaboration story

Once the centre was established, small local groups saw the GSNC as a hub and central meeting place. It became known as a place to find resources and a community worker who could assist with organisational development, incorporation and funding applications.

Collaborating to house services under one roof has enabled an integrated model of service delivery and has fostered the development of a multidisciplinary team.

Tools and strategies for collaboration

The centre is characterised by:

- co-location of services
- strong community networks, and
- a committee willing to auspice multiple programs.

Outcomes

The centre's collaborative nature has resulted in:

- an integrated model of service delivery

- a multidisciplinary team
- a cost-effective way to access premises, general resources, financial support and administration, and
- a framework to auspice local groups.

Success factors

The centre's successful collaborative approach is due to:

- the commitment of the management committee, staff and volunteers
- encouragement and support from funding bodies, the community, local, state and federal members
- the warmth and dedication of staff and volunteers
- a positive reputation, and
- cost savings and benefits to the community.

Challenges

The centre's success and rapid growth put pressure on the existing staff and committee to the point that some workers were 'burnt out'. Forward planning did not initially consider unexpected growth. As the GSNC's achievements were recognised, the requests to take on additional services grew. To address service demand, the management committee remodelled the building and did major renovations on the house and shed. Two years later, need still outstripped available space and resources.

The centre's management committee has recently advised the Queensland Department of Communities and centre staff that no new capital works can be undertaken in the foreseeable future. The centre's challenge is to decide whether further growth or change is possible, and if so, how. Current programs that incorporate and secure funds for their own premises free up space for emerging programs, but the process of separation may not be easy to achieve or desirable for those programs which are already part of a well-run centre.

Attempts to secure additional operational funds and capital funds to build or relocate have been unsuccessful. Finding sources of funding for these purposes remains a challenge.

Without a centre manager, day-to-day operational demands fall under the coordinator/community development worker, adding to their already extensive workload.

The future

The centre has received funds to develop a business plan. Developing a business plan will help the centre align its operations with its strategic plan and agree on a future management model. The imperative is to identify a model for future viability, married with strong service delivery and best practice approaches.

For more information

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