

The Brisbane Homeless Service Centre

Two years of preparation yields a high-quality, one-stop shop for people at risk of homelessness

Summary

The Brisbane Homelessness Service Centre (BHSC) opened in January 2006 in Brisbane's inner south. It houses five partner agencies, each offering a specialist service to people experiencing homelessness. The agencies worked hard to realise their vision for an integrated service that is better able to respond to the complexities of homelessness.

Partners

The partner agencies moved the parts of their organisations which focus on homelessness to the new BHSC location, with the exception of Brisbane Boarders Ltd which moved its entire service. The mix of services comes from large, faith-based organisations (Catholic and Anglican) and smaller, not-for-profit, community-based agencies. All have their own legally constituted governance structures and their own organisational cultures. All were located in Brisbane's inner south prior to moving into the BHSC.

They are:

- Micah Homelessness Services (MHS), which is funded by the Queensland Department of Communities to provide: (i) information, assessment and referral services (this aspect of MHS is one of the six service hubs funded in various 'hot spots' across Queensland); (ii) family support services to homeless and vulnerable families; and (iii) public space outreach and after-hours services. MHS is a project of Micah Projects Inc which is the lead agency for the operation of the BHSC.
- Brisbane Boarders Ltd, which provides affordable accommodation and tenancy/property management to single people, families, low-to-moderate income earners, people with a disability and other marginalised people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Murrie Watch Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation, which is funded by the Department of Communities to provide a range of housing, support and case management services to Indigenous people experiencing homelessness or who are vulnerable to homelessness. Murrie Watch also works to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to a full range of resources and services to protect the stability of their housing.
- Centacare's South West Brisbane Community Options Project, which is funded under the Home and Community Care Program to provide in-home and social support for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This service also has an outreach component to people sleeping rough.
- Anglicare's St Luke's Nursing Service, which is also a Home and Community Care-funded service, which provides primary health care to homeless people, especially people sleeping rough and who present with dual diagnosis health issues.

In addition to these five partnering agencies, the plan for a multi-agency, one-stop shop encompassed hosting a range of visiting agencies which would use the centre as a base for service delivery, enhancing the continuum of care provided.

Drivers for collaboration

A commitment to improving responses to the complexity of homelessness drew this group of partner agencies together. Notably, they were committed to securing improved physical infrastructure and better service integration for responding to homelessness.

An important secondary driver was the cost-saving benefit in service management time and resources through shared service arrangements.

The collaboration story

The BHSC initiative was two years in the making. Its genesis was an inter-agency meeting convened in October 2003 by Micah Projects Inc. and Brisbane Boarders Ltd. About 20 service providers attended the meeting, which focused on the deficit in physical and service infrastructure in the inner south and the rising rents facing non-government organisations. State Government parliamentarian, the Honourable Anna Bligh MP, and Brisbane City Councillor Tim Quinn attended and encouraged the meeting to advocate collaboratively for a one-stop shop.

To facilitate collaboration, the Southside Homelessness Action Network (SHAN) was formed. SHAN became a critical instrument in the ongoing facilitation of collaboration between government and non-government agencies to establish the BHSC. SHAN met monthly, appointed a part-time convener and developed an action plan entitled, *Towards a Localised Homelessness Service System: Report on Progress and Direction Setting*. The BHSC's establishment was a strategy in the action plan.

From these beginnings, the notion of a one-stop shop was given further impetus with the State Government's investment in responses to homelessness in the 2004-05 Budget. This Budget made provision for a number of service hubs in homelessness 'hot spots' around Queensland, including inner Brisbane. With Micah Projects Inc as the lead agency, a tender consortium was formed with the five partner agencies and supported by others including the St Vincent De Paul Society, Centrelink South Brisbane, OzCare and Mission Australia. As well as seeking service hub monies for the operation of an information, assessment and referral service, this consortium advocated for a collocated model of service provision. The tender detailed how the benefits of the new service would be maximised if it were based with other services under one roof. It argued that this would enhance collaboration, service integration and the capacity to provide a continuum of care for people experiencing homelessness and would more adequately respond to the rise in demand for services.

The model was not universally understood or appreciated by some in government and community services sectors and met with resistance in some circles. However, the Department of Communities funded the new service and a new IT system, and the Department of Housing funded the refurbishment of a warehouse in South Brisbane and entered into a leasehold arrangement with the landlord for a five-year period.

This saw the BHSC officially open on 22 February 2006.

Tools and strategies for collaboration

There were four aspects to the business of building collaboration and developing partnerships:

1. Vision and leadership

The partner agencies shared the vision of a one-stop shop to enhance service provision to people experiencing homelessness, largely due to the leadership of some key players and to the work of the SHAN over two years. Recognition that the increasing complexity of homelessness required new and more innovative responses was the conceptual starting point for the partner agencies. The adoption of a continuum of care framework underpinned that recognition. Clearly, there were benefits for each partner agency but each had to make a commitment to something bigger.

It was imperative that this vision was shared by services at both the operational and governance level because it would entail change management in these areas.

2. Change management and interpersonal relationships

The SHAN experience had cultivated good working relationships among the partner agencies at an operational level but this was taken to a new level of collaboration and commitment as the BHSC began to take shape. Once funding was approved, cultivating partnership relationships became a priority. Trust, respect, transparency, frankness, openness and honesty had to be hallmarks of interaction.

It was also important that each partner agency kept all staff informed of progress towards the BHSC, and boards of management and line managers received regular briefings.

To facilitate and manage the transition to the BHSC, the following mechanisms were put in place:

- A steering committee to plan and lead change in organisations moving into the one-stop shop. Each agency contributed two people to this committee, including managers, CEOs and coordinators. Initially, the committee met fortnightly and then weekly. The SHAN convener chaired committee meetings and formalities were adhered to — agendas were prepared, minutes kept and decisions documented. These meetings planned and made decisions about all operational matters including: cleaning, IT, a cost-sharing system, decor, a logo, floor design, security and furniture. It was agreed that after six months the steering committee would review a number of decisions made in this planning period to ensure all systems are working.
- Communication and consultation with the Department of Housing was critical in the lead up to the opening of the BHSC and full credit must be given to the departmental officers who worked with the steering committee. This was a huge effort with the lead agency, Micah Projects Inc, dedicating a full-time worker who did an admirable job of implementing steering committee decisions.
- In the period from the funding announcement to moving into the BHSC, social and information-sharing gatherings were held for staff of partner agencies. Agencies took turns at organising lunches and barbecues to enable staff to meet and get to know each other prior to collocating. A number of agencies were already working together in joint assessment and in responding to clients.
- Each partner agency was responsible for continually briefing management committees, boards and line managers about progress towards the BHSC. The steering committee's minutes provided a record of decisions which were the basis of reporting.
- SHAN meetings continued in this period and a full progress report was given at each meeting. An e-bulletin, *SHAN Online*, was launched to inform a wider stakeholder group about the collocation.

3. Financial savings

An important consideration for agencies entering into a collocation arrangement is the financial cost involved. Clearly, the partner agencies involved in the BHSC could not enter into this arrangement if it was going to cost more than a single service operating alone. One of the attractions for collocation was the potential for cost savings through service integration and shared service infrastructure in such areas as:

- reception services
- joint assessments which save staff time in undertaking multiple assessments of clients
- service proximity which saves transport costs
- IT savings, and
- phone savings.

While indicative costings calculated in the planning stages looked attractive and have, to date, matched real costs closely, collocation in a large building did bring one unexpected cost. The cost of electricity far exceeded what was anticipated due to the BHSC building's nature and size. Its air conditioning and security lighting use much more energy than expected or is financially sustainable for the partner agencies.

Initial set-up costs also placed financial pressures on partner agencies. Relocation and other essential set-up costs, official openings, etcetera, all need to be factored into budgets. Arguably, these costs could be met by a special 'seed' grant from the State Government. In addition, the lead agency, Micah Projects Inc, invested in the collection of baseline data, collected by the Queensland University of Technology, to ensure that a reliable evaluation of the one-stop shop is possible over time. Again, the cost of this could be met in a 'seed' grant as evaluation is critical to policy development in this area.

The Department of Housing's lease of the building contributes positively to the BHSC's financial bottom line in that agencies who previously paid rent now instead contribute to essential operating costs. This has funded the employment of a full-time cleaner at the BHSC. Further, this leasing arrangement has also enabled services to occupy space which, at market rates, would otherwise be beyond their capacity to pay.

While nominating cost savings as an outcome of collocation, it will be accurately measured after 12 months when initial set-up and establishment costs are confirmed and key aspects of service collaboration and integration are fully implemented.

4. Governance

Governance was critical to negotiations. Each partner agency has its own governance arrangements dictated by law. It was at this level that each partner agency's involvement in the one-stop shop had to be agreed. Consequently, each governance structure had to be fully conversant with the issues and risks associated with this initiative. The responsibility for ensuring that the appropriate level of knowledge was communicated rested with line managers, CEOs and coordinators, all of whom participated in the steering committee.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was developed between the partner agencies. This outlined the commitment and undertakings of each partner agency with regard to the BHSC. It also included (as appendices) other tools for collaboration including:

- a code of conduct for BHSC staff
- a risk management strategy for the collocation, and
- a conflict resolution mechanism for partner agencies.

The MoU was signed at the governance level of each organisation at a special, formal ceremony held at the BHSC in November 2005.

Agreement at this organisational level means commitment to collocation in a one-stop service centre is independent of relationships at the operational level. This is vital for the initiative's longevity, reducing the risk if key people leave or relationships break down.

Outcomes

- The vision's realisation is obvious in the shape of a large service centre for people experiencing homelessness, and spacious offices for staff. The centre houses a reception area, interview rooms, a women's room (a room where homeless women can receive special services and find a safe space), a health room, a family and children's room, a laundry, toilets for male and female clients, an activities room, an internet lounge, and client kitchen.

- While the BHSC is still in its first year and has not been officially evaluated, workers believe that the one-stop shop has enhanced service delivery to homeless people and one confirmation of this is the greater demand for all the services delivered by the BHSC.

Success factors

- A shared concept for developing a local service system based on a continuum of care¹ framework is essential to: prevent homelessness through providing access to both affordable housing and support to sustain tenancies; and rapidly house people when homelessness had occurred. By adopting this framework, the partner agencies were committed to building service responses, incorporating case management, in a way that encompasses:
 - an immediate crisis response
 - early intervention and risk reduction
 - continuing support in the post-crisis period, and
 - links to mainstream, generic services.
- In cost-benefit terms, achieving sustainable tenancy outcomes for clients is seen as contributing significantly to the bottom line of the service system and, ultimately, returning improved dividends on the government's investment in combating homelessness.
- Agreement and vision at the organisational governance level is a key factor to ensure the service is independent of relationships at the operational level.
- A shared operational vision is essential for day-to-day service integration and problem solving.
- Good working relationships were essential to developing BHSC and remain vital. Trust, respect, transparency, frankness, openness and honesty had to be hallmarks of interaction to build and maintain partner relationships.

Challenges

Forming loosely aligned services into a collaborative partnership committed to collocation in a one-stop shop arrangement does not happen without considerable effort and commitment. Demands on service provision tend to dominate service agendas and investing time in 'thinking and acting as a service system' can be seen as an optional extra that may or may not add value to current service arrangements. Consequently, bringing the BHSC to fruition was breaking new ground and a steep learning curve for all involved.

One of the emerging operational challenges is the problem of high electricity costs and a resolution urgently required.

The future

The BHSC pioneered new territory for all concerned and it continues to do so. To this extent, it is a work in progress. Eventually the initiative's outcomes will be evaluated in terms of organisational benefits, client outcomes and the return on government investment. Until then, full credit must be given to the non-government agencies who are involved and to the State Government for its initial and ongoing support.

Contact for more information

Coralie Kingston, Project Leader - Homelessness Services, Micah Projects Inc., telephone (07) 3036-4444 or email coraliekingston@bhsc.net.au

¹ A continuum of care encompasses an immediate crisis response, early intervention and risk reduction, continuing support in the post-crisis period, and links to mainstream, generic services.