

The Face of ACRO, 2022



(Left to Right) Carpenter Jared Taylor; Carpenter Glenn Bailey; Accounts Manager Neil Joseph; Construction Manager Ben Green; Programs Manager Fiona Begg;; Field Officer Paul Green; Administration Worker Anneliess Law; Occupational Therapist Kristine Eyles; Administration Worker Hannah Miller; Plumber David Licht; Housing Support Worker Lauren McNamara; (inset: ACRO Builder Alan Elliott).



Executive Committee Members Ian Stewart, Chairperson; Stephanie Whelan, Secretary; Chris Stewart, Treasurer.

Finally, I congratulate all those associated with the work of ACRO this past year, including (once again) our Staff, our Executive, our tradespeople, our members, the government agencies who support our work and their Staff and our clients for their patience and understanding. We optimistically look towards the future.

Program Statistical Snapshot

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3079 HAS Services • 3462 CHSP Maintenance Services • 1096 CHSP Modification Services • 348 First Interviews • 423 Occupational Therapist Referrals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5374 SHS Bed nights of Accommodation • 299 Additional Housing related requests • 752 Calls for Assistance • 552 assisted through additional programs • 59 families financially assisted this year. |
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Incorporated in Queensland under the Associations Incorporation Act (#10000)
Registered as a Charity under the Collections Act (#472)

In the spirit of reconciliation ACRO Australian Community Safety & Research Organisation Incorporated acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.



ANNUAL
REPORT
2022

Difficult decisions had to be made. It was necessary to change our service delivery and cost-structure model

This has been another year of great change for ACRO. Whilst we all believed that the first COVID years were going to be complicated (and they were), the ensuing “recovery” period has been even more so. Levels of homelessness have increased. Affordable housing has all but disappeared. Older people also continue to be a highly vulnerable group for COVID infection.

An ongoing challenge was (and continues to be) the provision of factual and well-researched information to balance the, at times, extreme negative views that proliferate so easily via all forms of social media. Now is the time to rebuild our interpersonal relationships and social connections, many of which suffered during periods of lock-down and social isolation. This is particularly true for members of our community who are experiencing homelessness and who may be struggling with their physical or mental health. Extra care and support is needed for this constituency. It is too easy to forget vulnerable members of our community as things return to “normal” for many of us. The housing crisis in Queensland is very real and along with rising cost of living pressures, ACRO’s primary client groups – older people and families experiencing homelessness - remain two of the groups most at risk of experiencing increased hardship.

For ACRO, we have continued to undertake strategic planning to meet current and future challenges. We have set in train a process for reorganization in response to challenges arising from the pandemic coupled with a shift in government funding priorities, particularly changes in the Aged Care funding space over the coming year which would impact the organisation. If nothing else, the Pandemic has taught us of the need to plan, to review those plans on an ongoing basis and to be flexible and innovative about how we approach current and future plans. It has been crucial for us to adapt to the rapidly changing service landscape.

ACRO has had a long-term plan to redevelop one of its properties for emergency housing and as a probable relocation for its administration. This Project was commenced just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. With the assistance of the Safe Places Directorate attaching

to the Commonwealth government, ACRO committed to joint-venture in the realization of this endeavor. A major redevelopment was initiated which, to date, remains incomplete, although we are approaching finalization. For us and beyond the COVID health impacts, this Project was plagued by serious and unavoidable impediments. The pandemic led to a chronic supply shortage of building materials and skilled labour. In addition, major structural change was required to accommodate (previously) unknown underground infrastructure. Additionally, a new sewer connection was required under a major road. Along with the impacts of flooding, COVID related illness and contractor failures, these factors combined in a perfect storm of cost escalations that almost doubled the budget allocated for its completion. Whilst the Commonwealth did agree to contribute more funds to the Project, ACRO similarly was required to increase its financial commitment. This, at times, led to serious cash flow moments, which were capably handled by our Accounts Manager, Neil Joseph, and our Treasurer, Chris Stewart. The intensity of this period was managed calmly by our Executive and I am grateful for their active engagement during this period.

The building itself will be an outstanding fit for purpose facility that undoubtedly will provide security and peace for the many families expected to benefit from it over the coming decades. It is a finely crafted construction and we are indebted to our builder Alan Elliott for its realization. Alan has operated under extreme pressure to accommodate the changes required during the construction period. He has had to navigate the trades and supply shortages; deal with some less than reliable tradespeople and navigate difficult engineering issues. We are extremely thankful that he was always there for us, in spite of the many difficulties he encountered along the way. We also acknowledge the team of workers who worked with Alan who met the many challenges of the build with good humour and many innovative solutions. Others involved with the Project since its beginning (and who remain staunch supporters of

Executive Director's Annual Report 2022

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our work) include Architect Scott Connell and Town Planner Ben Battist. We have been extremely grateful for their insights and ongoing commitment to the reconstruction.

As noted earlier, these cost increases did impact the organisation. Further, during the construction period the Federal Government advised of changes to Aged Care funding whereby organisations would no longer receive grant funding on a quarterly basis, but rather would receive monthly payments in arrears from July 2022. Difficult decisions needed to be made. As a medium-sized charity deficit budgeting was not a financially viable option and our surplus funds had already been committed to our housing development project. It was necessary to change our service delivery and cost-structure model by reducing our in-house trade staff, deferring rather to using suitable qualified external trade contractors on a fee-per-service basis. In the past we had utilized both methodologies engaging in-house tradespeople and external trade referrals. We were fortunate that we had a number of reliable in-house contractors with whom clients were familiar. We have been also fortunate in securing some former in-house staff as registered external contractors whilst other former Staff secured alternative employment or commenced business for themselves.

ACRO has always been blessed with competent, reliable, honest and courteous trade staff. We rarely had any complaints and our clients held them in the highest of regard. These are staff who were loyal to ACRO over a long period of time. I acknowledge those who are no longer employed by ACRO, with extreme gratitude, including Ben Green, Glenn Bailey, Jared Taylor and David Licht. The changed arrangements for this part of organizational activity was difficult as we said farewell to these long-term staff members. However, as they each took up new positions, we have been remind-

ed that change can lead to new opportunities for growth that otherwise may have been missed. ACRO now has a staff of five and I thank Fiona, Neil, Anneliess and Paul for maintaining a high standard of service delivery in the face of extraordinary change.

The other major modification forced upon us prematurely this year was the sale of Finsbury Park. In February 2022 our building was inundated by flood waters with extensive damage to the downstairs administration office, workshop area and equipment with a damage bill well in excess of \$100,000.00. This was a devastating event creating a very difficult environment for our staff and clients. We are indebted to our trades staff who worked tirelessly to clean up and clear out the mess and minimize disruption to our service provision. Fortunately our insurers met the costs for reparation. Others in the same complex were not so lucky. This was the first time ever that a flooding of this property had occurred and it raised concerns about possible future weather events and also the salability of the property. With a smaller staff compliment it was agreed that the large workshop area was surplus to our need and it was agreed to test the market. We were fortunate to find a buyer who was prepared to meet our asking price in spite of a clear knowledge of the future flooding potential.

These major changes during the year have enabled us to stabilize our financial circumstances and be in a position to complete the emergency housing development in the coming year and continue our work in other areas. As I write we are in the process of a temporary relocation of our Office to



Dr Clive Begg Executive Director

another site in anticipation of a final relocation to our redeveloped property, hopefully by March 2023. This has not been a pleasant experience coping with several moves in addition to a temporary cramped non-air-conditioned accommodation space.

Over the past year ACRO has received increasing requests for assistance from people who are in desperate financial and housing circumstances and who are emotionally as well as financially strained. Governments at both State and Federal levels are grappling with failures to plan adequately across decades when resource boom profits were high and general economic times were much more favorable than now. As a community we are all faced with rising costs, not only for everyday staples like food and rent, but building costs are also out of control as well as a shortage of skilled labour. Off the back of a health crisis, all levels of Government and the community are struggling to respond. However, the priority for all should be adequate housing and currently this is not available to a growing number of people either through government housing or in the private rental market. Skyrocketing private rental prices are forcing many from their homes and added pressure is being felt from the ending of the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) introduced by the Rudd government in 2008 and determined by the Abbott government to end in 2026. There is legitimate criticism as to whether the scheme actually achieved its aims. There is no

doubt that it has directly impacted on the current increasing homelessness rates as tenants who cannot afford the rental increases and properties being withdrawn from the scheme.

We should also be skeptical about the current terminology in vogue, terms such as "affordable housing" and "social housing". Many in the community may be surprised to learn that "affordable housing" is defined as housing that is rented at 75% of current *market* rent. Depending on the areas where such housing may be built, or if a person or family is on Centrelink income only, this can actually be quite *unaffordable* and potential tenants are often informed that their income is insufficient. Social housing also has become an interchangeable term for both housing that is operated by the Department of housing or by community housing organizations. There are many and varied eligibility requirements that apply to these different forms of social and affordable housing. The community need to be mindful of possible misconceptions from the (mis)use of broad terms which may imply that governments are investing directly in building and operating more housing for families in need. Governments may, in fact, be divesting that responsibility primarily to Organisations who do not face the ballot box. As a community we must remain vigilant in the struggle for fairness and equity and continue to advocate to address social inequality.

I have been encouraged by the way in which the ACRO staff have handled the considerable stress placed upon them over the past twelve months. Although now a reduced workforce and given the increasingly high demands placed upon them by many in crisis, ACRO has continued to play its part in achieving social justice for those in difficult financial and emotional situations. I congratulate Fiona, Neil, Anneliess and Paul for their fortitude in the face of increasing demands. In addition to losing our tradespeople the year also saw Lauren McNamara move on to a new, more challenging position outside the organisation. Lauren was a great asset for ACRO and I know she will continue to demonstrate her considerable skill and compassion in her new job. We wish her well.

As for our Executive members, what can I say that hasn't already been said many times before? Ian, Chris and Stephanie have always demonstrated their compassion, patience, integrity and intellect. This last year put our Executive to the limits of all of these qualities –

and they did not fail us. Thank you! Thank you also to our members who continue to support us and to our clients who remind us every day of the need to keep social justice as our focus into the future.

The pathway to the future for organizations such as ours continues to be a challenge. The reasons why charitable organizations were established in the first instance bear little resemblance to the reasons they persist today. Genuine concern for the plight of the disadvantaged and for those in dire circumstances appears to have given way to political and economic imperatives. The public is becoming more demanding in terms of its tax contributions and how they are directed. Benevolent Institutions are becoming more performance measured and must apply administrative processes that may detract from service delivery. Governments demand immediate gratification within electoral cycles. This, in turn, forces governments to become more focused upon short-term and popular fixes, the cumulative failure of which are exacerbating difficulties for the disadvantaged. Housing, Health and Community Services must be at the forefront of all government and community planning.

In terms of *our* performance during the year across our various Programs it is noted that our figures overall are on par with the previous financial period, with emergency accommodation (slightly higher), Home Maintenance (both HAS and CHSP marginally lower) and Modifications (CHSP considerably lower) however this variance is reasonably explained by the ongoing vulnerabilities of older clients and their need and choice to isolate as well as increased periods of sickness and hospitalizations.

Referrals from Occupational Therapists have significantly fallen to due to ongoing COVID impacts for clients and longer wait times for client assessments.

ACRO notes that over 65s registering for My Aged Care (MAC) continues to impact on the number of new clients registering for Home Assist and also impacts on our ability to retain existing HAS clients.

ACRO has actively advocated to the Department of Housing to increase the level of subsidized assistance available to Home Assist clients. The program has not increased any levels of assistance to clients in over twenty years, despite significant increases in the cost of tradespersons over this time and escalating building and maintenance costs generally. ACRO has slightly exceeded its Specialist Homelessness Service targets for the 2021-22 financial year.

ACRO is supporting three families long term on bridging visas who are unable to exit to independent housing due to limited income and ineligibility for social housing, again, due to visa status.