



**The LIFEWISE Centre – submission for PARITY magazine, March 2009.**

## **BREAKTHROUGH FRAMEWORK TURNING LIVES AROUND**

LIFEWISE, the community services division of Methodist Mission Northern, (the Mission) is approaching the first anniversary of the implementation of its cutting-edge service delivery strategy.

The LIFEWISE Centre, (formerly known as the Airedale Community Centre), at the helm of the benchmark strategy, dubbed *Pathways out of Homelessness*, is managed by former mental health services manager Corie Haddock. Below, Corie outlines the new thinking framed around achieving positive outcomes for homeless clients.

### **From 'hand-out' to 'hand-up.'**

In early 2007, the Mission evaluated its Airedale Centre service delivery model that had catered to the Auckland homeless community across two centuries, and concluded that the hand-out approach was simply maintaining its clients in their state of dependence and isolation from the rest of the community. The Mission, at the juncture of repositioning the organisation as a social champion (rather than social do-gooder) wanted to provide services that redressed social disadvantage and dislocation, while addressing the fundamental factors that contributed to these. Noted researcher Dr Chez Leggatt-Cook was commissioned to examine and report on some essential questions that would help to facilitate a framework specific to our clients' needs.

Several initial steps have been implemented since 2007. I'll illustrate the development and delivery of the strategy in five basic steps and reinforce the logic within each phase – note that we're still in the process of transition.

### **Step one: New thinking**

The first and perhaps most significant step was the acknowledgment by the Mission, a Christian agency with an ethos of 'unconditional love without expectation,' that a new service model was needed for the Centre, which meant that a new way of thinking had to be adopted. We still wanted to provide life-giving basics to our clients, (although there was a real debate about whether the provision of food was enabling our clients to remain dependent) - but the research had identified that supplementary best-practise services

needed to be adopted in order to turn clients' lives around. Change was needed so we could provide a service that was openly oriented to housing people rather than maintaining people in homelessness. As challenging as this new thinking was for staff and the organisation, it was, and still is, confronting for some clients. There is an innate investment from formerly institutionalised and mentally unwell clients in the current premises being their space, their community centre. This space is where they have long been provided with meals, clothing, shower and toilet facilities and, importantly, fellowship - and all without judgement. Clients living in a world thick with mistrust are threatened by change, so we had to be respectful of their fears and manage the change process carefully.

### **Step two: A model concept**

Step two in the plan was the recognition that LIFEWISE could not solve homelessness alone and would need other effective agency partners to help progress the framework – partners who could provide help with mental health and alcohol and drug services, life skills, and benefit and housing support. The framework would also need to be formalised and funded. Health sector professional, Joanne Evans, was appointed Project Manager to oversee the development of the planning phase. Joanne's background in health service analysis, service modelling and change-implementation provided the skill-set our project required. Joanne worked closely with the Mission team at all levels for several months. In late 2007, after a long road of fact-gathering, developing, negotiating and strategising, *Pathways out of Homelessness* was officially formulated, signed off and ready to head into step three. *(A small allocation of funding was provided at this time by the Auckland City Council, which enabled the agency partners to be trained in the model. A portion was reserved for the April 2009 undertaking of a development audit.)*

### **Step three: The transformation begins**

Step three is where I jump into the change process. I had previously worked with newly-appointed General Manager of LIFEWISE's Community Services Division, John McCarthy, and he thought the *Pathways* framework would suit my experience and passion. My mental health service background offered the Centre a different interpretation of their client group – a group whose needs are multi-faceted, complex and deep-rooted. Aside from the complexities involved in addressing their evident needs, the other major, long-term issue that LIFEWISE's client base presents is that they are probably the most difficult to engage with because of their transient nature. Fortunately the framework acknowledged this, and because the model was similar to those I had worked with in mental health, I knew the structure could achieve positive and impacting results.

In addition to implementing the new solutions-focused approach, we knew it was also important to recognise and address the key issues that led our clients into homelessness in the first place. The framework would, at least on an individual level, begin to address some of these issues, and help us gather information so we could prevent other clients from living on the streets.

Behind the scenes, the Mission was working hard to build a contemporary brand platform for the organisation from which the framework could be delivered. The name 'Methodist Mission Northern' would no longer encapsulate the true nature of the organisation's work across its community services.

#### **Step four: The progress of partners and *Pathways***

We knew that no one agency could solve homelessness; no government multi-agency strategy existed or had even been mooted, and there was no parallel strategy within the not-for-profit sector - so we created our own approach to operate from within the Centre. Here our fourth phase begins - the formalisation of the *Pathways* agency partnerships, and the structure that we would work to as a team. We purposefully sought formal partnership arrangements with specific agencies, and drew up service level agreements with them to outline the expectations around each others' work. ANZAC Day 2008 marked the beginning of significant advancement in the campaign to end homelessness in New Zealand. On 25 April 2008, the old Airedale Centre, our limiting 'charity' model, and the out-of-date brand were officially given a new life and a new name; LIFEWISE was born, and, with our partners, we began to deliver on the *Pathways* model.

The new opportunities for clients to engage on-site at The LIFEWISE Centre with mainstream mental health and alcohol and drug services, community probation, Work and Income and Housing New Zealand connected them to a normalised experience of these services. Engagement is still a choice for clients, but this setting provides them with the chance to increase their visibility to the wider world and the systems that helped create their homelessness in the first place.

Parts of the old service model – meals and clothing – still remain, but with a different sense of purpose. While our clients are mostly transient, meals are the means that ensure clients continue to come through our doors. We know that basic hospitality is key to engagement and trust. We know too that you can't engage in conversation about higher level issues such as addiction, mental health, employment and life skills if you're basically starving. It's practical and pragmatic compassion, but with a different purpose to the previous soup kitchen approach.

Our agency partners have allocated times of service within our Centre each week to engage with clients. The agencies collaborate with us, and with each other, identifying issues and addressing them on a client-by-client basis. Ultimately, we're facilitating the opportunity for the client to meet with the required social services in a place they trust. Many clients have had repeated negative exposure to other agencies - several have experienced considerable discrimination - so we all work to the "unconditional positive regard" principle. This ethos is supported with checks and balances, and if a client needs cooling off time, as can often happen, we allow that without judgement. Yes, these relationships can be challenging, but we always focus on re-establishing positive contact with the client and help them to reach their goals - the end-game is that they engage with *Pathways* so they can achieve a sustainably improved life.

An important part of the *Pathways* framework is simple and practical - registering our clients for benefits so they have an income; organising for them to get onto Housing New Zealand waiting lists - very basic but important steps that are easy for us to help implement, but which can prove difficult and often complicated for clients. Our objective is to have clients accommodated as quickly as possible, and then continue support services around them so they can remain in that accommodation - often the hardest part - and have the opportunity for independence. We recognise however that while some clients manage the transition, others may never make it to full independence, and will require support for life.

Nearly one year on, our model is still being built upon. We still see social service gaps every day - I've identified some of these below\* - and we're still cementing in what we're currently doing. The one-year audit/review process that is about to take place via an independent auditor will highlight the framework's wins and shortfalls, and as we move into our second year we'll work on growing and strengthening the framework.

#### **Step five: Here and now, and the future**

Step five is the place we're at now. Here in March 2009 we can reflect on a year of achievement, definitely. Resourcing our engaged clients with relevant, effective services has been successful. The framework works. Housing our clients can be accomplished; we know that, though it takes time. We've accommodated 10 clients in the last six months by creating an environment based on a framework where people can change, as compared to years when we hardly housed anyone. But in a Centre that, on a 'good' day, assists around 40 people, and on a 'bad' day can see up to 120 hungry clients coming through its doors, we still have a big job ahead of us. As a community, and as a Centre, we have

obstacles to overcome - some are existing, some are evolving - and the economic slump we are in will make our efforts twice as tough.

### **Our Future**

While we're no longer just a soup kitchen, we're still not the complete service that will reduce dependency. The LIFEWISE Centre will move premises in early 2010, allowing us to take the model to the next stage and some of our thinking is beginning to take shape. Our multi-agency collaboration has highlighted the need for a 'hub' service as a base for the incumbent agencies, and other agencies that will deliver the gap services to our clients. We'll continue to offer services that sustain our clients, such as food, but the delivery model is likely to be a consumer-oriented, rights-based service, something like a community café. This would create more opportunities for training and job-skills development for volunteers (an extension of the success of our existing meal service operated with the help of client volunteers), and encourage greater participation and engagement in our work with the public.

The future will also feature LIFEWISE's continued and significant involvement in the Auckland Solutions Framework (Future Direction for Homeless Services in Auckland: 2008 – 2013). Developed in tandem with central and local government and other non-government organisations, the framework contains important pieces of the solutions jigsaw that the skills and experience of LIFEWISE can help to solve. Homelessness prevention will be a key focus; our staff will be involved in pre-discharge planning from mental health and prison facilities where the client is of no fixed abode or has been living in vulnerable accommodation. LIFEWISE has also proposed innovations such as a special circumstances court and a tenancy sustainment project aiming to support newly housed clients and those whose tenancy is at risk due to difficult behaviour. Establishing client independence where it might be achievable is the ultimate goal.

The LIFEWISE Centre's framework strategy will enter the audit process in April. The audit, and any resultant changes, will be made available on the LIFEWISE website ([www.lifewise.org.nz](http://www.lifewise.org.nz)) from July 2009. In the meantime, if you would like further information or to simply have a chat, please email me on [corieh@lifewise.org.nz](mailto:corieh@lifewise.org.nz)

#### ***\*Identifying social service gaps for homelessness***

*A large part of step four has been months of defining and redefining which parts of our model work effectively, and honing in on gaps that need to be filled. The needs we thought were critical at the beginning of the strategy are changing. One of the biggest*

*unidentified issues we face as an agency is gambling, so we're currently in constructive discussions with the New Zealand Problem Gambling Association. We also want to provide services like anger management, and stopping domestic violence – services we see as absolutely essential – and we need to tactically address these types of problems that are holding clients in a state of homelessness.*

*Two other large and problematic gaps in terms of service care that we have identified in Auckland are for the needs of homeless women, and homeless youth. The specific needs of these client groups require urgent attention, and we are currently identifying ways of incorporating relevant service delivery into our framework. Again, funding is integral to these services being delivered and implemented successfully.*

## **The 'F' word: FUNDING**

Our sector knows that homelessness is the upshot of the lack of top-level acknowledgement that a serious problem exists. There are no government strategies, no policies and no funding allocated to homelessness, despite years of advocacy and lobbying. Unbelievably, there is still no formal *acknowledgement* by central government (and very little by local government) that this country has a statistically defined homelessness issue. This is despite various targeted research efforts by sector specialists that have not only highlighted serious primary, secondary and tertiary homeless data, but also recommended proven approaches such as Housing First to boot.

The LIFEWISE Centre operates/subsists thanks to grants and donations – we are totally reliant on the generosity of the public and the approval of grant applications. So, in this era of financial uncertainty, what can we do in 2009 to ensure our clients have a fair shot at life? This year we will insist on having homelessness acknowledged as a social concern. We'll persevere with facilitating local strategy and policy while we continue to campaign for our work to be funded.

Three rough-sleeping homeless people died faceless and alone on Auckland streets last year. The responsibility of feeding them and caring for them had been left to the NGO sector. When they passed, we dressed them, held funerals for them and buried them. It's a disgrace that human beings are being allowed to die on our streets - in a society that claims to have a significant social conscience.

In 2006, the mayor of Denver said that this year's NZCEH national conference guest, Philip Mangano, had shown how *"to look at this issue such that you're not measuring yourself by how many homeless people you fed but how many fewer homeless people there are now than there were before."* We can have fewer homeless people on our streets, but it's time for us all to stand up and contribute to the effort to achieve this.

### **Snapshot: The LIFEWISE Centre: triumphs and hurdles**

In the last 12 months, we have:

- Established a clearer picture of the needs of homelessness in Auckland
- Created a solutions-focused framework that is workable for other localities
- Settled 10 clients into accommodation
- Implemented positive and successful, collaborative agency partnerships
- Advocated for clients through Auckland Solutions Framework, the Committee for Auckland and *Pathways*
- Increased access to clients for mental health workers
- Successfully addressed ongoing client issues; mental health, drug and alcohol
- Increased reporting rates to Corrections and subsequent drop in breaches
- Reduced violence in the Centre
- Participated in the Homeless World Cup – five LIFEWISE clients starred in New Zealand's first-ever team at the Cup competition held in Melbourne in December – it was a life changing experience for them, made possible by the passion of our staff and sponsors
- Consolidated the importance of the framework with buy-in by staff and many clients
- Built a formidable staff line-up
- Increased client volunteer work, providing skills and experience

The obstacles we face:

- Lack of formal acknowledgement by government that New Zealand has a serious homelessness issue
- No formalised government strategy, policy or funding for homelessness
- Lack of funding full stop
- Lack of sufficient follow-up support services for housed clients
  - Lack of funding for LIFEWISE to action this as more clients are accommodated
- Threat of funding decrease from grants/donors in times of belt-tightening
- Threat of growth of client base due to recession
- Constant identification of service gaps
- Opposition to change by some clients