

# The NEIGHBOURHOOD JOB ACCESS centre

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The Neighbourhood Job Access Centre was located in one of the Department of Housing properties on the estate.

## Summary

This brief report describes a success storey in providing the opportunity for low skilled residents of the Goonellabah Estate to take on individual commitment within a structured work environment. The Job Access Centre is a component of the Department of Housing's Neighbourhood Improvement Program (NIP) and initiated in response to the identified needs for residents of the estate to have greater access to income earning opportunities. In this project residents of the estate are supported to construct car ports, decks, verandas and fences within budget and on time in a scheme that focusses on providing a supportive environment for individual commitment and responsibility.

The innovative approach taken has resulted in a high level of residents to:

- Take individual responsibility for small clearly defined outputs.
- Earn small amounts of money without compromising their existing welfare status.
- Gain skills and confidence in a progressive manner.
- Have control in how and when they wish to make commitments.

The result has been an administratively complex but ultimately successful project that has contributed to increased prosperity and well being across the whole community.

## The Goonellabah Estate

The Goonellabah estate is located within suburban Lismore and comprises 152 houses constructed by the NSW Department of Housing (DoH) in the early 1970's. Goonellabah is a mixed income suburb of the town, with a wide variety of income profiles living in the area. The estate though is a definable pocket of lower income households. All indicators are that there is a high proportion of lower income families living on the estate than in the immediate surrounds. As part of its ongoing program to 'normalise' the estate the Department initiated a Neighbourhood Improvement Program. The program had a number of components including:

- A policy to sell up to 50% of the housing stock
- Upgrade the remaining houses
- Develop a community action plan.

The community action plan developed was based on a participatory analysis approach with casual work opportunities for residents identified as a key area of need. A critical review of a previous employment initiative showed that a traditional model of an auspicing body engaging a builder/foreman together with a number of residents as 'workers' for the duration of the program was deficient in a number of ways, including:

- It did not respond to the residents' desires for casual work opportunities. The long term unemployed have usually developed survival systems and life styles that make full time employment an unattractive proposition. The potential for earning small amounts to supplement benefits is though highly desirable.
- There was no opportunity for residents to take personal responsibility for executing a work program. The majority of 'employment programs' result in ballooning labour costs, and the continuation of a 'master/servant' attitude to work.

To address these shortcomings a more sophisticated employment initiative was developed. In collaboration with the Lismore Skills Centre (LSC) the key elements of the initiative were for the Department of Housing (DoH) to provide:

- \$40,000 for the LSC to engage a building foreman/supervisor
- A budget of \$50,000 to be spent on upgrading houses in the area.
- Regular maintenance and planned works required by the DoH to be directed to the employment program for implementation.

The details of the program evolved from meeting two conceptual ideas.

- Providing casual employment opportunities as desired by residents.
- That those obtaining work had to make appropriate personal commitments.

### **The concept**

The general concept was to enable residents to provide fixed quotes for work to be undertaken, in the manner of a contractor, or in the 'larger' projects, a subcontractor. This was seen as being necessary for two reasons:

- To ensure that even within a 'supportive environment' employees gained experience in being responsible for own decisions.
- That the quotes provided to the Dpt. of Housing for work required were attainable, resulting in a predictable cost.

### **The hurdles**

The principle hurdle to be overcome was that it was not possible to engage residents as contractors in their own right. None carried appropriate insurance cover, and a statutory agency such as the Dpt. of Housing could not be placed in the position of employing 'grey' labour.

A secondary problem was having to pay casual award rates, which for the work required was considerably more than the residents generally realised when carrying out casual work in the 'grey' market.

Both these hurdles were overcome by a local NGO, the Lismore Skills Centre (LSC) becoming both a registered contractor to undertake DoH work, and casual labour employer. The process developed in collaboration between these two bodies enabled the Department to have certainty around the cost of works identified, and for residents to gain access to casual work.

## The process

The initial part of the process adopted was as per standard DoH procedures for contracting work to an authorised contractor/supplier. In this case the LSC was a registered supplier who directly employed a licensed builder as part of the program. The process would commence with the DoH:

- identifying the work required, eg. Fence, deck, drainage project.
- Preparing an office estimate
- Requesting the LSC to provide a fixed quote for the work
- Comparing the quote with the office estimate and, if within acceptable limits, instructs the contractor to carry out the work.

On receipt of the request to provide a quote, the licensed builder running the program prices the work in the normal way. Each component of the work required is broken down according to labour and materials. The labour component of each sub section of the work is estimated in order to achieve an overall quote, which is submitted to the DoH for approval. It is at this point that the program differs from usual building practice.

The Neighbourhood Improvement Program co-ordinator distributes a 'flyer' to all houses advising of the opportunity for work on the specific projects available. The flyer lists a specific date and time in which interested residents need to attend at the 'Job Access Centre' where the work will be allocated.

Before the meeting the builder writes up on a board or flip chart each subsection of the work, any drawings or diagrams available and the number of people expected to carry out that subsection. For example, a deck extension to a house might comprise:

- Marking out, digging holes, and pouring concrete - 1 person
- Constructing the framework - 2 people
- Constructing the roof and railings - 2 people
- Painting - 2 people

The potential workers identify which parts of the job they would be interested in, and the meeting self selects those who will be given the opportunity. By not 'allocating' the work, but simply facilitating the meeting to select who has the work empowers and enables the residents to make decisions. This is always done civilly and with little problem. The tendency is for the group to ensure that all get some work. On the occasions where there have been too many for the work available, the group has developed a general understanding amongst itself that those that have missed out this time round, will get work the next time.

Once the potential workers have been identified, the co-ordinator or builder goes through the work required in more detail with each sub group, requesting that they estimate the time that it will require them to carry out the specific work. The co-ordinator assists them in the process, discussing the parameters of what is required. This would include making an estimate of time to erect any scaffold that might be required, cleaning up etc. In the majority of cases, the workers determine very closely the same amount of time as has been estimated previously. If there are discrepancies, there is a contingency sum within the original quote, or else if unacceptably different, the work is offered to another. Once a time agreement has been determined, the workers sign pre-prepared pro forma performance agreements indicating the time agreed to, the date at which their section of work will be required, and the total gross payment due to them at completion.

At this point an OH&S talk is given by the co-ordinator or licensed builder, together with the 'rules of the game' regarding working in other residents properties.

A new worker scheduled to carry out a section of work, who has not previously had work with the program, is required to complete the forms to become a casual worker with the Lismore Skills Centre. Starting the job is conditional on completion of the forms for formal engagement.

### Learning from experience

The early trials of the program identified a number of areas requiring 'fine tuning'.

Workers tended to estimate in 'days' not hours. However, as they were not used to working a full day, they often did not actually put in a full days work. This was overcome by simply advising at the beginning of the allocation process that all work was based on a seven hour day. Thus, as rates are predetermined by award rates, a days work is 7 times the award rate.



Many participants had no previous experience of formal work. The program provided a supportive environment for individuals to take responsibility for completing small agreed outputs.



Being responsible for completing work rather than being 'at work' particularly suits carers and others with complex life arrangements.

residents who have previous work experience. They are used to a work situation in which you do nothing until instructed, and if not instructed, you do nothing.

The majority were used to getting cash in hand payments at the completion of any work they carried out. Having to complete a time sheet based on their agreement, and then not getting paid until the regular LSC pay run was difficult for many. Furthermore, tax was often deducted. Now part of every employment session is devoted to explaining with a large calendar when they are expected to carry out the work, the actual pay date, and the probable tax that will be deducted. Having overcome the initial teething problems the majority are now used to the process, and new comers gain comfort from the fact that the 'old hands' seem happy with the arrangement.

Obviously some spent longer working than their agreed time. This was especially the case at the start of the program. The majority were used to a pretty relaxed day. We played hardball. We discussed why the work might have taken longer, whether there were any unforeseen incidents that prevented the work being carried out in the agreed time. If there was no real reason why the activity might have taken longer than anticipated, no mercy was given. The intention is not to get the lowest price, but to ensure a fair price is paid for expected work.

A number of workers (4-5) have 'graduated' to other full time work. This has largely been through personal recommendations by the licensed builder to other contractors looking for a 'new start'. There is a core of around 5 to 6 that turn up for the majority of the jobs available. The greatest problems are from the older

## **Employment Outcomes**

Over 19 months, between August 1999 and February 2001, the project generated some impressive outcomes.

- 63 people were employed on on-estate work
- 11 people found either full-time or substantial part-time work off the estate
- 26 obtained casual work off the estate
- 4 people undertook accredited training

## **Value for money**

There is a relatively high turnover of residents on the estate, especially in the newly privatised houses which tend to attract low income itinerant people renting the properties purchased by small investors. It is of course almost impossible to place a dollar value on the 'worth' of the project, but as the asset value of the 'bricks and mortar' is conditional on the social conditions of the neighbourhood, it is probable that the program has contributed greatly towards the overall well being of the estate. This in turn reflecting in the increasing prices obtained in house sales.

## **Conclusions**

The process is administratively complex and requires a high degree of understanding on the part of the builder/supervisor. To be successful the person in this role has to be aware that the name of the game is not just 'getting the job done' but enabling people that often have very low skills. After a year the cost of work undertaken is similar to that provided by external contractors with the exception of the salary for the licensed builder. If what is being looked for is the cheapest fence, or deck, it is not viable. However, as a mechanism to engage people who have chronic self esteem problems, lack skills, have little experience in the work force and give them the opportunity to earn some money, realise that they are capable, develop new skills, be involved in a group decision making process, and make commitments to achieve those ends, the process has proved to be remarkably successful.

- It meets the needs of the residents for casual employment opportunities, without them having to make a long term (ie number of months) commitment to an employment program.
- It ensures that all workers are properly insured, and that the Department of Housing is not engaged in employing within the 'grey' market.
- It provides a secure environment in which residents can make short term commitments, that they feel able to keep.

There are numerous storeys of individuals initially only willing to 'dig the holes' or 'wash the wall' and later over time willing and eager to take on painting or even construction.

The program is eminently reproducible.

## **Further information**

A short video made by residents can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/DrMartinButcher#p/u/18/EZ88ItSjJl>