

The Story of CHSS

A long time ago (1989) in a town far away (Wangaratta), there was a 'rooming house worker' called Corienne Krich. Corienne worked for an organization called OVECA – out of this organization emerged three new organizations – NESAY; CHSS and Rural Housing Network.

During this period, concerns were raised by the Wangaratta community about the lack of accommodation and support services for people with physical and psychiatric disabilities. A public meeting was held by Wangaratta Council and a steering group established to address the issue. Our current CoM member Neville McCormick, and Corienne, were members of the steering group which was successful in obtaining SAAP funding for one position, to set up a Supported Accommodation Program for single adults. One property was also allocated from the Ministry of Housing.

Wangaratta Supported Accommodation Program was born, and Corienne, the 'rooming house worker' took on the job as the 'support worker' to help people with a disability to get accommodation and support them in their everyday living skills, like shopping and cooking. The program was auspiced by the Wangaratta Council.

At first, Corienne worked from home setting up the program and then found a vacant old convent school building where the walls were lined with hessian and there were lots of creepy spiders. She did have a car but not much else. There were no policies, no OH&S, no mobile phone, no computer and one worker! In those days there were no such things as case management frameworks either! The funding guidelines were very broad and there was very little accountability. The photocopier arrived in the second year and the fax by the third year. Things were really getting impressive now.

Within a couple of years it became apparent that the needs of these clients for independent living skills and in home support did not fit with the SAAP guidelines and the program changed its focus from disability support to supporting homeless, single adults. Wangaratta Supported Accommodation program became an Incorporated Association, managed by a Committee of Management, and was no longer auspiced by the Wangaratta Council. Neville McCormick was elected as Chairperson.

In 1992, the program secured new SAAP funding for an additional support worker (now Corienne and 1 other staff member), to provide supported accommodation to homeless families. The Ministry of Housing provided 2 additional properties which were managed by the program. WSAP still had no mobile phones and computers were only purchased after the program (not an organisation yet), had been going 5 years.

In 1994 DHS rolled out funding for Domestic Violence Outreach Programs across the region and Wangaratta Supported Accommodation Program employed a DV outreach worker, Lynne Allan. With a staffing group of 3.5 (including an Administration worker), Corienne was appointed the Coordinator of the agency (still not big enough to call an organization). She also maintained a part case load, and completed most of the administration work. The DV Outreach worker, having come from a Women's Refuge initiated the development of a worker safety policy. In total the organization at this point had about 3 policies.

In 1996 the agency was approached by DHS to auspice Wodonga Supported Accommodation Program, which provided supported accommodation to homeless families and single adults. Wangaratta Supported Accommodation program then became Central Hume Support Services, to reflect the fact that it now covered the two geographical areas of Wangaratta and Wodonga. Corienne now officially became the CEO.

In 1999, CHSS was asked by DHS Community Care Division to take on a new DHS initiative, the High Risk Adolescent Intensive Case Management Service, ICMS. At this stage, there were no adolescent residential services in the Hume Region, and ICMS supported their clients in the community or ACP placements.

In 1999, Ian Watkins joined the CoM of CHSS, and in 2001, was elected to and continues in the role of Chairperson. Neville McCormick, a founding Committee member remains on the CoM of CHSS.

In 2000, DHS made the decision to re-introduce adolescent residential services in the Hume Region. DHS asked CHSS to extend the High Risk Adolescent Service to include the provision of residential Care in Wodonga. Within a period of 4 months, with no previous experience in residential care, CHSS had established an adolescent residential service with 1 client, in a soon to be demolished Ministry of Housing property. The Wodonga Youth Refuge was established in the same year after a successful submission to DHS SAAP division.

The expansion into the areas of service provision to high risk / needs adolescents presented a steep learning curve and many challenges to CHSS. Fortunately we have a CoM that have always been supportive and employees who have been passionate and committed to the work that needed to be done.

In 2001, DHS again approached the now Central Hume Support Services, to auspice another Wodonga based program – Wodonga Accommodation & Support Program for Youth (WASPY). This re -auspice extended the range of homelessness services provided by CHSS to include Adolescent Community Placement and Youth Support Programs. CHSS was also lucky to inherit 3 staff members, among others, from the 2 Wodonga agencies, - who are still with CHSS today – Glenys, Georgie and Joanna.

The next 5 years saw a major increase in programs delivered by CHSS, particularly in the provision of youth services. Today, CHSS is the largest provider of youth services in Eastern Hume.

The challenge to any expanding service is developing and maintaining the balance between a high quality service delivery to clients and the community and the internal structures needed to support it. Internal funding was allocated by the CoM to fund a staffing position for the further development of CHSS' policies and procedures. After the completion of CHSS' policy and procedures development, this position has now evolved into Research and Quality Improvement. A reflection on the agencies commitment to ongoing service quality improvement.

Following several years of unprecedented growth the CoM engaged Ian Dunn from The Strategy Workshop to conduct a comprehensive review of the organisations operations. The review while positive stated that “the organization is, nevertheless, suffering from what could be broadly described as “growing pains”. From the review it became evident that to better manage the personnel needs of a growing organization a Human Resources Manager was required and this position was established in 2003.

The challenges for CHSS could not be met, and our successes achieved, without the full support of all our staff.

Because of that today we have a staff of approximately 72 including full time about (40) and casuals and part-time. We have a structure that includes CoM, CEO, a team of managers and team leaders.

“It is the contribution of other people that has made us what we are” Corienne Krich CEO CHSS.