

## **Community Information Services The Early Years and Current Challenges**

Before I begin I want to sincerely thank Minh Nguyen for all her research and help. CISVIC is extremely fortunate to have on staff someone with such great skills. I have so much enjoyed going down memory lane with her, remembering so many people who put their heart and soul into establishing such an important movement. We may not always have agreed with each other but there is no denying the dedication and commitment of everyone.

What a long way we have come from those first tumultuous years in the late 1960s and 70s. So many changes in our community and so many changes that information services have had to make to the way they function.

Today I have been asked to concentrate on the very early years. I'm probably one of only a few in the room who actually lived through them and I'm speaking from memory so if I make a few small errors please forgive me.

As I understand it Citizens Advice Bureaux were set up in England after the Second World War. The movement here was driven by Senator Marie Breen, a formidable woman who was passionate about the need for a similar service in Victoria. Interestingly she seems to have only advocated for it in her own home state because there were no similar services established in other states. But then Victoria was always the most progressive state wasn't it?

Melbourne was the first CAB to be established. This happened in 1968 and by 1970 there were 10 CABs, enough to form the Victorian Association of Citizen Advice Bureaux. They worked under very strict guidelines and had a focus on providing information only – no advocacy, either for individual clients or on a policy level. Privacy was paramount. Write ups after an interview were put in a locked box and could not be accessed if someone came back on a second occasion for further information. New Bureaux who were setting up found it difficult to get copies of the resource material the established ones were using. They were told they were private documents. There was a real reluctance to share.

What a difference to today. I was recently approached by a woman who is establishing the first Indian Welfare organisation in Victoria. She had a number of volunteers who needed training and she was unsure where to go to get help. I referred her to CISVIC who she tells me 'Were really helpful, offering lots of advice and training possibilities' It was great to hear.

But back to the early days. Most Citizen Advice Bureaux were established as stand-alone information services. Springvale had a very different birth. The community had been urging the Council to employ a social worker and in 1969 one was appointed. At the same time a migrant hostel, able to house 1000 residents at any one time, was opened in Springvale. As the only Council welfare worker and with 15,000 homes for whom to provide services the welfare worker decided to involve the community.

She called a public meeting, It was addressed by Dr Abe Kessell from the Dandenong Psychiatric Hospital who helped to establish the Dandenong CAB, Peter Hollingworth from the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Marie Coleman, the very progressive City of Knox social worker. They all emphasized the important role information played in people's lives. 150 people attended the meeting and a committee was formed to plan a way forward. They prepared a survey which asked people if they would volunteer to help with providing information services, interpreting, child care, personal visiting services, a migrant host scheme and a number of other services.

The survey forms were hand delivered and collected in a two week period, all by volunteers. One of the people we recruited and who visited a huge number of homes said it was the first time he had ever felt part of his community. The responses from the survey were overwhelming and, following another public meeting, the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau was off and away. The addition of the word Aid in its name instantly made it different.

I've gone into this example in some detail because it puts in to context some of the future developments and struggles.

### **Training**

Training for Bureau volunteers was provided by the Department of Social Welfare at its Training Institute at Lansell Ave, Toorak under the guidance of Betty Battle and Nancy Hillas. Group leaders also assisted. I think they may have been volunteers. The course was exclusive to information providers. If you were an information organisation providing more than information it was difficult to access the course. Springvale persevered and finally got 9 people trained so they could open their service – 5 days a week from 10.00 am -2.00pm with one night time service a week from 7.00 – 10.00pm. For a long time places on each new course had to be renegotiated. The timing of the courses followed school terms.

### **Coming Together**

Joint meetings of representatives from CABs commenced very soon after the first ones were established. They were chaired by Senator Breen who knew exactly what she wanted. She could always anticipate where opposition on an issue would come from and would never respond when the perceived opponents tried to speak. It was always difficult to get an opportunity to introduce a new idea. Little progress was made in those early days to broaden the scope of the work either to enable greater assistance to be given to individuals or a contribution to be made to social policy discussions.

### **Tracing the Search for Funding**

In 1970 a recommendation was sent to the Inquiry into Local Government Finances that money should be made available to municipalities to enable them to fund CABs. While it is recorded that this was favourably received there is no record as to what happened. **Was this an opportunity missed? Was it an example of the need always for follow up and lobbying?**

### **Emergency Relief**

This is a huge story in itself but today I will just focus on how CABs became involved.

In 1972 the State based emergency relief fund was established possibly in response to the SEC strike in that year. Springvale was heavily involved in the distribution of aid to people and there may have been other CABs. This strike was followed in 1977 by a further eleven week strike which shut down industry. At the same time social security payments were forcing more and more people to seek material aid. This led VCOSS to commence a campaign to improve payments and, in addition, establish a Commonwealth emergency relief fund which finally happened in 1982. There were subsequently a number of major improvements to the social security system but sadly that commitment only continued for a few years.

Then came the heated discussions about who should be eligible for a grant to become an emergency relief provider. The Department favoured the big welfare providers. Here in Victoria we argued very loudly for a community based program because we believed small community organisations gave people the greatest access. **(Something to think about in this day and age when so many organisations are amalgamating and becoming larger and larger,)** That gave CABs the opportunity to broaden their work and, in the long run, to reach far more people in the community.

But that change brought a certain responsibility and challenge. On what principles should the services be based? The formal ones were non-judgemental and accessible to all.

My own belief is that the greatest responsibility of any material aid provider is to ensure that people are on the right benefits or pensions, that they are being paid the correct amount, that they know about other entitlements, that other areas of need are also explored. A request for emergency relief should open many other doors. We once did a survey at Springvale and found that 10% of ER recipients were eligible for more social security entitlements than they were receiving. In the early days some CABs adopted this broad approach, others found it more difficult to do so.

Then data collection became an issue. Once again there was some resistance. Two organisations put their hand up to do a pilot which was being developed by VCOSS -Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau and a Broadmeadows community organisation which was not a CAB. It was an enormous amount of work but at the end of the year we had clear evidence of need. The data collection became statewide and eventually Australia wide and received much attention. I hope individual and statewide organisations still use them as frequently as they once did. Together with anecdotal evidence as to where systems are breaking down, data is a great lobbying tool.

### **Watershed for the Movement**

This happened at the AGM and day long conference hosted by Diamond Valley CAB in 1982. The Minister for Social Welfare was the Guest Speaker. A suggestion had been made to the Social Welfare Department staff that a funding program which would enable interested CABs to employ co-ordinators should be established. They were very supportive of the idea.

As I remember it someone asked a question of the Minister about whether she would be interested in such a proposal. While not giving a clear answer she was certainly

not adverse to the idea. After she left, the meeting fell into an uproar. People said (and I am working from memory):

- It would spell the end of CABs as we knew them
- Paid staff would take control and push the volunteers out
- Only volunteers could run such a service

It was decided by the membership that if such an offer was formally made it should be rejected. Departmental staff were aware of what had happened so no further action was taken. **Another real opportunity was sadly lost.** In spite of that the annual report noted that as the result of the conference 'there had been a great surge forward in thinking and that 10 recommendations had been made' Sadly they do not seem to have been recorded.

As I was asked to do I have been describing events that happened in the 1970s and 80s so I have not covered the many positive changes you have made since then. Those were years of exciting change and challenges for the community sector. Governments were recognising the power of involving the community in planning and service provision. Unfortunately some CABs were slow to respond to opportunities that were being offered.

Now we are all facing a similar time of change and it is important that the challenges are met and the same mistake is not made

What is your role? Do you regularly consider where you have come from and where you hope to go? One of the challenges you face is new technology. You need to embrace all that it has to offer to make the information and other services you provide more accurate, accessible and extensive. But under no circumstances must you lose personal interaction – the one on one contact, the relaxed friendly approach. No technology will help the woman who rings up frequently to ask how to get rid of her old papers and after gentle conversation says she has been bashed again. Yes it's a real story and it took several phone calls, all a repeat of the earlier ones before she took the actual step and left.

One of the projects of the Ronald Henderson Poverty Inquiry was to look at the way people got the information they needed. The report of the project, *Who Cares*, written by researchers, Jean McCaughey and Helen Ferber, stated very clearly that people turned to was family and/or friends well before any service was approached and services needed to provide 'the human touch'. I am sure the same would apply today. How often do we say 'I just need to talk' or 'I talked to my friend and she **listened** and now I feel much better'. *Who Cares* suggested that CABs with the right approach could provide the next level of information that people often need.

Do you think about ways in which you could do better? Are you closely connected with others in the sector so you get to know about opportunities which may be available to allow you to improve or extend your service? Are you community advocates as well as community information providers?

I was so fortunate to work in the years when advocacy was expected and I deplore the fact that fear of losing funding has led to less advocacy in some organisations.

You need to keep detailed data. There is strength in numbers and collectively you are a large organisation.

You have power which you can use for the greater good. You need to network with others.

So I'd like to finish with a challenge by describing the philosophy on which I believe every human services organisation should be based. If I help a person whose problem comes from a systems failure and I don't do anything to work to change that system then I have failed that person. People are not failures. It is the system that lets them down. What are you as an individual, or your organisation, doing to stop the increasing divide between 'the haves' and 'the have nots', the disappearing Aussie notion of 'a fair go for everyone', the loss of important services? Who are you networking with? Who are you talking to? What are you doing to ensure the voice of the grassroots community is not lost?

As I said earlier, collectively you can become a real voice for change. Be that voice. You are needed!

Merle Mitchell  
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