

AASW Victorian State Conference, November 1999

John Honner

1. Introduction

MacKillop Family Services began operations on 1st July 1997. The new entity has a long history, being a refounding of the works of seven well-established Catholic agencies operating in Melbourne and Geelong. MacKillop delivers over \$12 million worth of services through more than a 100 different programs, and is a major provider of specialist child youth and family services in Victoria. (That's the end of the info-commercial.) Importantly, when MacKillop was being planned, it was envisaged that the larger agency would offer not only direct services, but also – because of its scale and unlike its originating agencies – offer a chance to engage in advocacy and policy. The last of MacKillop's four mission statements thus reads:

We stand with those struggling for justice, peace and hope. We advocate with those on the margins and raise awareness in our society of justice issues.

It sounds grand. But how to put it into practice? One line of action has been the decision by a number of caseworkers to establish what have become known as "Telling the Story – Working for Justice" groups. In this paper I want to report to you how these groups have functioned, assess the fruits of their work, and raise the question with you of "Where to next?"

2. How did the "Telling the Story" groups begin?

One of the seven agencies that make up MacKillop Family Services is St Anthony's Family Service in Footscray. In December 1998, at an end-of-year review meeting, a couple of social workers expressed their concern about the fact that there were recurring difficulties and injustices in their work which were the result of systemic failure, poor policy, poorly practised policy, or no policy at all. Two examples given were the problem of getting priority housing for families in urgent need, the other was the high proportion of pre-adolescent children who were staying at home as supports to struggling single parents and not attending school.

These workers were encouraged to form a group, to invite in other workers, and to tell stories of actual cases that typified the problems they were concerned about. Early in 1999 we had a planning meeting at which we agreed to meet for about an hour and a half, to tell our stories, and to table relevant policy papers and forms. I would then type up a transcript of the stories, edit them into some kind of sequence, remove any details which might breach confidentiality, and circulate the stories back to the participants for checking. At the same time, I would try to find the current state of policy and practice, and to contact relevant advocacy groups to establish ways of addressing the issues.

3. Typical stories

At our first meeting five workers told stories of various mis-adventures they had had in trying to get housing for families in need. Their experiences were uniformly depressing and frustrating. They were surprised at how similar their experiences had been at a number of different housing offices. Narratives typically went like the following contributions, from three different family support workers:

If they are in one region, say around Broadmeadows, and are seeking housing in another region, say around Frankston, the demands are impossible to meet. People will have to get forms from the office in Broadmeadows and then be sent off to Frankston. When they get to the Frankston office they have been told that they have to make an appointment. Then they can be

told that they don't have to go to the Frankston office at all. Clerical staff are generally well meaning, but can be inconsistent. There is no specialised housing desk, and four different workers can have four different ideas of forms required. A person without an advocate, usually a single mother with other burdens to carry, would be hopelessly lost.

What families have to go through is a very degrading and confusing. You go to a ministry of housing office to pick up an application form. One worker is spoken to who gives information that, if you can't find a property, you just need to get a letter from a real estate agent saying that there is no property in this price range and that will be sufficient. You don't need the five rejection slips. When the applicant takes the form back with that letter from the real estate agent saying that there is no rental property in that price range her priority application is denied, because she hasn't actually got five written proofs of application. When she appeals and says she was told by another person at that office that she only needed a letter, they put her back on the priority application – they accepted that – so these are the inconsistencies that are told by two different clerical staff in the same office. The inconsistencies in information generally from different offices, and from different clerical staff in the same office, are everywhere.

Every time we go into a real estate agent it is so demeaning to people. A person with a mental disability got literally fifteen rejections because three times she was denied priority housing and had to go back and get some more. She got up to fifteen. And after the third set of denials I wrote a letter of appeal saying how this lady had fronted up fifteen times and how terribly downputting this was for this person who was struggling and who I was gaining ground with, and it did work, she was re-instated. But it shouldn't take that. You have to write a letter of appeal after every denial if you want to keep trying.

That's just a half page excerpt from a four-page dossier, so you can imagine what the effect of the whole narrative is on an innocent reader. As it turned out, on top of these problems, some of our workers were operating on a policy and practice that was two steps out of date, while departmental staff were working on a policy that was one step out of date, and those managing the show had just formulated the new policy of segmented waiting lists. Our staff and departmental staff both lacked information and training on the actual state of policy, and hence lacked power to see that justice was done.

4. From stories to advocacy

The fact that there is an insufficient stock of housing for needy families remained. Our workers were concerned that the wider community did not know enough about this issue and how devastating it was for families in need. What to do? On a hunch, I took these stories to a commercial documentary maker that I knew. The documentary maker was moved by the narratives and agreed to try to sell a Christmas special on family homelessness to Channel 7. Fortunately, this all happened just at the time that the second national conference on homelessness was about to begin at Melbourne Town Hall, and so I was able to put the producer in touch with a number of key activists, academics, and agency heads. The result is that a video called "I'll be home for Christmas" will be screened nationally on Channel 7 on Sunday 19 December. It features case workers, homeless families and individuals, experts like Ken Dyson and Terry Bartholomew, and at least 600,000 will watch it.

While this is a good outcome in terms of raising awareness, it has yet to change policy. Nonetheless, the initiatives of a small number of MacKillop's workers have led to a number of fruitful new linkages across agencies and peak bodies. The issue of priority housing for families, especially where there is a disability, has become one of my primary concerns at all sorts of policy meetings. Nonetheless, I cannot say that the process has changed policies. I have been trying to arrange a meeting with our local Office of Housing but without success. The advent of a new minister has further changed the landscape, and all strategies are on hold at present. One important outcome, however, is that our workers have seen what has happened to their stories, and they themselves feel more empowered and less frustrated in their work.

5. Other "Telling the Story" groups

Two other groups have also made a lot of progress. The group concerned with pre-adolescent truancy, which was an extension of the first priority housing group, simply raised the narrative evidence that so many of the families they worked with had school-age children at home. The only policy change they wanted, in the first instance, was that some record of the numbers of children involved might be kept. Current policy leaves these children in a kind of terra nullius, with both Protective Services and the Department of Education lacking policy to recognise them. Our policy recommendation, in the first instance, is that any school which loses a child ensures either that it knows where that child is now being educated, or adds the child's name to a list of "unknown attendance or non-attendance". The objective of this exercise is to find out how many children are in this state, because we know that any child excluded from school is a child that will be excluded from society.

Once again, these narratives had a surprising result. When MacKillop Family Services was making a submission to the People Together Project's hearing on education, we were able to raise our concern and, through the submission of the stories, heighten awareness of the issues -- the stories becoming a powerful appendix to the final report. I was also able to feed back to workers the recommendations of the recent House of Representatives Standing Committee Report entitled "Truancy and Exclusion from School: Does Anybody Care?". Knowing that their voice is being heard, and knowing that issues are being raised, once again reduces the frustration of the worker.

As MacKillop staff on other sites heard about the project, they established further groups. At Bayview Disability Services in Geelong a number of disability workers met to discuss inequities in disability funding across different services and from different departments, and to note impractical policy positions on providing appropriate housing and renovations for families with disabled children. These narratives not only draw attention to heart-rending injustice, but also really challenge existing policy confusion. This group then linked with disability service workers in Melbourne to explore the pressing problem of waiting lists (needs registers) and heavy case loads for case managers working with families with severely disabled children. These narratives are to become one part of a major document being prepared by a final year social work student on a placement at MacKillop's program and policy office. Once again, workers are encouraged that their voices are heard and that action is being taken.

6. Where to from here?

This all may sound like a success story, and to some degree it is. The closer one gets to policy makers, the more difficult issues become. We have been slow to take these steps without consulting more widely in the field. One fruit of the process, therefore, has been much better linkages with other services and agencies and peak bodies and advocacy groups. In making these linkages, however, the impetus for address policy is slowed down among lots of other debates and issues. If there is no policy

change, the present encouragement that workers at present feel may soon turn to disappointment and frustration once again.

While the "Telling the Story" groups have raised public awareness, informed research for policy change, and proved very encouraging to workers, there is still much to be done to effect policy change.

John Honner is Co-ordinator of Mission and Social Policy at MacKillop Family Services