MEETING THE NEEDS OF MOBILE COMMUNITIES

Throughout Australia more than 300,000 people live in caravan parks and manufactured home communities. Since 1986 the Hunter Caravan Project has worked with families in these communities in the Hunter Region of NSW. The project has drawn attention to the health and social needs of these previously forgotten or ignored Australians and has built up a level of expertise recognised at a national and international level.

The Hunter Caravan Project has received funding for a three-year National Dissemination Program from the National Health Promotion Program of the Department of Health, Housing and Community Services and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, an international philanthropic organisation based at The Hague.

This article outlines in brief:
- issues faced by residents living in caravan parks and manufactured home communities and implications for health services;
- innovative health programs developed by the Hunter Caravan Project to overcome perceived gaps in services; and
- the aims and strategies of the National Dissemination Program of the Hunter Caravan Project.

The Australian dream of home ownership has slipped from the grasp of many families. There are high rental costs, long waiting lists for government housing, economic uncertainty and high unemployment. Caravans, mobile homes and manufactured homes (either owned or rented) have become one type of alternative accommodation.

It has been the experience of the Hunter Caravan Project that caravan parks and manufactured home communities can be nurturing and supportive environments. When physical conditions, management style and community perceptions are favourable communities work together in a very positive way. However, caravans in particular were designed for short-term occupancy and are often unable to meet the long-term needs of family groups. Parks often lack adequate and safe amenities, social and play areas.

The general community perceives such families as marginal and transient and so they are often overlooked by existing community services including health services. Yet more and more families are choosing, or being forced to choose, this "affordable" housing option. Issues faced by residents of these communities include:

**Health and education factors:** There is often poor nutrition and inadequate health care (e.g. children not fully immunised), lack of confidence, low social skills often exacerbated by a mobile lifestyle, and poor access to health care, education, child care and job prospects.

**Mobility:** People lack knowledge of community services and what they do, and there is inhibited access to community services and a poor image of “authority” as people are wary of interference.

**Security of tenure:** There is a fear of eviction. Despite legislation to ensure rights of residents, there is a feeling of powerlessness. Residents won’t raise issues of concern with managers/owners, who can prevent access of community services to the parks.

**Isolation:** Residents are located on fringes of towns/cities often on low-grade land (e.g. reclaimed swamps). There is inadequate transport (often only the school bus), and poor access to services and social networks.

**Environmental factors** include poor drainage at some parks, unsatisfactory amenities (particularly for family groups), cramped living conditions, safety hazards for children, lack of sheltered areas and somewhere else to go at the park for adults and children, as well as problems with condensation and mould.

**Negative community perceptions:** Residents are unable to receive certain goods and services with a caravan park address, and they are still seen by some as second-class citizens.

Since 1986 the Hunter Caravan Project has worked towards better health and social equity for residents of caravan parks and manufactured home communities. The original focus of the project was on the development of children in the 0-8 age group and their families. It was soon recognised that health and nutrition were important elements affecting the lives of all residents in these communities.

A range of innovative strategies has been used to determine ways in which health needs of mobile communities can be met and problems of access to services overcome. They are:
- inclusion of Family Health Worker in the team of early childhood workers at the Hunter Caravan Project;
- surveys of residents in individual communities to determine their health needs;
- health information days organised on several parks with health professionals providing specific health information, screening programs and clinical consultations;
- project worker living on parks for short periods to establish a more sensitive rapport with the residents and a greater awareness of their health needs;
- establishment of links with health services to increase awareness of the needs of mobile communities and the need to re-evaluate their own role in service delivery; and
- recruitment and training of long-term residents as health information providers at their own parks — to strengthen the networks between local community health services and park residents.

The National Dissemination Program offers an opportunity for the Hunter Caravan Project to provide a national network linking mobile communities with health professionals, local government, caravan park owners and managers and key government decision-makers.

The program aims to:
- provide information on health needs of caravan parks and manufactured home communities to other States and Regions;
- share effective strategies developed by Hunter Caravan Project and other services to meet the health needs of these populations;
- collect and analyse information gathered through the network process to present an overview of the Australian situation; and
- advocate for better health provisions and improved social equity for such populations.

Strategies include development of a national newsletter, consultation and input into training of health care workers through workshops, seminars and conferences, and provision of information and resources to those concerned with problems faced by mobile communities.

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