

WHEN I NEEDED A BED ... YOU WERE THERE



Dave Brown and Angela McMorran describe to **Bruce Munro** how the Night Shelter offers a bed in an emergency to people in all kinds of situations.

“**H**omelessness is not simply a lack of shelter,” Dave Brown, founder of the Dunedin Night Shelter 16 years ago, says. “Finding yourself without a place to call your own is, without doubt, an incredible physical deprivation. As a society we ought to have a safety net for people who find themselves in this predicament.

“Running out of shelter options to the point where someone is homeless has a significance that goes far beyond the physical. When someone is homeless, the world feels like a friendless place. It is an experience of being alone in a seemingly uncaring world.”

When the Night Shelter began it was very difficult and expensive to find emergency accommodation. But last year the Trust undertook a major public fundraising campaign to buy the two houses it had been renting. The Dunedin Night Shelter Trust (DNST) now owns the two houses on one property in City Rise, a suburb on the fringe of the inner-city that has a comparatively high percentage of beneficiaries and boarding houses. The front house is the 8-bed Night Shelter providing up to three nights’

emergency housing for men and women. The other house, Phoenix Lodge, provides three months’ supported, transitional housing for up to six people trying to get back on their feet.

The Trust has the equivalent of three full-time staff who host the homeless in the Night Shelter. They provide their guests with dinner and breakfast, a place to shower and wash clothes and of course a safe bed for the night.

The Shelter relies on a large number of volunteer workers and supporters. It receives no government funding but is given wide support from the Dunedin community and Charitable Trusts.

Stumbling into Homelessness

Quite a number of the Shelter’s guests are coping with mental health or personality disorders. “Their difficulties can make them difficult to live with or cause them to feel out of sorts with others in a flatting or boarding house situation. This can lead to instability in accommodation,” Dave explained.

Others have addictions or lose perspective. They might spend money that should have gone on their rent on other less important things. This results in their losing their accommodation.

“Of course the addictions and various behaviours can be symptoms of other problems in life — depression or loss of hope — and they can be

self-medicating unconsciously.

“Most guests are unemployed. When their car breaks down or other extra costs come along, rent money can be the easiest bill to forego. You just hope to be able to repay it before you get found out. But too often that is not possible,” Dave said.

Support to Get on Their Feet

At present the men in Phoenix Lodge are all released prisoners. It is often difficult for these men to re-establish themselves in society. The Lodge’s supported accommodation offers some security to men who desire a new start.

“Whereas once there seemed room for the community to ‘carry’ those who were not so able, now there are very few places for them. The resulting hopelessness is the seedbed in which all sorts of life-problems take root.”

“Just getting a bank account, coping with daily tasks, budgeting and so on can be hard. Phoenix Lodge gives them three months to sort life out. It can mean that they do not have to associate with or fall back on to friends who got them in trouble in the first place.”

Bruce Munro is a journalist and a board member of the Dunedin Night Shelter Trust.



Isolation of Homelessness

Dave suggests: "The growing demand for emergency accommodation is a product of a society geared to an ultra-individualistic perspective that prizes efficiency above almost everything else. In many more "primitive" societies there is no homelessness because one's identity is found in a group, be that family, tribe, sub-group, religious group. That group provides for, and incorporates, the one who lags behind. In our society you are much more 'on your own' and isolated."

A drive for ever-greater efficiency has seen technology used to transform our workplaces, getting rid of jobs and leaving no room for some people in various sectors.

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Citing the example of a young woman with a mental and emotional age of a child, Trustee Angela McMorran asked: "Where does she fit in society? She has no support structures. How does she find her place in a world like this?"

Life Upheavals

"Life shocks" are another significant driver of homelessness. "We had one woman who was texted by her landlord to tell her there had been a fire in her flat and she could not stay there. She ended up on the Shelter's doorstep."

Other unexpected events include being made redundant or encountering relationship problems.

"There is tension in the home and it seems good for one person to move out until it is sorted. We have had any number of men, and at least one woman, who have decided on this action.

"Or the police could move someone out of their home for a time. A man may have done something wrong. But if there isn't a safe place where he can stay, he is at risk of getting himself in an even worse situation," Angela said.

Community Offering Support

"The last time we checked the figures we found that most of those who stayed at the Night Shelter used it just once. Only around 20 per cent returned from time to time," Dave added.

The Dunedin Night Shelter Trust exists to make sure there is a consistent emergency housing facility operating for those who need it. It aims to provide support for people in the Night Shelter and Phoenix Lodge so that the guests are assisted in working toward a more stable future.

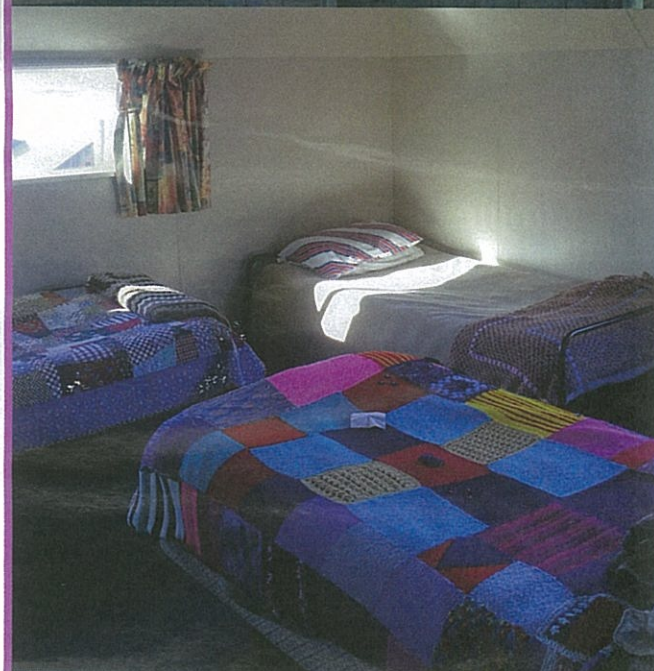
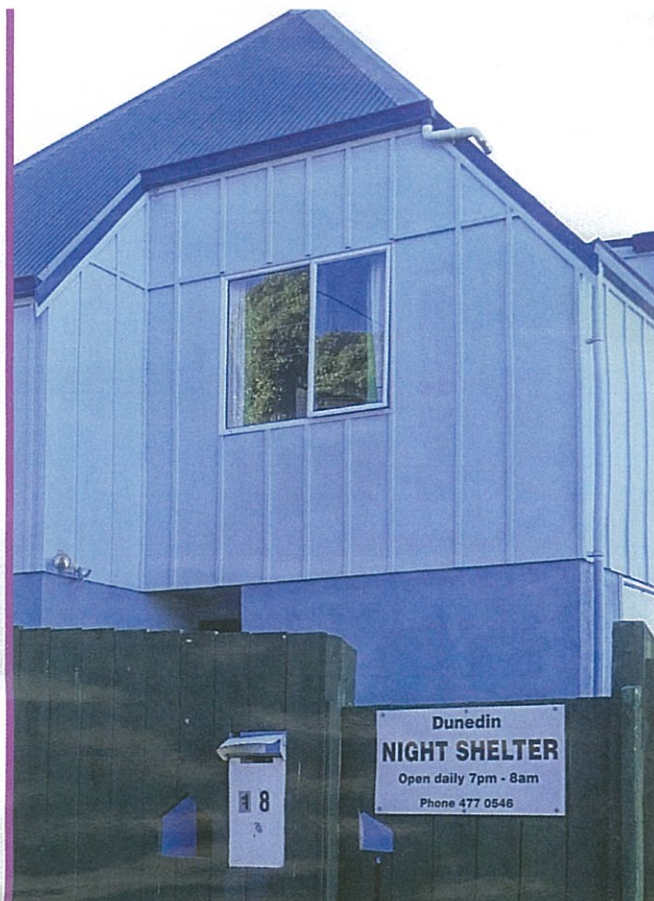
This can be through the provision of advocate support workers, or a community worker, or by referring people to other agencies for help.

The Trust hopes to be able to offer an "outreach" service in the near future providing support, guidance and help to people who are facing accommodation issues.

Dave said: "We seek to run the Trust in a way that truly listens to needs in the community and adapts what it offers to meet those needs. If, for example, it is true that homes for families is a growing issue, then we will look for ways we can assist in that area too."

And so the Trust has begun working more closely with a Dunedin violence cessation organisation to help men involved in family violence. "We want to continue to be open to partnering with other agencies in Dunedin to meet needs in the housing area."

Dave said: "Homelessness can be devastating in so many ways. The Night Shelter is a powerful statement that not everyone is against them — that some people do care." ■



Photos on this page
by Angela McMorran