

HELP FOR THE HOMELESS - AND THE AGENCIES THAT HELP THEM

Newcastle Region Library's Angie Weston and Kieran O'Donoghue were on hand at the Hunter Homeless Connect Day hosted by Newcastle and Hunter Homelessness Interagency Network (NNHIN) in August with the aim of emphasising the welcoming nature of public libraries and raising awareness of the free services available at public libraries.

Homeless Connect organisations operate Australia-wide and aim to coordinate a community response to homelessness. The homeless spectrum includes individuals and families unable to find rental accommodation, people sleeping rough, using refuges, or staying with a series of relatives and friends, known as 'couch hopping'.

At the event we distributed storytime brochures, Find Legal Answers showbags, maps highlighting branch locations, bookmarks, and free copies of Good Reading magazine. A display of books relating to home economics and cooking on a budget was popular. We also collected names of people interested in internet and computer lessons. While many of the participants were already library members, others were surprised by how many services and resources public libraries offer.

The day also provided an opportunity to network with other agencies. We raised awareness of the role of public libraries as a hub for homeless people and as an excellent point for information distribution. We also emphasised our ability to tailor programs to meet specific needs, such as for an adult education instructor who teaches a group of at-risk

people aged between 16 and 24 and wants to gradually introduce them to the library and broader social opportunities.

It was reassuring to hear libraries praised highly by other agency staff, while others, who had not been aware of our services or of our relevance to homeless people, gained a new insight into what public libraries can do for the community.

A specific aim of NNHIN is to highlight barriers and create opportunities to facilitate appropriate responses and services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. With this in mind, Newcastle Region Library recently modified its membership requirements to ensure homeless and at-risk people are not excluded from borrowing items or accessing computers and the internet.

All the library staff also supported this event with donations of non-perishable items and personal care products to distribute on the day.

While the day was a tremendous success we identified many ways we could improve upon our contribution to next year's Hunter Homeless Connect Day. We'd love to hear from other library professionals who have conducted outreach activities with homeless and at risk people.

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