

Fremantle Library Connect Project

Evaluation Snapshot – February 2021

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The **Library Connect project** is a collaboration between St Patrick's Community Support Centre (St Pat's) and the City of Fremantle that commenced in September 2020. As part of the pilot project, St Pat's have employed a community support worker to be embedded in Fremantle Library, to connect with people experiencing hardship (including people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness).

The support worker role is to provide initial support, as well as connection and referrals to other services, including for financial and housing issues and emergency relief. The Library Connect support worker also provides training, support, and capacity building for City of Fremantle Library staff on a range of topics, including working with people who have experienced trauma.

The **Library Connect project** is designed to offer support in a community setting, with public libraries being identified as providing a safe space for a broad cross section of the community. The project also aims to offer early intervention and support for people who are 'newly vulnerable' or are experiencing hardship as a result of COVID-19.

An emerging critical success of the project is the value of the partnership underpinning the project, including the fact that the **Library Connect** worker is supported by an established community service provider.

PROJECT EVALUATION

The Library Connect pilot project is being evaluated by the Home2Health research team at UWA, and a comprehensive data collection plan has been developed to support this evaluation.

The overall aims of the evaluation are to:

- 1 Describe the development, implementation, and evolution of the project;
- 2 Document the demographic profile and support needs of people engaged through the project;
- 3 Examine the key strategies for client engagement and the impact of these;
- 4 Investigate the perceived benefit/challenges to library staff overall understanding and self-efficacy when working with people experiencing homelessness or disadvantage;
- 5 Investigate perceived benefits and challenges associated with the use of libraries as an intervention setting for identifying and supporting people experiencing hardship for the first time, those at risk of homelessness, and those with other complex needs.



The evaluation is being supported by a Project Evaluation Reference Group, to ensure good research governance and to inform the action research approach being taken for this project. The membership of the Project Evaluation Reference Group includes representatives from the UWA evaluation team, St Pat's, City of Fremantle (library and community development teams), and a person with lived experience of hardship.

This first evaluation snapshot summarises who has been supported by the project so far, key findings from the library and project staff survey, and includes case studies based on interviews with two of the people supported by the project to date.

WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTED?

Over the first four months of the Library Connect Project, there have been 187 contacts with the support worker embedded at the library. Overall, there have been more requests for support from women compared to men (61% compared to 39%). The project has engaged with significant numbers of Aboriginal people and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds.



187
TOTAL RECORDED
CONTACTS



61% FEMALE
39% MALE



17%
ABORIGINAL
& / OR TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER



19%
BORN OVERSEAS



<20 – 70+
AGE RANGE

SUPPORT PROVIDED

“Not only is the Library Connect program allowing us to connect with people who are not accustomed to using services, but it is also helping us to connect with them earlier; before the situation becomes chronic or too complex. One successful example of this recently, was when we were able to help a young Aboriginal mother of 2 fleeing domestic violence, into a private rental and to get her established with food, household goods and support moving forward. Prior to connecting with the program, she had been ... couch surfing with her kids in an unsuitable and unsafe environment.”

- Library Connect Community Support Worker

TYPES OF SUPPORT PROVIDED



49
INSTANCES OF
INFO & ADVICE



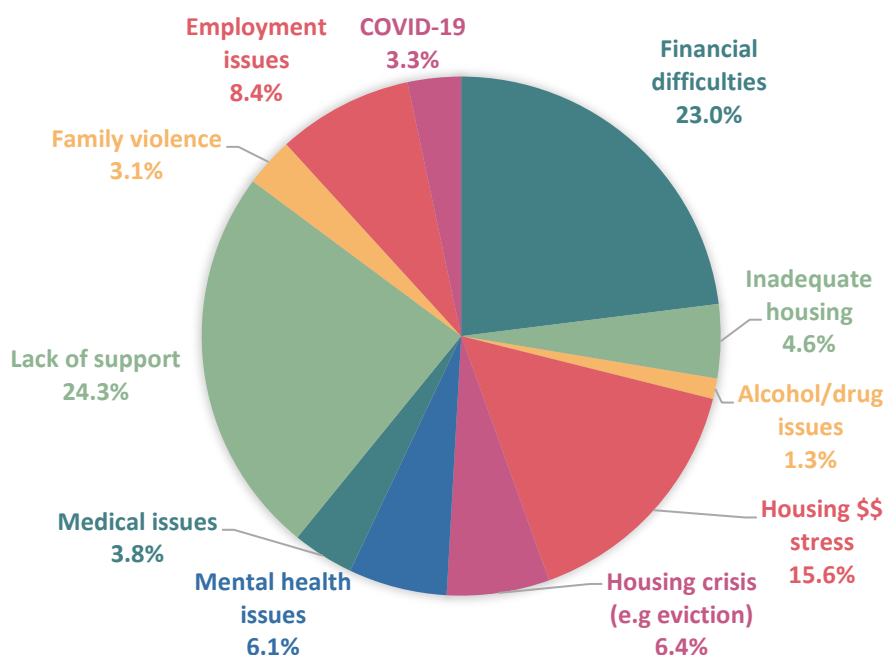
115
INSTANCES OF
SUPPORT &
REFERRALS



\$5,915
EMERGENCY
RELIEF PROVIDED

MAIN PRESENTING ISSUES

The main issues experienced by people supported by the project so far have included financial difficulties, housing affordability stress, and a lack of support to manage these issues. It is also of note that people have presented with issues resulting from COVID-19, including loss of employment, financial difficulties, and social isolation.



KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY OF LIBRARY & PROJECT STAFF & KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The survey was distributed through the Project Evaluation Reference Group in November 2020 and had a high response rate, with 16 responses received.

NEED FOR THIS LIBRARY INITIATIVE AFFIRMED:

- 100% of survey respondents considered that there is a role for Fremantle Library in **supporting people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship**.

"Libraries are a familiar centre of information and as such can provide a trusted, convenient and somewhat anonymous place for those in need to seek information, advice and referrals. This is particularly true for people new to hardship who may be completely unaware that help even exists or how to access it. In these COVID times, this type of service is essential."

"At a minimum there is a role for any library in providing a safe, free space where they feel welcome and included. Libraries generally are well positioned to support vulnerable people by connecting them with services to support them in the community as at their core, libraries are about connecting people to information to support them to live better lives."

- Respondents conveyed that people who use Fremantle Library present with a broad range of **multiple and often complex needs**, with the most reported of these needs including loneliness and isolation; homelessness; mental health issues; cultural needs (e.g. accessing culturally appropriate services); boredom; employment issues; and drug or alcohol issues.
- When asked about their confidence in **managing complex needs**, the majority of respondents stated that they were only slightly or moderately confident.
- All respondents stated that they would want to be **trained or supported to develop capacity** in managing complex needs, particularly in relation to AOD issues, homelessness, and mental health.

FEEDBACK FROM LIBRARY STAFF

"I find the Library Connect has shown to be an approachable and safe access point for vulnerable people to come seeking help. Overall, having Library Connect here shows that we care for the community and together we are providing an important service."

"Seeing the people come through to access the support and resources offered through the program is not only eye opening, it's rewarding. The number of people is growing, and the service sits alongside what the Library and Community Development do nicely. It's a very worthwhile service that I hope continues."

"Library staff are there to serve the community but there are times when professional support is needed. For example, Sonia was able to intervene with a library customer presenting with complex issues. As the customer's behaviour was rapidly escalating and unpredictable, I was hesitant to approach, and asked Sonia for assistance. She was able to calm the person down, and gave them community organisations to contact for help."

"It takes the feeling of helplessness away from library staff. It is great having someone who knows how to facilitate help."

CASE STUDY EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE SUPPORTED

In interviews undertaken with two of the people supported to date, the Library Connect project was described as providing essential, accessible support. Both participants had very little access to prior support.

CASE STUDY 2: SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND ISOLATION

Background

Julie* is a woman in her late fifties, who has experienced significant mental health issues, and has a history of family violence and trauma. Julie described herself as very vulnerable and isolated – socially and from services.

“There are a lot of things about how to deal with my situation that I can't think of for myself or don't know about. I'd become so isolated. I didn't have the confidence.”

Support from Library Connect Project

Library Connect has supported Julie with emotional support, financial issues, emergency relief, and engaging with the community – both socially and with services. Julie has engaged with the library project worker on about four occasions and during this time the support worker has helped her to set up an email address and access her emails on her phone, provided her with practical support through food and phone vouchers, and wrote her a reference for priority housing.

“We had a chat about what's going on in my life and – she was such a calming person. By the end of half an hour we were talking, I walked out in a level of calm. She gave me some food vouchers and a phone voucher because I had absolutely nothing. She helped me organise email from my phone. I didn't have an email. I didn't even know how to do it. Each time she's done something here to really help in my life. I can't say anything other than a positive experience for me and a real lifeline.”

CASE STUDY 1: SUPPORT FOR SOMEONE NEW TO PERTH

Background

Gloria* is a woman in her late twenties. She has one child, and only recently came to Perth after escaping a family violence situation. Gloria is new to Perth and therefore didn't know about many services and had been unable to access services that she had contacted (she either didn't meet service criteria or services were at capacity).

“I stopped working, and then also I was looking for a place, so I had to get extra help with the income but then I didn't know how to do it, and then I went to Centrelink, and they weren't really much help. You literally just have to sit there and do it yourselves and so it's like, “I don't know what I'm doing.” So I had to do it myself and I didn't know how to do it.”

Support from Library Connect Project

Library Connect has supported Gloria with referrals, finding housing, employment support, emotional support, emergency relief, and accessing Centrelink.

“Because you don't know anywhere, you don't know what to do or where to start. (She) gave me food vouchers. We did go shopping with my son and I bought him fruit and stuff. I'm applying for jobs. So we're going to write my resume, and then we'll send it out. She referred me to a counsellor, and she also referred me to a ... doctor. I wouldn't actually be doing it without her because every time I've gone to her, she's like, “Don't give up.” So I was giving up but she wasn't.”

* Some details have been changed to protect the identity of participants and pseudonyms have been used.

Further information on the Library Connect project is available here:

