

# The Face of ACRO, 2020



**Top Row:** Field Officer Paul Green; Carpenter Glenn Bailey; Plumber David Licht; Carpenter Jared Taylor; Accounts Manager Neil Joseph; Construction Manager Ben Green; **Bottom Row:** Programs Manager Fiona Begg; Occupational Therapist Kristine Eyles; Administration Worker Anneliese Law; Occupational Therapist Helen Uhlmann; HAS Administration Worker Jennifer Jones; **Left:** Daytripper Coordinator Sarah Green.



**Left:** Executive Committee Members Ian Stewart, Chairperson; Stephanie Whelan, Secretary; Chris Stewart, Treasurer.



1770 ACRO provided Bed nights of Accommodation serviced;

571 Additional Housing related requests processed;

1616 Additional calls for Assistance dealt with;

929 other eligible clients assisted through additional programs (e.g. DayTripper).

ACRO has successfully met all compliance requirements including financial Audit and Government Performance audits.

Needless to say, none of this can be achieved without the hard work and dedication of a committed Staff complement and an equally committed and dedicated Executive Committee.

Decision-making by the Executive has been fair, reasonable, unbiased and based upon the best information available. This has been a difficult year for them as well but ZOOM meeting schedules have worked to enable the continuity required during the pandemic. As always the membership is indebted to the input of the talented Ian Stewart, Stephanie Whelan and Chris Stewart.

The future is never as certain as the past. What I can tell you, with some certainty, is that this organisation will continue to provide services for those most in need within our society. This will require a degree of dexterity as we navigate the current and future direction of the coronavirus infection. But

ACRO has a proven track record in its ability to adapt and grow. We have undergone enormous change over the past financial period. Our work practices have changed. Our approach to the health and well-being of our Staff and clients has been modified. We have become more conscious of mental health issues as people struggle with fear. We have, regrettably, learnt to be less social but, hopefully, no less engaged in social justice issues. We have seen the impact of this fear as chaotic scenes have unfolded across the world.

We have also witnessed acts of compassion and genuine concern. This is the Ying and Yang of civilisation. I return to my earlier comments that the only mediation between opposing forces is rational discussion taking into account facts, not fictions, truth,

not lies, research, not guessing, honesty, not deceit. There are always positives that arise from negative events. I live in the hope that the patience that the Australian public have exhibited during these times of crisis persists and, like most, I live for the time when we can share each other's company in a civilised manner without fear and without confrontation.

The prevailing truth is that COVID-19 may only be the beginning of a progression of human illnesses that will challenge us well into the future. But it will not be the only challenge. The inevitability of climate change on our way of life must not be underestimated. I am buoyed by the world-wide trend towards understanding the impacts of human civilisation on our environment. I am not convinced that we have moved quickly enough to avert major calamitous climate events but perhaps action now will mitigate the extent of the suffering that human-responsible climate shifts will have.

I remain indebted for the privilege of living in Australia cohabiting with like-minded people who respond well in a crisis and who are compliant enough to follow expert instruction for the betterment of all. Our colleagues in Europe and the Americas are not so lucky.



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*....We find ourselves trapped in the margins of hope.  
 ...Ignorance is poisoning the well of civility*

2020 seemed to offer great hope and opportunity for ACRO. We had finally achieved some financial independence, our programs were proceeding, and plans to reorganize and relocate were formalizing and then, along came COVID-19. The first indication of a problem came during January but it wasn't until late February and early March that the sudden realization of a life-changing event was upon us. During this period, our worldview changed. And not only here in Australia but across the globe.

An economic, health and social revolution was precipitated by a microbe, invisible yet deadly. Governments across the world scrambled to contain the most virulent outbreak in over a century. Not since the Influenza epidemic of 1917 had an entire population been subjected to the levels of fear, disorganization, dislocation and upheaval that followed ongoing since the month of April. Our international borders closed, local borders opened and closed, social distancing entered our vocabulary, younger people were told to stay away from older people, there'd be no hugs, no kisses, and abruptly, we were isolated in our own homes unable to move about other than for meagre exercise and essential food shopping. The statistics were shocking with affected people numbering millions within days. The symptoms ranged from mild to death so no chances could be taken. The elderly were particularly vulnerable and they were already acutely affected by isolation.

Just as suddenly conspiratorialists merged challenging health requirements and often refusing to acknowledge that a problem existed. Chaos could have ensued and, some could reasonably argue, did ensue in places like the United States. Layered on top of this were the legitimate protests against racism, beginning the US and spreading throughout the world. The Black Lives Matter Movement gained important traction following the outrageous death of George Floyd. Australia's treatment of First Nation people and refugees was, correctly, not immune from attention. The failure to implement the findings of the Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission and the ongoing treatment of indigenous Australians boiled over into legitimate mass protest. The purgatory that we placed certain of our asylum seekers into demanded a public response.

Today we find ourselves trapped in the margins of hope. We anticipate the effectiveness of a vaccine. The herd immunity that mass vaccination promises may or may not eventuate. Issues such as effectiveness (particularly to mutant variants), refusal by some to vaccinate, supply of vaccine and so forth will dominate our thinking well into 2022 and possibly 2023. In any case, this pandemic should act as a warning that global change and disorder can occur at any time. The threat now exists for new pandemics and we are yet to deal with the evolving climate crisis that presents as a far more potent threat to our existence. And we are yet to confront the "big one" of climate impacts from *human intervention*. These are evident already as we witnessed from the inferno fires and bizarre weather patterns during the year.

I touched upon the action of conspiratorialists in disrupting cogent and intelligent argument on the COVID-19 debate. Ignorance is poisoning the well of civility. Our societal worldview is mediated by the known, the

scientific, and the testable. Our community responsibility is shaped by laws that protect the collective whilst acknowledging the individual, what we refer to as social justice.

However there are some who choose to ignore facts, laws and conventions as if they are somehow inconvenient or worse, irrelevant. The fervour with which such people advance their own hedonistic agenda reflects in their need to impart their "wisdom" to all and sundry by whatever means available to them. This bizarre phenomenon can be demonstrated by ordinary citizens as much as disgraced political leaders. The impact of failing to recognize facts and to rely upon fiction and then to communicate this fiction broadly is to create mistrust, doubt, anger, fear and retribution – all of which are anathema to a functioning civil society.

We, as citizens, rely upon each other for communal solidarity and mutual support. If you remove those elements you are left with the husk of a community with no sense of commonality other than the cult of deceit. The social media platforms, as much as mainstream media, rely upon friction and conflict to generate business. The question is whether to continue to enable these platforms to undermine civil society in the name of profit, regardless of social consequences. We have always had citizens unable to integrate into the mainstream. Social media has given them voice and their angst at not fitting easily into society has created venomous outpourings through this newly found social media voice. All they have to contribute are falsehoods and lies. Who or what is there to stop them?

The emergence of the uneducated voice as the bastion of "truth" is deeply concerning and governments that ignore its rise do so at their own peril. The storming of the Capitol in Washington D.C. is a warning, not only to American lawmakers, but it should also inform democratic leadership throughout the world. In the words of John Stuart Mill, "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." And there are good people, businesses and organisations that are being targeted through false propaganda every day in Australia. Although limited research exists into the profile of the cyber stalker it appears they are often unemployed or underemployed who have an intense preoccupation with the victim hiding behind a firewall and creating enormous angst for individuals and deeply incising our civil society. Governments appear mute. They mouth anti-stalking, anti-bullying and cyber-abuse rubric but under the rhetoric is a toothless tiger. Police seem indifferent to investigate and enforce legislation. This is not an issue for an individual to have to fight alone in the civil courts, this is an issue of profound importance that should be pursued vigorously by our legislators. People should be held accountable for their actions. Our recent experience as a victim of this bad behaviour has led to a growing awareness of the impact of this often hidden crime in the wider community and in keeping with our charter of upholding community safety and promoting crime prevention, ACRO will commit to researching this matter with a view to strengthening legislation to protect vulnerable peo-



# Executive Director's Annual Report 2020

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ple into the future. There are some in our community whose complete illogic and dangerous mouthing interfere with the normal workings of a decent society beyond the pandemic discussion. This past year an unknown (to ACRO) person has been spreading malicious untruths apparently for their own amusement or faux aggrandizement. It should be prerequisite that people choosing to disrupt and intimidate fair-minded individuals and organisations be obliged to provide proof rather than speculation when laying claims that purport to espouse fact when all evidence suggests the exact opposite. Apart from significant time and resources being wasted countering the vexatious and false claims referred to above, I can report that, in spite of the extraordinary impacts of the pandemic, we have continued to provide necessary services to the weak and vulnerable. I can proudly report that our Staff have performed commendably in spite of the fears and concerns that they themselves have felt.

## The COVID-19 Response

Along with many others throughout the Country, ACRO responded quickly and decisively to government directions in relation to the pandemic. We, more than most, appreciated the vulnerability of older citizens to this virus. We immediately developed new Policies and Procedures to protect our clients and Staff. Initially we devised alternative job specifications in the event that home maintenance and modification work could not be undertaken. This involved checking on client's welfare and purchasing groceries and pharmaceuticals as required. Since the initial onset of the virus, we have maintained our workflow for maintenance and modifications. Generally speaking, these have increased. We recognised that some work was critical for implementation and with this in mind we secured protective equipment and devices for the safety of workers as much as clients. There was a degree of concern held by all and I commend our trades workers for persisting in the face of that concern. We have been grateful to the Federal government for PAYG relief and for the JobKeeper subsidy. For the safety of our clients we suspended our Day-tripper Program. Some workers elected to work from home and this proved to be a highly successful way of ensuring the work got done without compromising the health of our Staff.

## Milestones for the Year

Before the onset of the COVID-19 emergency we made the decision to sell our property at Bonney Avenue. This sale has provided a much anticipated new independence for the organisation and has set the scene for some dramatic changes for ACRO. We have decided to redevelop another of our properties for emergency housing use. This work will commence in the following financial year and be completed during the 2021/22 Financial period. It completes a strategy that was first

mooted in 2009. As part of our strategic development we will be seeking to more actively engage volunteers to our work over the coming years. We have always been privileged to have outstanding citizens drawn to our mission of social justice for all. We acknowledged this engagement with awards presented to two of our longest serving (and now retired) volunteers, Phil Hassett and Mary Orr. Plaques were presented to them for their long service to the people we support and in recognition of their long membership and engagement with ACRO.

This was also the year that saw the organi-



sation more formally link to the University of Queensland. I have been honoured to be an Adjunct Lecturer at UQ for many years. This year, however, we extended our remit by becoming an Industry partner with the University by arranging for students from the School of Social Sciences Bachelor program to undertake research on our homelessness program. We are indebted to the University for this opportunity and hope that it will be extended for many years into the future.

Security of tenure for ACRO has always depended upon funding by State and Federal authorities. This remains the case in spite of the liquidation of some of our asset. Our Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) and Home Assist Secure (HAS) funding is secure until 2022 and 2023 respectively. These programs pro-



Dr Clive Begg Executive Director



vide much needed home maintenance and modification support for older citizens who have elected to remain in their own homes. They are important programs particularly in the shadow of the Aged Care Royal Commission findings. During the COVID-19 period additional funds were provided for both.

Our assistance for older people was extended this year with a One-Off capital grant of \$5000 per eligible person being offered by the State government. These HAS Capital Grants proved to be a great boon to recipients who were able to un-



dertake work that otherwise was beyond their reach. Work included the installation of chair lifts, roofing repairs and so forth. This was a highly successful and much appreciated program funded by the State government.

These have been extremely challenging times for older citizens and the provision of essential services that the HAS Capital funding was able to provide certainly shed light in the darkened room.

Our Dignity First program that supports younger Australians in their education was refunded this year. Again, the support that this Project provides in vital to the well-being of our youth in the pursuit of educational opportunity that impacts their long-term future. Our funding specifically assists disadvantaged Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families and their school-aged children with IT, book, uniform and other assistance.

Our Emergency Relief (ER) Program continued this past year (albeit at a reduced level of contribution by government) providing much needed financial and food assistance to many disadvantaged people. It was noted that demand for assistance had increased as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis. Many people have lost their jobs and whilst the JobSeeker subsidy has been dramatically increased for a considerable period, the stressors of lower income and ongoing commitments to rent or mortgage payments persist and are likely to be exaggerated when JobSeeker reduces in the future.

Our Specialist Homeless Services (SHS) accommodation program has similarly continued although, as reported last year, the number of units of accommodation have been drastically reduced. Having said that, ACRO is forging ahead, as noted earlier, with its plan to invest in its own emergency accommodation options. We feel that we have no choice in this matter as the number of requests for housing assistance from families with little or no income due to indeterminate visa status increases. We are currently supporting families fleeing domestic violence on bridging Visas. These families require a high level of support due to their limited eligibility to access support services. They currently have no long-term housing options. ACRO is a member of a consortia of agencies undertaking a brief-

ing document advocating to the Department of Housing seeking increased access for these clients to the social housing system and other social support systems.

Our housing programs which have been operational since 1972, continue to provide accommodation for those amongst us who are the most desperate. In years past this included former prisoners, families in crisis as a result of personal and financial circumstance and, more recently, as noted earlier, those for whom options are non-existent—refugees and those on temporary visas unable to access government services and housing. Many of these clients present with multiple issues not the least of which is their homelessness and lack of income. Many are from war-torn and ravished countries. These people carry the deep scars of trauma, in-family violence, other violence including rape and torture and fear that they endure on a daily basis. The very least that an affluent and tolerant society should provide survivors such as these is reasonable accommodation and support to meet basic survival needs. It seems anomalous to me that a small nongovernmental organisation should outreach and provide such support, seemingly in the vacuum of a non-caring overarching set of governmental structures.

We, as an organisation concerned with social justice, will continue to lobby for more humane conditions. In the meantime, we continue to provide the basic roof over their heads and support to enable social integration.

Homelessness can arise for a variety of reasons. Most significantly it impacts on people who have incomes that are not commensurate with the cost of rental. Social Housing, or the provision of low-cost, subsidized housing usually associated with government-owned housing but also managed by government-funded private organisations, is the safety net provision that assists such people. These systems have been degrading/overburdened for a considerable period and governments are preferring to fund "affordable housing" where rents are 75% of market rent. However if market rents are rising the "affordability" of such housing becomes questionable. Affordable housing is not necessarily an affordable option for unemployed or underemployed people. Basically, the housing rental market is booming, rents are increasing, incomes are decreasing and this, in turn, creates a crisis for low income people. This was the issue before COVID-19. Over the coming months we can expect to see a significant spiking in the number of people seeking low-cost housing. A perfect storm is brewing. From one direction we have the already stressed subsidized housing system which was previously in high demand with long wait periods for low-income recipients. From yet another direction are middle-class peo-

ple deeply affected by on/off closures as a result of the pandemic now unable to afford rental or mortgage payments/repayments. Government responses through JobKeeper for those who have become underemployed, JobSeeker increases for those already financially stressed through unemployment and grace periods provided by landlords and banks for rent and mortgage payment are all coming to an end without any indication (as yet) of continuation of all or any of these pressure release measures. When these elements converge we can expect an unprecedented crisis in housing with the potential for a rapid increase in homelessness. We can only hope that governments are monitoring the possible impacts on housing as they unwind relief measures such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker. We are a wealthy society and we have performed extremely well to contain the coronavirus in this country. This was achieved through discipline, austerity and good will. The cost, ultimately, comes at the expense of entrepreneurs and ordinary working citizens. As a wealthy country it behooves us to protect and support the "new" vulnerable as much as our historical vulnerable. The cost of COVID-19 has already been high, not only in financial terms. The residual impacts will challenge government at all levels as we all come to terms with a changed economic and social platform. We will definitely need to think outside the box to contain the inequities that will undoubtedly flow from this pandemic. The pandemic has required our government agencies to think more creatively about possible solutions. We need them to continue to look at the challenges faced as *opportunities* to be willing to try and to look for new and possibly better options into the future.

In general terms, this was a year of further consolidation in spite of the extraordinary challenges confronting ACRO. I am pleased to publish the following statistical information as performance indicators for the year's activity:

3860 Home Assist Secure (HAS) Services provided;

3770 Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) Maintenance Services provided;

1492 CHSP Modification Services completed;

542 First Interviews of HAS clients undertaken;

814 Occupational Therapist Referrals received and processed;

5420 Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) Bed nights of Accommodation provided;