

RESSO Conference 2004

Plenary: Student Specificities Speaker 3, Liz Black, DUSA

Student Housing in general and operation of student residence facility for financially disadvantaged and/or homeless students – presented by Liz Black, Student Support Officer-Housing, Deakin University Student Association, Geelong campus.

There are two services of accommodation for students at Deakin University. On campus residences managed and operated by the University, and off-campus student housing service operated by Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)

Off-Campus Housing Service operated by Deakin University Student Association.

Our off-campus housing service operates fairly similarly to those provided at other universities – we manage a database of all types of housing offered by the community, commercial operators, students etc.

The types of listings of housing we provide are

- Shared Housing
- Full Board.
- Vacant properties to rent
- Summer accommodation
- Casual housing – which came about with the construction of the highway from Melb to Geelong to cater for many students commuting daily from Melbourne and other places such as Ballarat, Colac.

The demand for casual housing listings has risen over the past two years with many more students opting to live at home. This may be due to increased cost of housing and or university fees.

From feedback I have received this year, students as far away as 3 hours drive are stacking their tutorials where possible into 3 or 4 days per week and opting to take casual housing in between commuting to home.

DUSA also manages and operates two rooming houses off-campus. One residence of 9 bedrooms is leased to provide accessible accommodation close to the Waurn Ponds campus which is located 10 kms from the city of Geelong. (New suburbs are now being built in this area.)

Housing specifically for financially disadvantaged and/or homeless students.

Smythe Place is located in the heart of Geelong city and is designated specifically to assist financially disadvantaged and/or homeless students.

DUSA leases the premises through the City of Greater Geelong at a peppercorn rent.

To our knowledge it is only student association operated facility in existence providing accommodation for financially disadvantaged and/or homeless students.

Since 1996, Smythe Place has provided safe, secure and affordable accommodation to over 300 low income and/or homeless Deakin students.

Historical background

Smythe Place was a double storey warehouse, converted to 17 bedrooms, office, two lounge areas, two dining areas, two kitchens, laundry and storage rooms. The premises are accessible for anyone with a physical disability and provides a number of large bedrooms, a bathroom and separate laundry equipment on level 1.

The building of Smythe Place was initiated by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence and the city council following the concerns about the lack of housing for homeless young people in Geelong in 1995.

The property was purchased and refurbished with funding from the Federal Govt through the Local Govt Community Housing Program (LGCHP).

The design of the building was undertaken by Architecture students at Deakin and the refitting was undertaken by unemployed youth under the auspices of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence Building Industry Group program (BIG)

After consultation and consideration of which youth support organisation had the funding and ability to manage the property, it was determined that the student association at Deakin would manage the property for an initial twelve month period.

The steering committee consisting of relevant groups (student residents, student association manager, student support staff, student council executive and members of the COGG and BH of SL) was established.

The role of the steering committee was to determine the

- Establishment of a resident selection criteria
- Operating the establishment at break even budget given rental charge constraints – (then 20% of the gross income of the student capped at \$180/wk)
- Resident support, staffing and management
- Operation within the Residential Tenancies Act

Resident selection criteria

The selection criteria applied to students as residents is governed by the lease and the funding grant to establish the premises.

- Aged 17 – 24 (at the time of application)
- Low income (minimum youth wage or less) – approximately \$180 per week.

Added to the criteria

- the applicant had to be an enrolled Deakin student
- living away from home
- distance from home

And other defining factors taken into consideration – ie

- parent or guardian on a social security support payment – ie pension etc
- first time away from home
- number of siblings
- student's inability to secure affordable low cost accommodation or in a state of homelessness.

Residency in Smythe Place is usually for one year (Feb to Feb – or less). Residents who can demonstrate their need to on-going supported accommodation can re-apply.

Rental charges

The level of rent charged to the student resident is also governed by the lease (funding for the establishment of the premises) – ie (at the time) 20% of the student's gross income of \$180 (approx) or less at the time of application. It is now 25% of the gross income.

Utilities and service charges are governed under the Residential Tenancies Act.

Today, the maximum rent in Smythe Place for a student on full youth allowance is a total of \$80 rent per week.

The rental income of the premises covers all the day to day running costs. Effectively DUSA subsidises the operation of the premises through the staff position of Student Support Officer – Housing.

Resident support, staffing and management

Resident support, staffing and management has evolved since the building opened in 1996.

Originally four student lead tenants were offered a discount on their rent to act as role models for other tenants and liaise with the Student Support Officer who does not live on site.

Applicants for Lead Tenant positions tended to be from previous year's residents and this had advantages and disadvantages.

The advantages were that these residents had had prior experience living in the premises and could initiate or orient new residents – and the downside of this was the negative initiations and orientation were passed on year by year.

This resulted in the death of a new Lead Tenant in 2002 when he lead another resident onto the roof of the premises and fell through the roof of an adjoining premises.

Apparently this 'initiation' had been passed on from one year to the next unbeknown to the Student Support Officer.

The Lead Tenant model was initially suspended for a trial period of 12 months – to break 'the mould' and evaluate and monitor the need for Lead Tenants.

To date the premises continues operation without lead tenants.

The Student Support Officer provides induction orientation and information to residents regarding to their rights and obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act. Residents are also provided safety and fire safety training.

Management of the premises and resident support is provided through the Student Support Officer - Housing position.

- on call for emergencies 24/7(most of the call outs after hour calls are to attend room lock outs or urgent repairs)
- inspection of the premises at least once per week
- undertakes the rent roll, and follows up rental payments with residents

- purchase of cleaning supplies and directs cleaning staff
- arranges repairs and maintenance
- processes payment of invoices, accounts and contracts for the premises
- OH&S risk assessment, procedures

House meetings are conducted to receive feed back from the residents and to allow them to air and discuss issues arising within the household.

A fine line exists in management of the premises and provision of support to the residents. Being the landlord of the premises enables DUSA to have flexibility and leniency, however the Residential Tenancies Act is enforced when all other avenues of agreement and consultation are no longer effective or applicable.

(The number of Notices to Vacate issued in the past 6 years could be counted on one hand.)

Operating the premises with 17 individuals under the rooming house section of the Residential Tenancies Act is challenging.

One issue is defining which individual tenant is responsible for damage or creating unsanitary conditions. A 'cone of silence' exists amongst residents and the level of tolerance amongst residents has risen steadily over the years.

A 'team' system was been introduced for the maintenance of common areas. Each resident is a member of a team responsible for the sanitary conditions of their allocated kitchen space and maintenance of common areas. Subsequently the whole team is breached (under the Act) if they fail to maintain their facilities.

Individuals are breached if they fail to abide House Rules. Three 'breaches' for the same reason can lead to a Notice to Vacate.

Damage to the premises deliberate or otherwise is low as is rent debt.

A scheme of 'Mutual Obligation' has also been introduced. Residents who meet their tenancy responsibilities are provided with a rental reference upon their departure from Smythe.

The purpose of Student Support Services and, in particular, the need for low cost housing for financially disadvantaged and homeless students has been summed up in the following note received in 2000 from a student made homeless:

*"As the chill of winter comes around, I am reminded of this same time last year – being kicked out of home and sleeping on the floor in a friend's house. Goodness knows how long I would have continued on this way if it hadn't been for you guys – always ready to listen and help me out to resolve my financial, housing and family problems. I did end up returning home and I have realised that I never thanked you for your help. So I would now like to say that I would have been lost without your help and thank you for everything. I would also like to donate \$50 to the next person who is stuck in the predicament of being a student and having just been kicked out of home and is in need of help. Thanks again for your help.
MM"*