

Media release
Public Health Association
Friday 4 July 2008

From cramped laundry encounters to thriving village hall: transforming the lives of the elderly

The wellbeing of sixty residents of the Manningville pensioner housing complex in Onehunga, Auckland, has been transformed thanks largely to the establishment of a small building in its centre to house social activities.

Marie Hull-Brown of the Mental Health Foundation told the Public Health Association conference in Waitangi today that the pensioners had at one time been housed in tiny bedsits, very much feeling the cold of winters and with a sense of disconnectedness from their neighbours and isolation from the outside world.

"There was a very old room at the back of the site which was inaccessible to all but the most mobile residents but the only place for anything approaching a 'social' encounter was the communal laundry, where three or four of people had room to chat," Mrs Hull-Brown told the delegates.

That changed when Housing New Zealand bought the complex and reconstructed the 24 square metre bedsits, replacing them with comparatively roomy, modern, well insulated and ventilated one bedroomed units.

"That had an immediate effect on the residents," Mrs Hull-Brown said. "One delighted lady told me that for the first time she had room for a table and chairs and could invite her daughter's family for a cooked meal."

But the real transformation came when Housing New Zealand built a "village hall" to house social activities.

"It meant the outside world could come to Manningville for the first time. Library services, tai chi sessions, computer training, nutrition sessions, visits from the Auckland DHB, Age Concern and the Mental Health Foundation among many others. Not only were the residents now connected to outside services but crucially they were mixing regularly with each other.

An elected committee of residents now manages the hall as an ever increasing community spirit takes hold at Manningville.

"The younger men help the elder residents by digging newly established gardens (prior to this only one or two residents had flowers in a tub); residents look out for one another at gatherings in the hall, noticing if a regular is missing. You see them walking up town on pension day in small groups.

"One resident told me the whole thing had added ten years to her life. That's how valuable it's been," said Mrs Hull-Brown.

"The changes have also empowered them so that, instead of huddling inside frustrated about things, like a steep pavement on the nearby road, they've learned how and to whom to complain!"

For more information contact the conference media advisor Liz Price on 0276 957 744.