



Prevention through connection

Community Educator Garry White receiving his Community Educator certificate from HAAG Executive Officer Fiona York.

Peer-led community education is a powerful tool to reach older people experiencing housing insecurity, who can often find it hard to ask for help.

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All too often, people only seek help for their housing issues when they reach crisis point. This can be particularly true of older people.

For many, particularly older women experiencing homelessness for the first time in later life, service systems are complex and difficult to navigate. Stigma and shame can act as barriers to older people knowing when and where to seek help.¹

At Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) early intervention and prevention is the basis of our service model, so we can reach people before they are in crisis.

Established more than 40 years ago, HAAG is a member-based, community organisation specialising in the housing needs of older people. Our Home at Last service provides older people with information and support to access affordable, long-term housing; exercise tenancy rights; and find aged care services.

We have a two-pronged approach to prevention and early intervention: ‘community education’, targeting older people at risk of homelessness, and ‘professional education’, targeting professionals in health, aged care, community and related sectors who interact regularly with older people.

Community education

Our community education aims to reach older people *before* they are in crisis and prevent them from experiencing homelessness.

It provides information to older people at risk of homelessness about: homelessness risk factors, pathways to support through HAAG’s Home at Last and Care Finder programs, and the unique experiences of older people.

Community education targets older people with additional homelessness risk factors and barriers to accessing services, such as those from multicultural backgrounds and LGBTQIA+ people.

HAAG’s Participation and Early Intervention Worker leads this work, engaging with services and community organisations working with older people, and speaking at forums, events and meetings about the housing and homelessness needs of older people. They also support HAAG’s Community Educators, the backbone of our early intervention approach.

Key to our approach is training older people with lived experience of housing stress and homelessness to deliver information sessions. Community Educators are often drawn from HAAG’s working groups (e.g. Multicultural and Multifait, LGBTQIA+

groups) where members have a nuanced understanding and position in these communities.

**“We will not ask for help.
Shame holds us back.”**

Using a peer-based model enables HAAG to build connections and foster trust within communities.

Volunteers undertake a six-week training course designed for HAAG’s Community Educator role, including modules on systemic causes of homelessness, how to deliver community education, key messaging, and HAAG services.

Once trained, Community Educators identify and connect with groups within their community, delivering talks covering risk factors for homelessness, where to seek help, and the importance of thinking early about their housing future.

Critically, Community Educators also take referrals for HAAG services on the spot, reducing the need for older people in housing stress to make the initial contact with HAAG later.

Participant feedback from Community Educator talks indicates they feel better prepared to make decisions about their housing future and will pass the information on to others.

Vanessa and Garry

Seven HAAG Committee of Management members are trained to deliver community education, embedding lived experience and older people's participation within HAAG's organisation and leadership.

One of these members, Garry White, says that older people don't always understand if they are at risk of experiencing homelessness.

gone through what they have and are reassured it's okay to seek assistance.

"People who haven't gone through it don't understand the complexities," adds Vanessa. "They've never gone through hardship like that."

Having a peer who not only gets it but has come out the other side and is now in stable housing helps people see that attaining support and secure housing is possible.

Garry adds that older people in the LGBTQIA+ community often don't know where to go for help and are reluctant to access services due to past experiences of state-sanctioned discrimination and social isolation.

"They absolutely need to know that services are safe," he says.

Having a peer from the LGBTQIA+ community attest to a service's safety can make a huge difference.

Connecting to Home at Last

Community Educators are a key referral source to HAAG's Home at Last service, particularly in multicultural communities. In 2015, when HAAG trained 16 bilingual Community Educators, we saw a 345 per cent increase in referrals to and from ethno-specific agencies and a 200 per cent increase in clients from culturally diverse communities housed by Home at Last.²

Vanessa speaks three languages and has delivered community education sessions in the Macedonian community. She said that when she first began talking about HAAG and the services provided, many people weren't aware our service existed.

Over time, the community engagement work of HAAG helped raise awareness of



Community Educator Vanessa Heart receiving the 2025 Homelessness Consumer Achievement Award.

Another trained member, Vanessa Heart, says that older people can find it hard to seek assistance: "We will not ask for help. Shame holds you back."

Garry adds that hearing from a peer can help break down the stigma and shame attached to experiencing homelessness.

Through experiences shared by Community Educators, people see that others have

older people's experiences of homelessness and the support provided by Home at Last.

Speaking about her work as a volunteer and the importance of early intervention, Vanessa says: "I'm proud that people now know who HAAG is and that I've helped with that... even if I only help one other person, I've made a difference."

Professional education

Professionals working in the aged care, health and community sectors are well-placed to identify older people who are at risk of homelessness, however, many are unaware of the housing supports available or how to navigate the system.

HAAG's professional education sessions educate non-housing workers on risk factors, housing options and support pathways. Often delivered at team meetings, and encompassing information on retirement housing and tenancy issues, sessions help bridge the gap in the fragmented support systems for older people.

After training aged care assessors, an evaluation found an increase in the number and appropriateness of referrals into HAAG's Home at Last Service, with assessors more likely to make early referrals rather than when their clients were in housing crisis.³

Our professional education has been adapted by the Federal Department of Social Services into an online training module for care finder staff.⁴

Last year HAAG delivered more than 100 information sessions, with participants reporting they better understand systemic housing issues for older people, how to identify older people at risk, and where to refer them.

Need for more prevention

Preventing people from becoming homeless is much more effective than responding once people are at the crisis point of experiencing homelessness. It saves people the distress, upheaval and pain of losing the roof over their head along with their sense of safety and stability.

We should stay mindful of this as we see the dynamics of home ownership changing, which is increasing housing insecurity for older people. Despite a widespread assumption that all older people own their own home at retirement, this is far from reality,⁵ with a declining proportion of people over 55s living in homes owned outright.⁶

More older people are renting, and they make up one in seven people experiencing homelessness.⁷ These numbers will only increase with the worsening housing crisis, meaning homelessness prevention efforts are now more important than ever. ■

To arrange a talk about the housing needs of older people, contact HAAG on (03) 9654 7389 or email haag@oldertenants.org.au. Find out more information at <https://www.oldertenants.org.au/>

Endnotes

12. Faulkner D and Fielder J 2017, 'The older I get the scarier it becomes': Older people at risk of homelessness in NSW, <https://www.oldertenants.org.au/sites/default/files/older-i-get-scarier-it-becomes-291117.pdf>
13. Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) and Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health 2016, *A home for diversity: building the capacity of homelessness services to meet the needs of older culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians*, <https://www.oldertenants.org.au/publications/home-for-diversity-project-report>
14. Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG), The National Ageing Research Institute and Deakin University 2020, *Older people at risk of homelessness: improving early intervention via aged care assessment services*, https://www.oldertenants.org.au/sites/default/files/older_people_at_risk_of_homelessness_final_report_24.12.20.pdf
15. The care finder program provides support for vulnerable older people to interact with My Aged Care, and to access aged care services and other relevant supports in the community. See <https://www.myagedcare.gov.au/help-care-finder>
16. Stone W et al 2023, *Ageing in a housing crisis: older people's housing insecurity and homelessness in Australia*, https://www.oldertenants.org.au/sites/default/files/decades_of_decline_2011-21_victoria.pdf
17. Reynolds M, Veeroja P, Perugia F, Stone W, Power E R, James A 2023, *Older people's housing and housing precariousness in Victoria (2011–2021)*, Research Insights Report Series, Swinburne University of Technology, Housing for the Aged Action Group, <https://doi.org/10.26185/v77z-2m88>
18. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023, 'Estimating homelessness: census', <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release#older-australians-experiencing-homelessness>