

CARAVAN PARK PROJECT, BIG IDEAS GRANT

Using ABCD with transient caravan park communities



The Caravan Park Project has been developed to support residents who live in caravan parks, because they have few or no other housing options.

Using an asset-based approach, the Caravan Park Project has a Big Ideas Grants (BIG) scheme to help fund initiatives that residents identify and that build on their strengths.

Conversations occur over shared lunches where residents are invited to come along and bring their favourite or signature dishes.

As a result, residents own the resulting initiatives. The project has shown that ABCD can work with transient caravan park communities.

Background

The Big Ideas Grants (BIG) project started in early 2008 at a trial caravan park in the Lake Macquarie area (in Australia). The initiative was facilitated by Graeme Stuart, Dee Brooks and Cherie Stephens from the Family Action Centre (at the University of Newcastle).

The BIG project developed because the team felt frustrated when they worked on an idea with a group of residents who, for various reasons, did not always stay around to see an initiative completed. It was also hard on other residents, when resident-leaders left but an initiative was only half-finished. Dee Brooks, from the

team, could see that the mini-grants approach used by the Benevolent Society had real potential in caravan parks.

The ABCD process

The BIG project uses an ABCD and Appreciative Inquiry approach, by asking questions like, what are the strengths and assets of our community? Share a time when you felt our community was at its best. What do you value most about our community? What is the essence of our community that makes it unique and strong? These questions form the basis of conversations between the project team and residents. Some conversations take place between individuals; other conversations occur over shared lunches where residents are invited to come along and bring their favourite or signature dishes.

Through these conversations people's skills and abilities emerge. For example, some older men have mechanical skills that they share with younger kids; one lady who could crochet began teaching others. At one park, residents built a set of pigeon holes for their mail; at another park, residents ran a Christmas lights competition; while at another park, residents organised a Secret Santa Christmas party. These initiatives helped to improve life in the caravan parks, and became a way for residents to meet each other (and thereby develop a stronger sense of community).

An initial asset map was conducted for the surrounding area of one isolated caravan park. A capacity register and skills audit was also conducted. People filled this out individually or alternatively

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Gift of the head, heart, hands AND heel!

they were assisted by workers who would use an informal conversation to guide the person through the audit. The worker would get permission to write down the residents responses. This approach worked well because people felt it was their choice to participate in they way that felt most comfortable for them. Results were presented back to the adults' group and this helped form the initial ideas list about what the projects to start with.

The BIG project provides residents with small amounts of funding (\$50) to help them get started with their initiatives. Recently the project has gained funding from Street Smart which allows each park a further \$400. Residents decide what they want to do with the money and are encouraged to fill out a BIG ideas proposal form for the money. Residents can get support filling out the form (especially the budget). For other projects there is no paperwork at all. Ideas emerge organically and groups collectively agree on what to fund. A group at one isolated park has decided that they want a directory of services to give to new residents. To do this they are conducting an asset map of their community. From here they hope to paint a physical assets map on an amenities block.

Currently five parks are using an ABCD approach. This approach has helped shift residents away from "a welfare mentality" to focus on people's skills and abilities. The activities build people's confidence so they can stand up and say "This is what I am good at". Many friendships have formed around shared interests, and people have started to relate to each other differently. For example, Dee Brooks describes how, in some of the isolated parks, people have become comfortable enough with each other to ask for lifts into town.

Challenges

The transient nature of caravan parks provides many challenges. There are times when a group begins and then the resident-leader needs to leave. Residents soon realise if they want their group to continue someone needs to step up to the role. Dee Brooks gives an example of a group where the person in the leadership position had to leave. To everyone's surprise, a quiet member of the group stepped into the leader's role. As a result, her confidence and self esteem has increased and she has helped get the initiative finished.

Another challenge for the project is that sometimes people don't feel that they have anything to give to the community. Gentle and informal conversations help to establish gifts of the head, heart and hands. Many people don't feel confident about talking about themselves but find it easier to talk about what they are good at with their hands. When they talk about what they feel with their hearts and what they care about, they start to talk about their children. In some cases an extra H is added for 'heel' which is used to discover the things that grounds a person and helps them move forward. This tool is simple and easy to use to establish individual assets and skills, and it helps to build confidence in a non threatening way.



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