



*communities where whānau are housed, connected,
valued and thriving*

Aro Mai Housing First – working together to end homelessness in Wellington

Today we share the story of DCM's Aro Mai Housing First service. This service sits alongside DCM's other programmes aimed at ending homelessness, such as [Toru Atu \(Outreach\)](#), and [Noho Pai \(Sustaining Tenancies\)](#). Aro Mai works in unison with them and other programmes at DCM and is itself a collaboration with Emerge Aotearoa, Wellington Homeless Women's Trust, and Tākiri Mai Te Ata.

At the heart of Aro Mai Housing First are the people. To get referred to Aro Mai, you will need to have experienced rough sleeping for at least a year; and you will have multiple and complex needs, likely including addictions and mental health challenges. The Housing First approach means that you'll be moved swiftly into appropriate housing, with support wrapped around you by DCM's team.

In theory, this means that people at the sharpest end of the homelessness spectrum shouldn't have to sit on social housing waiting lists; they shouldn't have to flounder in unsuitable emergency housing or have to earn a place of their own through transitional housing. It's in the name – Housing First. In practice, the reality is that amid New Zealand's ongoing housing crisis, there just aren't enough options available for people experiencing homelessness. They are at the bottom rung of the housing ladder, having been regulated to second-class citizenship all their lives.

Fortunately, DCM has a long track record of breaking down barriers for the most marginalised. Thanks to the support of many people in the community, we can and do find permanent homes for our people – so that they can be housed, connected, valued, and thriving.



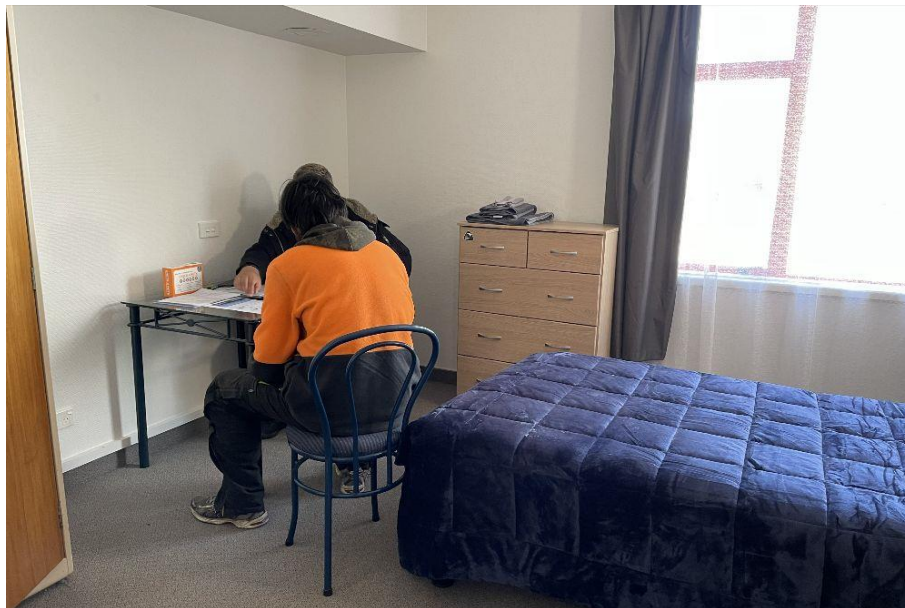
Porirua – where DCM has met a number of people sleeping rough.

Liz

Liz has arranged to meet Anthony on a street corner in Porirua. Today, she is going to drive him into Wellington to sign up for a tenancy in an old motor inn that has been transformed by Emerge Aotearoa into transitional housing.

Anthony has stayed in transitional housing before – but didn't cope well with the lack of privacy and intrusions into his space. Emerge do things differently – and at the motor inn, he will have his own room, bathroom, and cooking facilities, with round-the-clock security at the front door.

For the last several months, Anthony has been sleeping rough, including under a bridge. He says that he's been homeless on and off for 10 years, living for a while in a tent. DCM's Outreach team first connected with him many years ago – and he is well-known to other services in Wellington.



Anthony signs documents with Emerge so he can move into his new room.

At the motor inn, Anthony signs several documents and is given a swipe card and key – the place is his now. But he wants to go back to Porirua where all his stuff is stashed – and he makes plans to come back to the motor inn next week.

Liz drives him back to Porirua but along the way, Anthony has a change of heart. If he can get some food, maybe he can use the new air fryer Emerge has provided, and cook himself a meal. His eyes have lit up, and it's the clincher Liz needs. After a quick run around the supermarket for the basics – white bread, milk, sausages, eggs – Anthony just needs to get his stuff and it's back to Wellington. But under the bridge, Anthony's stuff is gone.

It's possible that his things have been missing for a while – and Liz will come back to check – but for now, it's already 4pm on a Friday, and it's time for Anthony to enjoy his new place. In particular, he's looking forward to having a long shower.

On the drive back, Anthony is reflective. "It will be good to have a stable first point," he says, thinking ahead. "Maybe I can cook a meal on Christmas Day."

Back at DCM, Liz is not satisfied. She looks around for spare clothes, finds some basics, and heads back to the motor inn. Anthony has arrived with only the clothes on his back.



Liz with Anthony in his new room, where he can stay for at least the next 90 days.

Shaun

Shaun is DCM's Kaiārahi Whiwhinga – housing procurement specialist. It's his job to meet with people like Anthony – to find out what their needs are, and based on that information, go out and search for a permanent home of their own.

“We ask them quite simple questions about where they want to live,” says Shaun. “Then we ask a few more questions to try and refine that. We get all their housing needs in that assessment and then we use that information to procure properties through the private market or Kāinga Ora.”



Liz has a chat with Shaun about one of the people on her caseload.

Shaun shares that support of Kāinga Ora has increased, with 15 whānau successfully housed in Kāinga Ora properties over the last six months. But a key focus continues to be on the private market.

Shaun utilises online listing websites like myRent and TradeMe to search for properties based on the needs of whānau, refined by location, number of bedrooms, and funding limits. “And then it’s almost like cold calling,” Shaun says. “Most of the time they have read your message and they don’t want to hear it. It’s not something we’re interested in, they say.

“Sometimes, we get a different response – a feeling that they understand our kaupapa. I’m transparent with the work we do, who we work with, and the risks involved. But there are so many benefits – we’ve got the maintenance and inspections covered by Emerge. The rent is guaranteed, and Housing First landlords are exempt from tax changes to interest deductibility. It’s a win-win.”

Shaun explains that insurance has been an issue for Aro Mai in the past – with insurance companies refusing community housing providers. “But now Emerge has worked out an insurance package with Crombie Lockwood. We can now say to landlords, we’ve got you covered. We have a pathway forward.”



Shaun hits the phone in search of the next property for Aro Mai.

A private landlord

One of our private landlords, who would like to remain anonymous, first read about Aro Mai Housing First in a DCM newsletter when we shared the story of one of our Housing First landlords, Dev.

“I thought, gosh, we could do that,” he says. “I have a small crib – my grandfather put some army huts together in the 1930s, so it’s more of a family heirloom. But my wife is totally averse to us owning a crib in a housing crisis. It got me thinking, why am I as somebody who is moderately well off competing with a young couple buying their first house?”

Our landlord sat down with Dwell Housing Trust, providing funds for an apartment, while Dwell worked out an arrangement with DCM to provide the property for the Housing First programme. A young man who has been homeless for many years is now supported by DCM to thrive in the home while he deals with significant health issues. The unit is ideal as it has a front door ramp, wide access door frames, and a wet bathroom.

“To be honest, for me and my wife it’s an ideal arrangement because we don’t want to be landlords,” the private landlord says. “I don’t really like the idea of intruding and inspecting on other people’s lives.

“Now we’ve raised the Housing First concept to a few friends with some cash and said why don’t you think about this? People are surprised when you tell them about the approach. It’s radical, but it leaves the expertise in the hands of the people that have it. I have one or two friends who rent properties at my age or older and you know, I feel sorry for them!”

John

John is another kaimahi with Aro Mai Housing First. Like others on the team, he works with approx. 10 people at any given time, supporting them to make the leap from homelessness to permanent housing.

Michael is one of the whānau on his caseload. Like many others, he had been staying in emergency housing, and is now in transitional housing while he awaits a permanent place.

Michael loves his room. “It’s nice and quiet,” he says. “I feel safe here.” For Michael, one of the best things about this place is that no visitors are allowed. He shares that it’s good for him to focus on himself right now.

When Michael does get out and about, it’s often to visit DCM, where our Te Pae Manaaki Tangata service connects him to the health and other supports he needs. Often, that might just be a cup of coffee at Te Hāpai. Like many of our whānau, loneliness and social isolation can be an issue once people have moved into a new place.

John has worked out a plan to get Michael into a permanent whare in time for Christmas. Michael would like his family to be able to visit him. And he is also working with John on getting a passport so he can travel to Samoa to visit them.

Re-connecting with his culture and whānau is important for Michael, and it really helps that John can speak Samoan with him. It especially helps when John takes him along to MSD or doctor’s appointments – sometimes it’s easier explaining things in Michael’s own language.



Michael with his key worker, John.

Portia

Portia is kaiāwhina – a peer support worker – with DCM. She has been supporting another member of the Aro Mai Housing First team, Alisi, with her caseload, during a period of illness. Today, Portia is off on a home visit to Fiona’s place – a permanent whare provided by Kāinga Ora.

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Fiona lives up several flights of stairs despite recovering from surgery on her foot. This whare was her choice – as soon as she saw it, she knew it would make the perfect home.

“I’ve spent my whole life in the dark,” Fiona says. “But I’ve found my place now.”



Portia visits Fiona in her whare.

Fiona’s whare has a stunning view over Newtown, and is a far cry from her previous place which Portia explains was literally dark, with gang members coming and going, and rubbish everywhere. Fiona, having been a cleaner for much of her life, would tidy up after everyone.

Now, Fiona says, she has found the right place for her. And despite her recent surgery, she is already talking about getting a job, maybe as a cleaner again. She has put up pictures of her ancestors on the walls, and her focus is to ensure the wairua of her whare is well.

Barrie

Barrie is the kaiāratiki (leader) of DCM’s Piki te Kaha Pou, which encompasses Aro Mai Housing First and Noho Pai (Sustaining Tenancies). Barrie was previously the kaiārahi of the Aro Mai team in the Hutt, so has wide-ranging experience and is used to having an ear close to the ground.

“DCM’s vision for our whānau is that they are housed, connected, valued, and thriving – and this sits at the heart of our Aro Mai Housing First service,” Barrie says. “However, amid New Zealand’s ongoing housing crisis, a roof realistically means emergency or transitional housing while our team procures the right property that meets the needs of our whānau. And so, over the last year, DCM has supported 289 people into emergency accommodation, and 81 into transitional housing, with 45 people supported into permanent, long-term, safe, secure homes of their own.

“Every one of those 45 whānau has an inspiring story of courage and survival to tell, which makes our work so rewarding.”



Jane and Regina (centre front) are kaiārahi of DCM's Aro Mai Housing First service, based in Wellington. Here they are pictured with a handful of the Aro Mai team, clockwise from left: Adriana, Alisi, Daniel, Lotu, Liz, Desirae, Sarah, Cindel, and John.

Barrie shares that in the coming year, DCM is looking forward to many new housing options opening up for our people, including 20 units earmarked for Aro Mai Housing First at Te Kī a Alasdair – The Voice of Alasdair. This development has come about thanks to our very special landlords, Maurice and Kaye Clark, in honour and memory of their son Alasdair.

Thanks to hard work and relationship-building, Barrie also shares that DCM has now established a working relationship with Kāinga Ora, in which both parties are aware of each other's needs, requirements and processes.

And private landlords still have a role to play. "They have shown us they too can be part of the solution to homelessness," Barrie says.

WORDS/IMAGES: MATTHEW MAWKES.

Can you help?

If you would like to know more about how you can provide homes for the people we are supporting out of homelessness, [please get in touch with our Kaiārahi Whiwhinga, Shaun.](#)

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Our mailing address is:

DCM
PO Box 6133
Wellington 6141
New Zealand