



MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY & PEER SUPPORT CHRISTCHURCH :: A CHRISTCHURCH STORY

RISEN FROM THE RUBBLE

On February 22nd 2011, everyone in Christchurch experienced a life-changing event which cut through the hopes, expectations, routines and plans that on February 21st had seemed sure and unquestionable. Tragically for some, their lives were changed for ever by loss of life, home or health. For others, the future now feels uncertain, full of hurdles and challenges which impact on mental and physical health.

Change has been forced upon us all, but although we want to resist it, once accepted it can provide many opportunities. And, as Rosanne Cash (daughter of Johnny Cash) said, “The key to change is to let go of fear.”

This time last year both Bipolar Support Canterbury and Anxiety Support Canterbury, two small but effective mental health non-government organisations (NGOs), were faced with another sort of change – the loss of their Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) service contracts due to a change in funding policy. Being peer support organisations based with the Mental Health Education and Resource Centre (MHERC) in Securities House, their Boards and staff knew at first-hand how important these two services were to people experiencing anxiety and bipolar disorder in Canterbury and pursued all available options to ensure continuation. Psychiatric Consumers Trust, a well established peer support NGO and another Securities House co-habitant, recognised the value of these peer support services and entered into preliminary merger discussions with BSC and ASC.

Simultaneously, in a different process, MHERC had decided to shift from Securities House, and had begun re-location talks with other NGOs including PCT, ASC and BSC. Change on all sides was looming on the horizon for our three NGOs. With the help of Board Clarity, (a company specialising in not-for-profit organisation assistance) a process for change – encompassing both merger and co-location – was pursued, and by Christmas 2010, potential buildings were shortlisted (of which CTV was one) and negotiations for a tripartite merger were underway. Just as the new Merger Committee was forming and final relocation discussions were in progress, the devastating earthquake struck.

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PCT, ASC and BSC were now homeless with all equipment, computers and resources locked away in a destroyed building in the Red Zone. In the knowledge that we had valuable services to provide, Trustees, merger Committee and staff worked together in a very practical way and secured a 4 bedroomed house in Spreydon from which to operate peer support services, and these were up and running by the end of March. Commitment, generosity and team spirit on the part of all concerned combined to move us through a very challenging time, both personally and organisationally, to a position of mutual vision and trust (in a considerably smaller working space than we were used to!). The organisations finally merged on 1st July into the new legal entity MHAPS – Mental Health Advocacy and Peer Support Trust. It was not a text book merger by any means, as we started working closely together before we had time to develop any protocols or procedures, but it has worked! Committed trustees, dedicated staff and fantastic support from our valued funders, HR consultant and IT guys have together provided the foundations to enable three independent groups to unite their energy, skills and resources for the benefit of the mental health community in Canterbury.

As a peer support service, our 26 staff have all had personal experience of mental health and/or addiction issues and this basis of shared knowledge and empathy is the foundation of the valuable contribution that MHAPS offers to people with mental distress.

In the months following the February earthquake, we also won an additional CDHB contract to further develop the Consumer Network to enable positive dialogue with the CDHB service arm and other providers to improve mental health service delivery and experience for all those with mental illness.

We hear a lot these days about the resiliency and hope that Christchurch needs for the Rebuild after the traumas of the past 12 months. MHAPS is but one example of the positive results that can spring from co-operation and effort focussed on a shared vision.

We would like to give special thanks and acknowledgement to our funders – the CDHB and to the Working Together More trust, whose encouragement and financial assistance have been a major factor in the success of this merger; the Lion Foundation who provided funding for our new phone system: and the ASB Earthquake Fund which enabled the hire of two portacabins to ease the cramped space of our current accommodation.

Continuity gives us roots; change gives us branches, letting us stretch and grow and reach new heights.
~Pauline R. Kezer

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