



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The story of the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB) begins with a loose knit community group which began to lobby the local municipality about the need for a vision for the future, the need to address the issues of isolation and lack of cohesion in the community, and the need to establish a range of community services. They believed that the appointment of a social worker would be an excellent starting point. At the time, except for a small home help service, there were no community services in the municipality.

Dianne Bell was appointed to the position of Welfare Officer for Council late in 1969. She quickly decided that alone she could do very little for the people but knew that if she asked the community to become involved the possibilities were endless.

It was at that point that the story of SCAAB becomes a story of vision and a story of partnerships. Partnerships are being talked of in the community sector as if they were something new. However, back in 1970, the local Council acknowledged the importance of partnerships and said to the community, 'We do have a problem. We do need to address the problems of isolation. We do need to build a strong cohesive community. We'll support you financially and provide you with accommodation if you agree to help us solve this problem.' And the community did, and the council did.

So in July 1970 a public meeting was called. 150 people attended. A steering committee was formed and the Springvale Jaycees, which at that time was an organisation with a deep commitment to the community, decided that they too wished to join this emerging partnership by devoting the next two years to establishing an organisation which would complement the work of the council.

The steering committee decided to survey all 15,000 households in the municipality by personally delivering a survey form and collecting it two weeks later. It was a colossal task which attracted attention in all of the daily media. The survey asked people if they would like to volunteer services for their community.

The message from the Mayor of the day, the late Cr. Andy Ericksen, said that a range of services would 'further unify the people of Springvale, making the older residents more secure and the new residents welcome in our community.' Today's buzz words 'community building' was strongly supported in very practical ways in those days.

The survey form asked for ways in which people would be prepared to volunteer – with transport, gardening, household tasks, child care, meals on wheels and, because there were no interpreting services at that time, with interpreting. Most importantly, the survey also asked for volunteers willing to be trained to provide information and act as advocates for people needing assistance to access services.

Four hundred and thirty eight of the returned survey forms contained significant offers of assistance.



In November 1970 a further public meeting was held and a resolution was passed to establish a Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) but, unlike the others in the state at that time, rather than limiting itself to information provision, it would provide practical assistance, advocacy services, and also be committed to social change. The community was determined to meet people's needs in very practical ways. This caused great consternation in the CAB network! At that time most CABs were extremely conservative organisations and diversity among member organisations was very threatening.

By May 1971 nine volunteers had been formally trained for the information service. They were also responsible for organising the practical aid services. The first family day care service in the municipality was established— no pay, no insurance! The first interpreter service in Victoria was also set up— again no pay, no insurance. Later when the Council set up its own child care service and the Immigration Department set up the Telephone Interpreting Service many of the volunteers became paid workers in those services. At that point the Bureau ceased to run child care and interpreting services. It was SCAAB's philosophy to demonstrate a need by piloting services and then happily transferring them to others where appropriate.

Even in those early days three important principles were established:

- Firstly, a genuine partnership of equals was established between the Bureau and the Council. The autonomy of each was recognised and both partners were committed to working in equal partnership together to develop the social infrastructure and provide the services the community desperately needed.
- Secondly, the important role of volunteers, from the local community, was established. SCAAB is a positive example of a grassroots organisation which throughout its development has maintained the comprehensive involvement of local people in all aspects of its work. Trained volunteers provide much of the information and individual advocacy work at SCAAB. Paid staff accept referrals from them where the problem is more complex. New arrivals to the community often seek to volunteer at the Bureau in order to better understand the way in which systems in Australia operate. Volunteers have sometimes been clients, then volunteers, and some have even gone on to further training and been employed in the organisation. The volunteer program provides significant opportunities for skills development and, on average fifty percent of the volunteers leave each year to take up work or study.
- Thirdly, from the outset, at a time when few were interested in doing so, the Bureau was committed to reaching out to all groups in the community and providing all its services in the language of the client's choice, not the choice of the service provider. That's why we set up the interpreting service with 139 volunteer interpreters, and that's why the Bureau has always been able to reach people from each new ethnic group in the community. Over time the Bureau became recognised as one of the few mainstream organisations which were able to reach people from comprehensive involvement of local people in all aspects of its work.



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One of the first practical services operating from SCAAB was a Migrant Host Scheme whereby people from the community personally welcomed each new family to the Enterprise Hostel, a settlement centre which at its peak housed up to 1000 migrants and refugees.

Late in 1971, in recognition of its work the then Department of Immigration offered the Bureau funding to employ a social worker. The Department's offer stands in real contrast to these days of tendering and contract negotiation which has led to the breakdown of so much networking and co-operation between agencies. It was November 1972 before the appointment of Jennie Biggs was made, due in part to the lack of trained social workers at that time. Jennie's community development work skills had a significant impact on SCAAB's development.

SCAAB's work with newly arrived people, ensuring that they are in receipt of their entitlements and have access to information and support, is one of its core activities. This work has contributed substantially to the successful settlement of tens of thousands of refugee and migrant people, which in turn has had a substantial and positive impact on community cohesion.

Social action began early in SCAAB's life. In 1971 postcards, which had been prepared by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, were distributed with the request that they be signed and sent to the Minister for Social Security. The postcards requested that pensions be increased in line with CPI increases. It was not until 1990 that indexation of all social security payments was achieved. Social action and policy change takes time and can sometimes subsequently be lost. Sadly there are now huge differences in rates and means testing between different payments due to the use of different indexing methods.

An SEC strike occurred in 1972 and SCAAB responded by raising and distributing money to families in need because of the closure of their workplaces. SCAAB's response to a further, and more devastating, strike in 1977 led to a detailed report on the hardship people had faced and possible action which should be taken if such a situation arose again. As a result SCAAB played a major role in the establishment of a network of emergency relief agencies in Victoria and has remained involved ever since.

In 1973 a researcher from the Henderson Poverty Inquiry studied the Citizens Advice Bureau movement. SCAAB was chosen for a more detailed study. Records note that 'she (the researcher) gave us confidence to challenge the status quo, to be innovative in approach and dare to be different.' This encouragement also played a crucial role in the Bureau's development.

In July of that year the first Italian worker was appointed on a one day a week basis. The position



was funded by the Council who continued to fund it for many years.

Four bi-lingual welfare staff, in training and from the Department of Labour and Immigration were appointed to SCAAB in 1974 as part of their practical training. One remained as an outreach worker until 1980. Although he had only twelve months training and had not worked in relevant positions in Spain it was he who taught SCAAB staff much about writing reports and submissions. "If I can't understand what you are saying, you run the risk of others not understanding it. Rewrite it!" he used to say. And he would then make excellent suggestions as to how the document should be rewritten. He taught us how to write clearly and logically.

The number of paid staff increased substantially in 1977. The Federal Government introduced the Family Support Program which enabled the Bureau to employ a volunteer co-ordinator and the first housing worker for the area. It was in this year that new partnerships were formed when SCAAB started to encourage other agencies, particularly ethnic agencies to place staff there on a part-time basis. These arrangements continue today.

SCAAB has always been prepared 'to speak out'. But its advocacy work is always based on fact – facts that have been learned from working with clients. The 1981/82 Annual Report states that

"Unemployment has worsened, pensions and benefits have fallen even further behind the poverty line, charges for essential services such as electricity and transport have increased dramatically and rental housing in the Springvale area has become almost impossible to obtain.in financial terms the cost to the community of personal and family breakdown due to the lack of an adequate income and basic services is immeasurable"

A statement which, chillingly, rings equally true today.

No agency can achieve social change alone. SCAAB has been very active in peak organisations such as the Australian Council of Social Service and the Victorian Council of Social Service. It is also been a member of many local and state wide advocacy groups and coalitions.

People have always wanted to come and hear what SCAAB had to say. Prime Minister Hawke launched his social justice statement there, Federal and State Ministers and staffs from their departments have visited, nearly every Minister for Immigration since SCAAB's establishment has spoken at an AGM. The late Governor Davis McCaughey and Governor-General Bill Hayden both made private visits to inform themselves of issues confronting the community.

Ministers and Departmental staff didn't always like what they heard but case studies always made what was said more credible. SCAAB's expertise in the delivery of services has been recognised by the appointment of representatives to numerous state and national policy advisory bodies.

1983 was a very exciting year with the establishment of the unique Springvale Neighbourhood House, which was built as a special meeting place for community groups, and the Springvale Indo-Chinese Mutual Assistance Association, the only organisation in Victoria to cater for the



needs of all ethnic groups from Indo-China. Both were initiatives of SCAAB and were financially and administratively supported by the organisation until they were ready to operate independently.

The following year the Federal Attorney General wished to pilot a Mediation Centre in Victoria. Springvale was chosen with the proviso that SCAAB, the Springvale Legal Service and the Council would support the proposal. They did and the first Mediation Centre in Victoria was established.

By 1986 SCAAB had outgrown its building and the search for funds to rebuild commenced. When funds were found the Council in a gesture of true partnership gave SCAAB permission to go out and find an architect who it believed best understood the organisations needs.

The move into temporary accommodation at the old Enterprise Settlement Centre in Westall Road in March 1987 to enable a new building to be built was carried out with such precision that service provision was only interrupted for two hours, the time it took Telecom to reconnect the phones. Clients were still being interviewed as the removalist van moved off and within a very short time the first client was being interviewed in the temporary premises. Clients needs have always come first at SCAAB.

The joy of returning to a building with vastly improved working conditions was tempered by a fear that some of the ethos on which the Bureau had been built would be lost– the warmth, the flexibility to respond instantly and the priority which was always given to client needs. So a pledge was given at the wake which was held to farewell the old building and the official opening of the new one by Premier John Cain :

‘Our pledge for the future is that we will continue as an organisation with its roots deeply embedded in the community. We will remain absolutely committed to social justice, to equity and the provision of high quality services’

This is but a small sample of the many activities in which SCAAB has been involved. It traces the early development of an organisation which was established by a small group of enthusiastic people who were committed to making Springvale a better place in which to live.

The new building provided an opportunity for a significant expansion of services. Over the years the availability of funding, the establishment of other organisations and changing community needs has meant that from time to time some services have closed while new ones have opened. But the commitment to the pledge made in 1987 remains.

And one other aspect of the SCAAB also remains unchanged. Volunteers established SCAAB and were the only staff members for some time. Their importance has not diminished. They, the paid staff, the committee members and friends of SCAAB have all made, and will continue to make, an outstanding contribution to their community.