Innovative philanthropy – the Ian Rollo Currie Foundation

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By Perpetual Private Insights
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Money is the fuel of philanthropy. But human invention and effort is the spark that turns that fuel into energy. And that energy into change.

That’s the lesson to be drawn from the recent history of the Ian Rollo Currie Foundation.

Set up by Ian Rollo Currie, a successful grazier, in the early 1970s, the Foundation’s mission is ‘providing relief to aged persons in necessitous circumstances in Victoria”.

Nowhere to be

Elderly homelessness is a hidden but serious problem. Our general prosperity means the public rarely see older Australians couch surfing, sleeping in cars, sleeping at risk. But it happens – particularly to those with mental health challenges, to Indigenous Australians and, increasingly, to those who do not own their own home and experience a life shock such as an illness, eviction or a late-life relationship breakdown. The problem compounds in rural and regional areas where there are fewer facilities.

John Etherington is a co-trustee of the Foundation. Under his stewardship, it funds grants to a broad range of organisations via Perpetual's IMPACT Philanthropy Application Program.

But John Etherington is an analytical man, a Chartered Accountant by training, and he started looking more deeply at aged homelessness – an important and often overlooked issue facing many elderly Victorians. John wanted to uncover what could really drive change in addressing this problem.

From Stanford to Shepparton

In 2019 John attended a Perpetual philanthropy seminar where Paul Brest, from Stanford University's Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, discussed the theory of change and the possibilities of strategic philanthropy. "It made me think a lot more about the idea of maximum impact," says John. "To ask: what are we actually aiming at?"

John was shocked at how little real research there was around aged homelessness. A chat with Perpetual's Caitriona Fay confirmed his growing belief that the Foundation could work collaboratively with third sector organisations to get a grip on the problem and make bigger steps towards solutions.

After a strategic review in consultation with the Australia Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) the Foundation agreed to fund a pilot program in partnership with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) and the Housing for Aged Action Group (HAAG). The pilot seeks to:

- assess the nature of the problem in a specific part of regional Victoria – starting in Shepparton.
- develop networks and relationships that improve the ability to address the homelessness issue
- advocate for more government involvement in addressing the problem
- secure suitable, cost-effective housing for older people in crisis.

"We had to be sure we understood the boundaries of the problem," says John. "We decided to focus on helping those at risk of slipping into homelessness. It's a crisis many don't see coming and we want to stop it happening."

It's an inventive and highly targeted pilot program that aims to test and learn. There's a structured Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework built into the pilot.

But it's not purely an academic exercise. Clementine Lucas, who is Perpetual's representative as Co-trustee on the Foundation says, "We wanted partners that could deliver for people. HAAG have a strong track record and are committed to finding long term solutions to the housing crisis facing older Australians. Importantly, they partner with organisations working in the space and understand the practical pathways to accessing housing. Engaging FRRR also meant that HAAG could tap into their regional knowledge and experience and work closely with case workers on the ground."

Right now, the pilot is recovering from some Covid hiccups but back on its revised scheduled. John is happy to be sharing the experience – and risks -with HAAG, FRRR and his co-trustees.

"Everyone is learning from the process," he says. "It feels a bit experimental – but we're anchoring it all round good practice in strategic philanthropy. It's so much more involving than giving a grant and walking away. We're going to push through, learn our lessons and ultimately help older Victorians in regional areas facing homelessness."

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