

First the house, the rest can follow

American psychologist Abraham Maslow's classification of a hierarchy of human needs is almost 80 years old, but the idea that people need to satisfy their basic physical needs for food, warmth and shelter before they can address other issues in their lives is still not always recognised when it comes to how social housing is provided.



Housing First Christchurch is a collaboration between Comcare Trust, Christchurch Methodist Mission, Emerge Aotearoa, Ōtautahi Community Housing Trust, Christchurch City Mission and Te Whare Roimata

On the contrary, homeless people are often required to address issues such as addiction or mental health before they are considered eligible for housing, an approach Christchurch Methodist Mission's Nicola Fleming says is illogical and goes against fundamental human rights principles.

"Permanent, secure, appropriate and safe housing is a basic human right for all," says Nicola, the team leader in the Housing First Christchurch programme.

The Housing First programme sets out to provide the homeless community with permanent housing options so they can then deal with any other issues they may be facing – rather than stepping them through a phased approach.

Nicola says getting people housed gives them a sense of home and belonging. That stability enables many to address other issues that are too hard to manage when they are facing the

day-to-day struggle of life on the streets.
The results speak for themselves, says Nicola.

“Hospital visits, mental health admissions, court appearances; all down by 50 percent within the first year people are given a place to live in our programme.”

It’s a similar story in the North island, where the Lifewise Trust has been delivering the Housing First programme in Auckland City since 2017 and in Rotorua, in partnership with Ngati Whakaue, since 2018.

Lifewise chief executive Jo Denvir says secure housing allows people to improve their own health and wellbeing.

“If you’re on the street, you eat what you are given. Even in temporary accommodation, you might not have the cooking and food storage facilities most of us take for granted. Just having their own kitchen is all some people need to make huge improvements in their diet,” says Jo.

Almost sixty per cent of Housing First participants in the Auckland Lifewise programme are Māori and in Rotorua, ninety per cent of participants are Māori.

Jo says a stable house is often a starting point for people to build stable relationships with their whānau, families and friends.

“For one participant in our programme, the greatest thing about having her own place is that it gives her an opportunity to have her daughter back in her life. For others, it’s about having somewhere they can invite friends and whānau members.”

Lifewise works in partnership with Methodist Mission Northern and the Airedale Property Trust, the property management arm of the Methodist Church.



Working for our people: Haehaetu Barrett, Regional Manager - Rotorua (Bay of Plenty) and Justin Carr, Peer Support Worker, Lifewise Trust

Jo says this partnership, strong support from the public, and Lifewise’s track record of building partnerships with other organisations has enabled it to take some risks in developing and implementing new initiatives – but more government support would help, as would access to more permanent housing options.

“The lack of long-term housing options undermines what we are trying to achieve. Like so many other renters in the private market, Housing First participants struggle to find a permanent place to live,” says Jo.

In Christchurch, Nicola Fleming has a similar message for government and its agencies.

“The Housing First model works when we can offer permanent affordable housing – the right home, in the right place along with the unconditional offer of support. Ideally the government and community housing providers need to be providing more of these homes!”