

Kildonan UnitingCare

helping people cope in hard times

Most people want to meet their financial responsibilities. But for some, there are times when they will have difficulty doing so. Many factors may contribute to financial difficulty, sometimes compounding existing issues that are outside of the person's or the family's control. In itself, failure to pay bills can become an all-pervading weight on a family's ability to function. Pressures build, arrears and debts grow and resources dwindle.

Speaking up is hard for individuals experiencing hardship. Those who are most vulnerable often fail to contact businesses to which they owe money because they know they cannot satisfy their debt, and they may feel ashamed or embarrassed about their circumstances. They fear a conversation with a bank or utility company may make matters worse, or that they may make promises they simply cannot keep.

Kildonan UnitingCare (Kildonan) understands that the hard-line approach of 'getting blood out of stone' can deeply damage consumers' relationship with their utility providers, bank or insurance companies. It works with industry and consumers and across legislatures to develop respectful practices and programs that promote long term, sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships.

Kildonan, one of Australia's oldest charities, was established in Melbourne in 1881 with a focus on children and families facing hardship and disadvantage. However, its ever-expanding range of programs is proving effective at empowering people to improve their lives through the provision of community services and addressing issues of social and economic hardship, such as helping struggling households maintain essential utilities services.

Fundamentally, Kildonan seeks to maximise potential and provide opportunities for members of the community in need who include some of the 2.4 million Australians (including 743,000 children) who live below the poverty line, the 700,000 people classified as being long term unemployed or people with mental illnesses.

Kildonan is an innovative and responsive organisation which has moved with the changing needs of the community, designing relevant and effective programs to meet those needs. It works to create a socially just and responsive environment for those who are most at financial risk. Its Social Advocacy Services, for example, include the provision of training and consultancy for small businesses as well as financial counselling, energy services and community housing for consumers experiencing hardship.

Kildonan's programs work with consumers who want to meet their financial commitments but are unable to do so. It offers a respectful approach which results in better outcomes for both consumers and business. The energy services program within Kildonan's award-winning Business Partnerships Program (BPP) works to align affordability with sustainability by taking a holistic approach to helping people manage spiraling household debt. It provides smart ways for families to reduce energy use and new debt creation on the one side while also working with utility providers on how they manage difficult payers on the other.

WHY SVA BACKS KILDONAN

SVA supports Kildonan for its proactive and empowering response to individuals and families experiencing debt hardship. There is an increased understanding of Kildonan's approach to industry, regulators, government and corporations, and there is growing demand for its programs. This approach has a high impact in creating change and it can be effectively replicated around Australia.

GROWTH

Since 2005, SVA has provided portfolio management, funding, consulting services and mentoring services to Kildonan. In that time, Kildonan has absorbed two other agencies (Preston Creative Living Centre and Hope Springs), hired a new CEO and sharpened its focus on program capacity and sustainability.

Kildonan has experienced significant growth particularly in its Social Advocacy Services division, resulting in a 100 per cent increase in staff numbers. This growth has enabled its service delivery and training to increase its impact significantly across a range of established industries. Staff numbers within the broader organisation now stand at 70 and its volunteer base has expanded within a year from 15 to 75.

In the past year, Kildonan supported more than 5000 families and individuals through its range of services as well as providing 6000 meals and more than 1000 Christmas gifts to people facing hardship. The BPP helps about 1800 individuals annually through utilities billing, and its energy audit service has expanded from five to 25 houses each week.

With SVA support Kildonan has started to document and extend its ability to internally support its growth and expansion. These learnings can now be implemented, and with continued support, Kildonan will be able to work across new industries and geographical locations.

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

Several Kildonan programs have been national firsts, with its work identified as best practice and leading the way for innovation within the broader essential service areas. The BPP is now the benchmark for electricity and gas retailers in Australia and has the potential to have an impact on five million Australians.

By measuring electricity alone, more than 1500 households have cut their bills by an average of \$350 a year. Kildonan anticipates some homes will also save \$500 per year on their combined water and gas bills.

Energy reduction initiatives have saved some households up to \$1000 per year on electricity. Second-year reductions for those who've been with the program that long produced an extra \$200 per annum in electricity savings, a result which demonstrates sustainable behaviour change.

WHAT'S AHEAD

Kildonan's programs are poised for significant growth, replication and transfer across sectors. Its Family Services team has been working with eight other agencies to develop an integrated model of service delivery in partnership with the Victorian Department of Human Services.

While Kildonan's training and consultancy work is based in Victoria, some of its partnerships are national. The organisation is also talking to businesses in other states and industries, including banking and insurance, about developing relationships for future expansion.