



## New portable homes for people with disabilities

Grant Meyer MPIA

This article outlines how an innovative response to a social issue is being pursued through a built environment solution. In an effort to keep young people with disabilities out of aged care facilities, the Summer Foundation has recently launched the prototype of a new type of portable house.

People with acquired brain injury and spinal cord injury are often unable to find suitable housing in the community due to their accessibility and support needs. The injury may have been as a result of a motor vehicle accident. But not returning to the community as soon as possible after an injury impacts a person's health and wellbeing. Their ability to live independently declines quickly, as do their connections with the community and mental health.

Currently around 50 younger Australians are admitted to aged care every week and the majority who end up in nursing homes come from a hospital setting. There are significant challenges in navigating the readiness for hospital discharge and readiness to live well with appropriate support back at home. It takes time to establish funding for support, equipment and home modifications, not to mention implementing these changes and supports. If a person's home can't be suitably modified, or for a range of other good reasons isn't the right place for that person to return to, even greater strain is placed on the transition from hospital to home.

Living in aged care can lead to really poor outcomes for younger people. Almost half in aged care are in partner relationships at the time of their admission. Of note more than one in four are parents of school-aged children. Aged care is not a suitable or conducive environment for a younger person to maintain a relationship or raise a family.

In addition to the social and identity considerations, the 'do for' model of care in a nursing home limits the confidence, independence and rehabilitation potential of younger residents. This can lessen the likelihood of them making their way out of aged care and into more suitable housing. And this is where the Rapid Interim Housing Prototype comes in.

The availability of appropriate interim housing will be a significant factor in helping younger people avoid discharge from hospital into aged care. It will give people, their families and support networks time to work out their longer-term capacity and support needs. Appropriate interim housing can maximise a person's quality of life and independence, as well as their potential for functional improvement. And critically, it can keep people connected – to their communities and to their support networks.



It's a problem that sparked the design of a high-tech housing unit, which is a prefabricated dwelling that has the potential to drive real change. The dwellings have fit-for-purpose features including: wide doorways, an accessible bathroom, ceiling hoist in the bedroom, voice or touch activated appliances and height-adjustable benches and sinks.

The companies who assisted with the construction brought experience, both in modular design and in customising solutions for people with a disability. Following a planning approval process, the dwelling would take around six weeks to build and approximately four hours to install. A typical unit is priced at approximately \$160,000 to construct and is designed to fit in a backyard or space of at least 10x12m in size. The building footprint is 7.6mx10m.

The Summer Foundation is marketing the initiative as an interim solution to fill a gap while an existing home is upgraded, or a new suitable permanent home is found. This would allow a person with a new disability to return to their community as soon as possible.

The prototype is the result of a collaboration between a range of organisations and individuals and was on display as part of Open House Melbourne in July 2019 with hundreds of people taking the chance to look through. And feedback received was very positive. The initiative has been backed by a range of funding partners including the Transport Accident Commission (TAC).

"This unit is a prototype – a demonstration of a concept. It was designed to show what's possible and encourage conversations about appropriate interim housing – available for people where and when they need it," said Carolyn Finis, Chief of Staff at the Summer Foundation. We look forward to upcoming conversations with future developers of this type of housing, with the NDIA, TAC about funding models, and with local government and other authorities about planning considerations," she said.

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