

# Adapting and Growing Stronger in the Face of Adversity

Dr Tracey Dodd, Ms Janin Hentzen, Ms Angelina Demaria, Ms Ashleigh Beaumont, Adelaide Business School, University of Adelaide

Community housing provider, Junction, faced a surmountable challenge of supporting over 4,500 vulnerable tenants and clients at risk of homelessness during the Covid-19 pandemic. From July to October 2020, the University of Adelaide completed a review of Junction's response, finding that the organisation not only managed to maintain, but also improved, its services over this period. A key finding of the University's research is that the connections that Junction kept throughout this period supported tenants and clients to maintain stable housing and emotional stability, thus reducing their risk of entering (or re-entering) homelessness.

The organisation is large by Australian standards, with 230 employees spread geographically across metropolitan South Australia. During the pandemic, the University found that Junction maintained services without significant disruptions, or a single instance of staff or tenants contracting Covid-19. As such, the organisation provides a case study of how other organisations supporting the most vulnerable can maintain operations to support people who are homeless during one of the most disruptive periods in modern times.

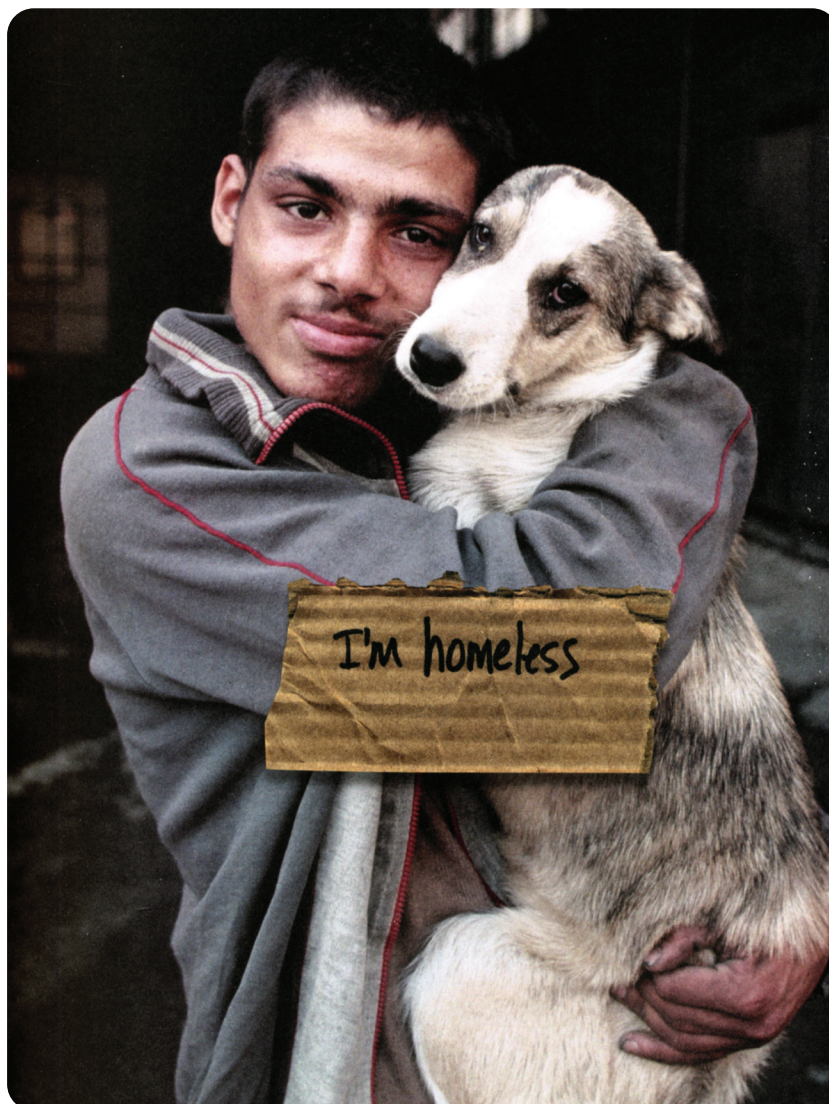
The University's research found that restrictions imposed by state and federal governments in response to the Covid-19 presented a unique opportunity for Junction to think creatively on how they remain connected to their tenants and clients. The organisation understood that social connection was critical at a time when many individuals had become unemployed, were dealing with mental health issues, or at risk of homelessness. Maintaining, if not strengthening, this relationship between the organisation and

their clients was vital in showing that no one was experiencing this alone and Junction would continue to provide support, however possible, in such uncertain times.

Importantly, tenant engagement increased during Covid-19 restrictions with the organisation implementing tenant welfare checks via telephone. This included 2,077 calls. Through these calls, tenants shared that they appreciated the concern, with one tenant remarking *'I felt like I mattered'*, another stated *'love the calls, I get lonely sometimes'*.

Through the interviews, tenants stated that Junction's services were not disrupted. Interview data also indicated a highly humanistic approach by the organisation, with positive tenant feedback. Interview participants shared that Junction was quick to make changes to rent when they were stood down from work. In addition, a separate interview participant shared that *[Junction] took action over this time to help resolve neighbour issues and it was much appreciated'*.

Likewise, the organisation invested in supporting the well-being and safety of staff, with the University finding this to be critical for the maintenance of business operations. Through a staff





Junction Housing Manager Tiffany 'checking in' with tenants via phone.

survey, completed by 107 staff, as well as 104 qualitative interviews (including tenants and service clients, staff, board members, and external stakeholders), the University's research found that Junction's business continuity during 2020 Covid-19 restrictions was made possible through strategic investments in communication and other critical soft and hard infrastructure, including IT, robust HR practices, and high organisational commitment to employee well-being.

Themes that emerged through clients who accessed Junction's community services echoed the humanistic approach. Clients who could engage in online services spoke positively about them; *'attending online play sessions helped us connect with Junction'*. Within the realm of the organisation's control, clients spoke positively about their experience with the service. As noted by one interview participant: *'I just want to add that we feel so welcome and so valued at Junction, we love playgroup and crèche. All child educators and*

*volunteers are so kind, genuine, caring and are always available to provide guidance and support'*.

In terms of key areas that emerged through the data, that could apply to other organisations in the homelessness sector, include:

### 1. Trust in decision-making was critical

The Executive team in this case study backed themselves, trusting their judgement and the judgement of staff in a highly uncertain environment.

### 2. Investment in communication is essential

Communication mechanisms and expertise with the organisations was critical. Data showed that Junction maintained connections with staff and stakeholders during a turbulent time, providing thought leadership to staff and external stakeholders with a clear point of reference. The positive role of communication during the pandemic highlights the need for continued and expanded planning for how future unknown and critical events could be managed.

### 3. Existing infrastructure allowed Junction to move swiftly to a new working environment

ICT investment and foresight allowed the organisation to move from face-to-face meetings and in-office work to working from home and digital meetings. In the future, more resources (for example, additional staff) could be made available to support IT staff, if needed. Organisational policies and procedures, such as WHS, risk, and response plans also facilitated a smooth transition for staff to work from home.

Overall, Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for community housing and service providers, such as Junction, to re-evaluate practices both within their internal operations and also in their tenancy management and engagement of housing and services. It has also proven how ongoing services, communication, and engagement with clients and tenants can be vital for those at risk of homelessness to provide them with stability and continuous support.