

Communities connected

By LISA KORYCKI

CONNECTING with friends, family and neighbours is what creates community.

Housing Week, recognised from today to December 5, is an annual statewide celebration of the connections in your neighbourhood.

Each year during Housing Week, tenants and residents of public, community-managed and social housing celebrate these connections.

It also provides an opportunity to build positive links through local events.

For Barb Devcic, seeing those connections being built is one of the satisfactions of the job.

As team leader of the client centre in Loddon and Mallee, Ms Devcic has seen the Loddon Mallee Housing Service grow from virtually a cottage industry to the burgeoning business it is today.

With that growth has been the recognition that more needs to be done to help those facing a housing crisis.

"This area used to be a one-off crisis response — put someone in a caravan or motel, they were in and out and that was it," Ms Devcic said.

"Now it is a much better service. We can hold on to people and see what's going on.

"If they need long-term case management, that can be arranged.

"It felt like a band-aid solution and we didn't see any outcome, now we are and we are part of the outcome.

"We must be doing something right. There are now people in extensive case management in areas which didn't exist before.

"Once where they would fall through the cracks we can refer

them on and they are seeing results.

"I'm really happy to look back at that, you can see the interventions working."

Ms Devcic has also seen a shift in the type of clients needing assistance.

While she said there would always be a core generation of poverty, the service was being approached more and more by people who traditionally wouldn't have needed assistance.

She said these were people who were under mortgage stress, or they are people earning but can't afford their rent.

She said there were also a lot of people looking for "a leg-up" — fuel or food vouchers, school assistance for excursions or uniforms — small amounts of financial help.

Ms Devcic is passionate about her job and after 12 years she is still enthusiastic about where the service is heading.

"I don't have starry eyes about it all, but I do like it when we see results.

"I can see we will have an impact. There is movement, the government is listening about housing and homelessness.

"I still despair about poverty and disparity but I like the way the big picture is happening."

■ A street party with music, entertainment and food will be held at the Long Gully Neighbourhood Centre, 2 Humboldt Drive, Long Gully on Friday from 4.30pm to 8.30pm as part of Housing Week.

For more information, phone Karin Haevecker on 5442 1165.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: The Loddon Mallee Housing Service's Barb Devcic. Picture: BILL CONROY

CFA volunteers face fiery test

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WHILE Mr Shelton said the training had given him the skills he needed, he admitted to being nervous as the bushfire season rapidly approached.

"I'm feeling more confident about approaching fires and being much more aware of fire ready programs," he said.

"I'm quite interested, and anticipate being able to put the skills and training into effect, to be able to make it useful."

Weeroona college teacher Ben Lee also signed up after the February fires.

He said witnessing the devastation of the fires, as well as attending a car accident in 2007, made him more aware of his desire to help others.

"It hit home that we need to look after people, to do what you can.

"It felt like the right thing to do."

Mr Lee has felt the "heat of the

fire" during several minor call-outs and has gone through a number of night time and low structure exercises.

He is continuing his CFA training to upgrade his skills.

Mr Murley said it was not just new recruits that had been strengthened by the February fires, but there was a growing public awareness of what the community faced.

He said that was evidenced by more than 300 people turning

out to a fire ready public meeting last week. Last fire season a similar meeting attracted barely a handful of people.

"There is a certain amount of awareness out there.

"Maybe some are a bit nervous," Mr Murley said.

"This fire season is a worry. I'd be silly if I said I wasn't worried about it.

"Every time you go out, the way the country has dried out so quickly, it's ready to go."

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