

'I've been homeless. I know how it feels'

Danielle Bergin once lived in a car and ate at soup kitchens. Now she's helping the homeless, through her Island Child Charitable Trust, but it's getting harder and harder, she writes.

This opinion piece was prepared for Radio New Zealand News and aired on 23 May, [listen to the interview here](#). Island Child Charitable Trust is a member of Community Housing Aotearoa.



Danielle Bergin Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

You see, I've been homeless. I know how it feels. To have nowhere to go. To be stressed about safety. To feel lonely inside. To watch every cent and walk the streets daily, looking for free opportunities. To sit in libraries and read the paper, trying to pass time, waiting for the next free soup kitchen dinner.

Becoming a mother helped me gain a Housing New Zealand (HNZ) home 13 years ago. I proved I was traumatised from a sexual assault. I proved I had a newborn baby. I cried in the HNZ office, and within days I had an offer of a warm, dry home.

Our little unit gave baby and me shelter and a place to heal. I grew in confidence as my baby showed me how to better communicate with others. People would stop me on the street to lean in to the pram to talk to baby and coo and aah. Looking back at my homeless days - sleeping in my car, being transient, no one ever stopped me to ask if I was alright. I guess I wasn't a cute baby. I guess I had barriers and too much sadness around me.

Social reality again started to hit me when baby was two years old. I had inherited a small amount of money, just enough to buy the cheapest rundown shop in Panmure, Auckland. I noticed families sleeping outside in their cars. Inviting them in from the cold, I started letting people stay in my front room for free. From there Island Child Charitable Trust was formed.



Children cuddle pets at Island Child Charitable Trust. Photo: Supplied: Island Child Charitable Trust

I had not grown up in poor New Zealand. I was white middle class. I had been sheltered from poverty and social issues. I had no idea about social services or how to assess needs.

What I had was the ability to show humanity to a fellow human being. I grew in courage and went to community meetings. I met local Work and Income and HNZ teams. Over time I learned how to re-home a desperate family within a week, and present a good case for action by government agencies.

But over the past seven years everything has changed. The housing crisis began. Initially it started to take longer to get a HNZ home. More paperwork was required. More barriers from the government agencies that vulnerable people sought refuge and support from.

I can pinpoint the time of collapse to when Work and Income took over housing assessments from HNZ. House offers for my clients (whom I call whānau) immediately dried up. In a two-month period I ended up with a caseload of 16 desperate families, when I had usually handled only five families at a time.

No one knows how complex each family's case has become. The constant barriers and hurdles now in place, from waiting for the call centre to answer, to assessment interviews, to filling in copious forms - including authorised agent, change of address, accommodation forms, change of personal circumstances form - and that's for those already on a benefit. To start from scratch takes longer!

On top of this my little trust needs to gather vital information under the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families and Vulnerable Children Acts. So I then have to spend additional time gathering names, dates of birth, medical histories, next of kin, consent to obtain and disclose information etc. The list goes on.

If I don't do the paperwork, my whānau cannot comply with the Work and Income requirements necessary to obtain a home offer. For a Ministry of Social Development contract, each family must complete a 12-week programme at an approved provider. But no one seems to understand that my shelter is small, it's not designed to hold people here for 12 weeks. I want to house people within 4-6 weeks.

Whānau now stay here longer as the exit point is blocked. House offers are not given as fast as needed. It's a miracle I achieve it all, but I am very grateful to the senior Work and Income officials who strive to listen to my pleas.

I can only help about 15 families this year. That's reduced from the 35 homes per year when HNZ could talk with me and an easier process existed. I'm not a statistician but that's a pretty big reduction in productivity.

But for some reason, I feel like I work even harder now. More bureaucracy, more communication hurdles equals fewer results.

A huge amount of follow-up work is required on each case to make sure it's progressing in the Work and Income system. Otherwise, the client can be stood down or taken off the housing waitlist. Why has our nation's social housing allocation system become so difficult?

But what keeps me going is this: I see the personal growth as homeless families are transformed from despair to recovery. I see a parent arrive stressed, worried, crying, and I help transform them to a calm, centred parent again. I see them smile and be happy that their children are gaining stability when moving into an income-related rental home.



Church group City Impact donates Christmas gift boxes every year. Photo: Supplied: Island Child Charitable Trust

I can't wave a magic wand to help the masses. All I can do is help a few. I try hard to select those who sound the most vulnerable. I hear them over the phone first. I try to find the voices that sound like they are just gripping on. I hear the young women saying that Child, Youth and Family will take their baby once the motel room tab has run out. I'm haunted by those I have to turn away.

Recently, I've once again become a one-man band. I can't afford to employ a staff member. I worry each month how to pay the bills. I have my funding applications declined, as all charities are now struggling for the same dollar. The funding I used to get to stay afloat has diminished in the past five years.

All I've ever sought is enough funding to employ staff to help families in crisis. I've been ridiculed, put down, advised by consultants that my trust is not corporate enough for government funding. But they just don't get it. Government *should* be funding these small grassroots trusts. They are the lifeblood of society.

The consultants want flash signs at the gate, a reception area with serenading fish tank, and cold glass-tabled boardrooms. They see the smaller rooms, tattooed clients and the high-risk neighbourhood as flaws.

They fail to see the successes: a mum being helped with her newborn baby, the laughter of children playing hide 'n' seek, parents reconciling after fighting in their car due to desperation, driving in the night to Starship with a child with a deep chesty cough, or calling an ambulance for an asthmatic child.

Here at the bottom of the social heap, I see it all and I don't judge others. Is it possible we could teach our decision-makers to do the same?

We need to stop contracting consultants on huge retainers. We need to listen to and encourage those at the frontline who have the skills and knowledge to contribute solutions.



A bed set at Island Child Charitable Trust. Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

Writing this, I sit in a warm office on a cold wintry night and I think of the faces of the many people I've helped over the years. At least 300 families safely housed.

Thirteen years have passed, and it makes me think of when I lived in my car. People went on with their lives. I was not noticed until I had a cute baby for others to coo at. Maybe that's what we need to find now as a society. We need a feel-good baby. Have we thrown our social baby out with the bathwater?

Have we left it too late? I hope not. I hope we can stop the insanity of moving people out of their homes and selling off our valued land. For what? Money in the bank and more homeless on the streets?

Our society and our elected government have the power to turn this around. We all have a duty of care to our most vulnerable citizens.

What legacy can we leave to future generations? We sold off our land? We sold off our nation's children?

It's not a legacy I wish to be remembered for. Is it yours?

Danielle Bergin founded and runs the *Island Child Charitable Trust* in Tamaki. The non-profit organisation was set up in 2005 to support marginalised people in the Greater Auckland area.