

GJK Facility Services International award shows power of anti-poverty partnerships

The Brotherhood, Collingwood-based GJK Facility Services and the Victorian Department of Human Services won the H. Bruce Russell Global Innovator's Award

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property-industry award this week for a cleaning contract that employs residents of two Melbourne public housing estates shows how partnerships between welfare agencies, business and government can help lift people out of poverty and "skill up" the economy, Brotherhood of St Laurence Executive Director Tony Nicholson said today.

The Brotherhood, Collingwood-based GJK Facility Services and the Victorian Department of Human Services won the H. Bruce Russell Global Innovator's Award for Community Redevelopment, auspiced by US-based CoreNet Global, an

international industry association for corporate real estate and related professionals.

The award winning project is a pilot cleaning contract on the Collingwood and Atherton Gardens (Fitzroy) public housing estates that requires 35 per cent of staff to be residents. The project grew out of advocacy by the Brotherhood to the State Government for the training and hiring of residents on the estates, many of whom are long-term unemployed.

"The result was employment opportunities for unskilled workers, some of them second-generation unemployed, and also the chance to improve their home environment on the estates," Mr Nicholson said.

"The Brotherhood of St Laurence sees such local employment projects as great ways to assist people out of poverty and into worthwhile jobs and careers – along with all the opportunities in life that flow from long-term employment. The Victorian Government and GJK Facility Services have shown how effective this approach can be," he said.

"Indeed, the model used for the cleaning contract in Collingwood and Fitzroy has now been extended by the State Office of Housing throughout Victoria, through its Public Tenant Employment Program."

The State Government awarded the cleaning contract with the public-tenant employment clause in 2003 to GJK Facility Services. GJK trained the staff in certificate-level industry skills, while the Brotherhood intensively supported them in their transition to full-time and lasting employment.

“Since then the Brotherhood has increasingly used what we term ‘supported employment’ for the long-term jobless in our work,” Mr Nicholson said. “These include community businesses whose trainees were formerly unemployed, including gardening businesses in Braybrook and Hastings that have State Government clients, and a concierge service for the Office of Housing on the Atherton Gardens and Collingwood housing estates.

“Welfare organisations have a big role to play in developing the work skills of the unemployed – skills that the economy desperately needs to keep growing. This approach, using a business model to achieve social change, is a powerful way to both respond to skills shortages and change people’s lives.”

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