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Newcastle work-based day program is the avenue to real social and economic inclusion for people with disability

A work-based day program with a difference for Newcastle and Hunter residents with disability was officially opened at Warabrook today.

In a first for the region, Avenue's alternative program gives people with disability tailored work-based opportunities in profit-sharing microbusiness teams.

Avenue is the brainchild of co-founder and CEO Laura O'Reilly. Ms O'Reilly joined one of the centre's first participants, Julie Clifton, and Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation Chair, Jennifer Leslie, to cut the ribbon at today's opening.

Ms O'Reilly said team members keep the income they earn, an opportunity many people with severe and profound disability are otherwise denied.

She said the microbusinesses serve individual and business clients. Skill-building work activities include fulfilling online orders for retailers, letterbox distributions, animal care (pet sitting and dog walking) and gardening.

Bringing Avenue to Newcastle and the Hunter has been a priority for Ms O'Reilly, as it is one of Australia's highest need areas for quality disability support services. According to the City of Newcastle, seven per cent of its residents receive disability support benefits compared to five per cent across NSW¹. A 2018 report by the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health showed Stockton and Fullerton Cove has the highest proportion of working-age adults living with disability in Australia.²

"Avenue flips the traditional models of work on their heads, by redesigning traditional workflows to meet people's abilities and support needs," Ms O'Reilly said.

"Work should be accessible to all, and Avenue sets a new standard for social and economic inclusion for people with a disability," she said.

"Feedback from the community and our participants has been immensely positive. People are embracing our approach including support workers, community groups, parents and carers of people with a disability, and funding partners such as Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation."

Ms Clifton said there has been nothing like Avenue in her area. The 40 year old from East Maitland joined in October. As well as being a key member of the order fulfillment team, she has studied peer mentoring and started her Cert II in Auslan at TAFE to broaden her skills. She is determined to use her lived experience of intellectual disability to help others to reach their goals and live their dreams.

¹ The City of Newcastle (2015). Social Strategy 2016-2019. [online] The City of Newcastle, p.25. Available at: [https://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/getmedia/671f2972-0f9a-4ef4-a59e-838eb84671dc/Social-Strategy-\(2016-2019\).aspx](https://www.newcastle.nsw.gov.au/getmedia/671f2972-0f9a-4ef4-a59e-838eb84671dc/Social-Strategy-(2016-2019).aspx) [Accessed 23 Feb. 2022].

² Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (2018). Technical Report - Spatial distribution of working age adults with disabilities across Australia: a small area analysis of the 2016 Census. [online] APO, p.13. Available at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2018-03/apo-nid223311.pdf> [Accessed 23 Feb. 2022].

"Avenue helps give me purpose, and is building my self-confidence, social skills and work skills," Ms Clifton said.

"I love earning my own money, but I am most proud of meeting new people and socialising at Avenue," she said.

"Leaving each day, I feel confident and happy from having achieved the goals of the day. Never give up on the job until you have finished the tasks set on the day. I have courage and am determined to never give up on anything in life."

A \$160,000 Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation grant helped create the purpose-built space. Charitable Foundation Chair, Ms Leslie said the Foundation is pleased to help bring this much needed support service to the region. She said Avenue's approach is an innovative and rewarding alternative to traditional recreational or therapeutic day programs for local people living with a disability.

"Purposeful work and recognition for it is vital for everyone," Ms Leslie said.

"Avenue's approach delivers real world work skills as well as supporting participants to socialise with teammates and develop their individual skills.

"The Charitable Foundation is excited to support the establishment of such a worthwhile enterprise. With the goal to attract around 80 team members in its first year, we know it will make a significant positive impact on our local community," she said.

Avenue is a social enterprise that is part of not for profit organisation Fighting Chance, which Ms O'Reilly and her brother Jordan founded in 2009. The pair were inspired by the experience of their brother, Shane, whom they say was let down by a society defining him by his disability.

Avenue now supports more than 400 people with disability across five coworking spaces – with the other four in Sydney. The 800sq metre Newcastle centre has quiet spaces, sensory rooms, fully accessible bathrooms and a range of other features to facilitate full participation in a variety of tasks, engagement and learning.

Avenue is taking registrations for participants in both their Work and Social programs, and expressions of interest for partnerships from the local business community. For more information visit www.avenuecoworking.org.au

This project is one of more than 500 in NSW that the Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation has supported though \$24 million in grants. The next round of grants will open in March. For more information, visit www.newcastlepermanent.com.au/charitable-foundation

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