HomeAssist: A New Approach to House Security

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During 1989, a national workshop on Crime and the Elderly was jointly organised by the Office of the Commissioner for the Ageing, the Victims of Crime Service, and the National Police Research Unit in South Australia. The workshop was a state-level response to the mounting evidence that elderly people feel particularly vulnerable to crime and that this fear impacts adversely on their quality of life.

The workshop was also a response to a call for a coordinated approach to the problem from several local government authorities. They were concerned with the enormous anxiety created in their communities by a spate of attacks on elderly women accompanied by the high level of publicity surrounding these events. The workshop identified that:

- elderly people believed themselves to be the easiest and most frequent target of criminals;
- fear of break-ins, should elderly people leave their house during the day, is accompanied by a fear of burglary and personal assault during the night-time hours;
- this fear was a very real problem because it impacted on personal health, restricted lifestyle and increased social isolation; and
- there were links between this perception of threat and premature or inappropriate admission to residential care.

The workshop recognised a need to focus on strategies which would work at changing the elderly person’s perception of the degree of threat. This
change in perception would bring about some small but critical behavioural and home environment changes and that these changes would protect the person and their property and improve their quality of life. It was recognised that, in order to implement such a strategy, an integrated approach to home safety and security needed to be devised involving all levels of government and including a wide variety of government and non-government agencies and community organisations. The strategy should be coordinated at the state level through one central agency (Department of Employment and Technical and Further Education-DETAFE).

It was recognised that the home safety and security strategy needed to be centred around the elderly person and their environment. The strategy needed to:

- cater for all levels of the elderly person's concern for their safety and security;
- offer reassurance;
- offer advice on matters of personal safety at home and outside the home;
- offer assessment and advice on the home environment;
- provide access to practical changes around the home; and
- raise community awareness regarding home security issues.

In July 1990 HomeAssist was launched. Its design and delivery model is believed to be unique in Australia in that it provides an integrated, yet multifunctional approach to a multifaceted problem—the provision of a safe, secure and healthy environment to the people who most need assistance. These people include the frail, aged, people with disabilities, carers and people on low incomes.

HomeAssist has a complex set of funding arrangements spread across the Commonwealth, state and local government sectors. Funding for HomeAssist makes its way into a conglomerate budget through the Home and Community Care program, the Together Against Crime program, the Department of Employment and Technical and Further Education, the Local Government Association, and participating councils. Most of the annual budget of $2 million is expended on the salaries of personnel involved in HomeAssist. Of the first year's budget, $100,000 was allocated proportionally to councils for use as a subsidy on hardware for those people who could not afford to pay for security modifications to their homes.

The operational base of HomeAssist is the team of workers in each of the forty-three funded councils. In the local government sector, HomeAssist operates as a labour market program providing $1.7 million annually to workers who have been unemployed for six out of the previous nine months. These employees are sought through the Commonwealth Employment Service and many—at the specific request of councils—come from the older age group of unemployed people—the over 45's group. Councils report that workers in this age group are more likely to have a social and ideological
empathy with older clients and are more likely to be trusted by them. These workers may become HomeAssist coordinators within councils and be employed for a period of two years, or they may become security advisers, community aides, or handipersons and be employed for a one-year period.

With the exception of four councils in the north Adelaide region, where a community organisation delivers HomeAssist, all metropolitan councils in Adelaide (twenty-four in total) were funded to deliver HomeAssist and nineteen country councils also deliver the HomeAssist program. HomeAssist operates through a single assessment by the agency delivering the program. This agency uses either its own HomeAssist funded services or calls on other agencies and services funded directly or indirectly as part of the HomeAssist network. The genesis of the delivery model for the new HomeAssist lay in the pre-existing Home Assistance Scheme, based in local councils, which has been delivering home maintenance and social support services for six years. The injection of $1 million into HomeAssist in 1990 boosted the annual budget of the new HomeAssist to $2 million and provided for the delivery of the new safety and security service.

Within the combination of the Home Maintenance Service, the Home Safety and Security Service, and the Social Support Service lies the key to the effective delivery mechanism of HomeAssist. This delivery mechanism is that, to secure a home adequately, simple safety precautions and protective measures can be implemented at very little cost in the course of routine repair and maintenance work and very often by using existing hardware.

However, securing homes so they are less likely to be broken into is not the full HomeAssist picture. Turning homes into prisons and perpetuating the 'Fort Knox' mentality is not what HomeAssist is about either. While the 'fix it' component of the safety and security service is organised and happens through the home maintenance part of HomeAssist, the coordinator who does the assessment is taught to be mindful that fitting better locks than those already in existence may not be the total solution to the problem.

Allaying the person’s fear of crime is a critical factor in the assessment process. The broader social aspects of the problem—that is, recurring illness, pain due to age-related difficulties, or loss of a partner or spouse—may have precipitated fears which need to be addressed. This is where the social support service, either directly or with the assistance and resources of other more specialised agencies in the network, is utilised. The social support service includes the Victims of Crime Service workshops on personal safety, the local Neighbourhood Watch, the local Council Volunteer Support Network, the Telecross Telephone Reassurance Service and agencies working with the local crime prevention committees.

As part of the assessment process, the HomeAssist coordinator or the security assessor (sometimes these two positions are amalgamated) is careful to match security modifications to client needs, special circumstances and behaviour patterns. For example, some styles of locks are unsuitable for clients with arthritic problems. Security screen doors may be the best solution for house-bound clients, and digital access code locks may be necessary for clients who are visited regularly by service agencies. A simple change like the provision of a louder doorbell can also improve a client’s sense of security.

An important step in the assessment process is the follow-up procedure. New hardware is of little use if it is not used. Most councils have set follow-
up procedures with clients receiving at least two visits after the work has been completed, wherever possible. For a graphical overview of the HomeAssist program, see Appendix I.

Staffing
Various agencies funded directly to support the HomeAssist process are:
- South Australian Department of Employment and Technical and Further Education is responsible for the overall coordination and administration of HomeAssist employees (HomeAssist State Coordinator and Assistant Project Officer);
- the Victims of Crime Service provides workshops and seminars within local councils focusing on issues of personal safety, home security and victim counselling (HomeAssist Program Coordinator);
- Local Government Association-provides general HomeAssist training for local government employees operating the program (HomeAssist Training Officer);
- Telecross, Australian Red Cross Society, provides bases in Local Government Authorities for volunteers to undergo daily telephone reassurance to elderly clients (HomeAssist Telephone Reassurance Coordinator);
- the South Australian Police Department provides crime prevention and security assessment training to council employees and works with Neighbourhood Watch (HomeAssist Police Coordinators-two positions).

HomeAssist and the South Australian Police Department
The involvement of the South Australian Police Department is critical to the effective delivery of the security component of HomeAssist. HomeAssist within the South Australian Police Department is managed by a commissioned officer at Inspector level who is located within the Community Affairs Branch.

This management structure has ensured HomeAssist has access to the highest policy and decision making level within the Police Department and has provided HomeAssist with information on and exposure to the latest developments in crime prevention methods and programming, as well as specialised training, resource support and access to other community-based crime prevention initiatives operating in the community.

Just as importantly, this relationship has provided for a cooperative and mutually beneficial problem-solving environment which has allowed a smooth and trouble-free implementation of a program that, at the outset, seemed unwieldy in structure, politically and publicly sensitive and clouded with an aura of 'too difficult'. In recognising the special expertise of the Police
Department in crime prevention issues, HomeAssist has been able to develop into what is widely considered to be one of the better crime prevention programs in South Australia.

**Training**

From the outset it was recognised that, in order to deliver an effective safety and security service, HomeAssist employees needed special training to increase their knowledge base of South Australian crime problems, crime prevention methods, and community policing philosophies and programs. HomeAssist employees needed to acquire particular skills in order to provide advice on the practical implementation of crime prevention methods in line with the needs and personal situation of the client involved. They also needed to learn and promote professionalism in attitude and application of the crime prevention measures taught and used by the South Australian Police.

All employees involved in the safety and security service of HomeAssist must be antecedent screened and attend a series of workshops run by the South Australian Police Department for which they will receive accreditation for attendance. This last procedure further protects the integrity of HomeAssist, the client and the employing authority.

The initial workshop addresses a wide variety of crime prevention topics, a general workshop looks broadly at the rationale and program components of community policing methods, and the Hardware Installation workshop provides:

- information on the types of locks recommended for securing clients homes;
- information on the conditions under which to select locks for installation—that is balancing between security and ease of usage for client group;
- skills enhancement in the fixing of locks;
- tips on minimising installation costs where cheaper alternatives may be available and equally effective.

So far, 100 local government employees have been trained through these workshops and are working in the community under the constant guidance of HomeAssist police coordinators.

If it is assumed that a program operating at full capacity may require the security officer within council to survey, assess and secure three homes a day, then the skills building required to conduct a security survey takes up a large component of the training. Assessors are taught how to survey using a process called the Three Stage System and using the HomeAssist Security Survey (see Appendix II). This document becomes the working tool of the assessor.

Once through the initial training program, HomeAssist assessors are visited regularly by, and maintain constant contact with, the two HomeAssist police coordinators. These two officers, Senior Constables in rank, spend a
large proportion of their time in the field working professionally with employees they have trained (as well as with clients). They teach, resource and advise the assessors in areas where they may experience difficulty. Also, the police coordinators work with Neighbourhood Watch in a variety of ways including program promotion, seminars for the elderly, and client identification and referral.

**Observations**

While HomeAssist was launched in mid-1990 (eleven months prior to this conference), its effective operational life has been approximately eight months. Across the forty-three funded Local Government Authorities there exists a wide variety of structural and delivery models. Councils choose the delivery model that best suits their own organisational and community environment. As can be expected, some councils appear to be dealing with HomeAssist better than others, and the reasons for this are varied.

Initially, while most councils were keen to participate in HomeAssist, there was considerable concern about its implementation and operation. 'How do we do this?' was the most frequently asked question. Most concerns related to a perception of increased liability exposure, and many councils believed they had inadequate hardware allocation to operate HomeAssist effectively. Clearly the public perception is that adequate security is very costly. However, these concerns have dissipated as the knowledge and skills base of those delivering the HomeAssist service has increased.

While it would be unwise and not even possible to formulate conclusions or predict outcomes at this stage, nevertheless some observations are possible and some likely questions for the future are emerging.

Predictably the councils who manage HomeAssist well, understand it, publicise it, and involve other agencies and resources in the implementation of it (including the resources of the South Australian Police Department, DETAFE, Neighbourhood Watch, Meals on Wheels, Domiciliary Care, Royal District Nursing Society, Lions Club and Rotary) are inundated with requests for the service. And, of course, the reverse applies. Some councils have chosen a more low-key approach which encourages and relies upon their pre-existing client base to pick-up on the HomeAssist service.

Response to the HomeAssist security service initially seemed slow, with councils reactively responding to requests for assistance from clients who had experienced break-ins. Many councils have now adopted a more proactive role in delivering and even selling the HomeAssist service. Councils have reported that clients do not seem to know what adequate security means and consequently are inadequately secured. Requests for surveys have gained momentum, and it is hoped that this is an indication of raised community awareness.

Reports from councils on hardware expenditure reveal that most clients are prepared to pay for the new equipment installed. This has left the original hardware allocation almost untouched and reserved for the most needy clients. It would seem that adequate security is high on the list of expenditure priorities for most clients once they have received an assessment. As a result, several councils have been able to fund the installation of costly items like
security screen doors on the homes of some very frail and financially destitute clients who have severe mobility problems.

Country councils have reported a different experience. Most have totally expended their hardware allocation and report a reluctance on the part of their clients to pay for hardware changes. Most report their clients have little fear of break-ins. The country councils attribute this lack of fear to be related to lack of exposure to violent crime reports in the print media. One country town reports:

We're all locked up now. A fellow stopped here when his car broke down and did one break.
That was all it took.

Conclusion

As with all crime prevention programs some careful qualitative and quantitative analysis of the outcomes is critical to the further deployment of resources. A formal evaluation of HomeAssist in late 1991 will undoubtedly explore a variety of issues relating to requests for service, hardware expenditure, community awareness, client perception-the 'before service' and 'after service' measurement-and the impact on these issues, if any, of variables like socioeconomic differences, age profile differences, Neighbourhood Watch activity, police presence in communities, the built environment (including the appearance of a neat and tidy community-graffiti free-and the effectiveness of safety and security service publicity in changing perceptions.

Quite simply, HomeAssist is about two things. It is about securing homes adequately so they are less likely to be broken into, and it is about getting the right information out to elderly people-information that will bring about some small but important changes to the way they go about their daily lives. This information will play an important role in helping them to maintain an independent lifestyle, to be able to go to the shops knowing their homes are not likely to be broken into, and to be able to sleep at night knowing their homes are well maintained and secure. HomeAssist is a cooperative venture in South Australia. It is a partnership between three levels of government and a large number of agencies working Together Against Crime for a safer community.
Appendix I

The HomeAssist Program

COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT
Dept Community Services & Health

ATTORNEY GENERAL

MINISTER OF FACS

MINISTER OF EMP & FE

HACC PROGRAM

HAS PROGRAM

VOCS
SAPD
DETAFE
LGA
RED CROSS

MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
DETAFE
LGA
COUNCIL EMPLOYEE
HACC / HEALTH / WELFARE
UTLC
WOMEN’S ADVISOR TO PREMIER
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
SAPD
ATTORNEY GENERAL’S DEPT

COORDINATOR
ASSESSMENT COORDINATION

STEERING COMMITTEE
CONCIL
DOMESTIC CARE
RDNS
MOW
VOCS
NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH
RED CROSS
SERVICE CLUBS

COMMUNITY AWARENESS
- SCC’s
- DAY CENTRES
- PRESS RELEASES

TECHNICAL ADVICE
- SECURITY AUDIT
- SUBSIDISED EQUIPMENT

HOME MAINTENANCE
- REPAIRS
- PAINTING
- DIRECT OR HONEST BOKER

OTHER SERVICES
- RDMS
- DOMESTIC CARE
- MOW

RESSURANCE
- NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH
- SERVICE CLUBS
- RED CROSS
- COUNCIL VOLTEERS
### Legend for Appendix I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DETAFE</td>
<td>Department of Employment &amp; Technical and Further Education</td>
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<td>Employment &amp; Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>FACS</td>
<td>Family &amp; Community Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>HACC</td>
<td>Home &amp; Community Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAS</td>
<td>Home Assistance Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGA</td>
<td>Local Government Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOW</td>
<td>Meals on Wheels</td>
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<tr>
<td>RDNS</td>
<td>Royal District Nursing Society</td>
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<td>South Australian Police Department</td>
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<td>Senior Citizens’ Clubs</td>
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<tr>
<td>UTLC</td>
<td>United Trades and Labour Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>VOCS</td>
<td>Victims of Crime Service</td>
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### HomeAssist Security Survey

**Name and Address of Occupier:** ____________________________________________

**Council Area Concerned:** _______________________________________________

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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| 1 | **House Number:**
   | Visible from street?                                                                      |
   | Easy to see at night?                                                                     |
| 2 | **Neighbours:**
   | Known and trusted?                                                                        |
| 3 | **Front Fence:**
   | High                                                                                      |
   | Low                                                                                       |
   | Nil                                                                                       |
| 4 | **Side and Rear Fences:**
   | High                                                                                      |
   | Low                                                                                       |
   | Nil                                                                                       |
| 5 | **Trees and Shrubs:**
   | Windows and doors visible from road?                                                      |
   | Obvious hiding places?                                                                    |
| 6 | **Outside Appearance:**
   | From street does house look lived in?                                                     |
| 7 | **Front/Rear Entrance Doors:**
   | Door viewer?                                                                              |
   | Side hinges-double/single?                                                                |
   | Solid/hollow?                                                                             |
   | Nightlatch/knobset?                                                                       |
   | Hingepins-loose/fixed?                                                                    |
   | Drop bolts?                                                                               |
   | Glass insert?                                                                             |
   | Glass panels adjacent?                                                                   |
| 8 | **Sliding Door:**
   | Able to be lifted from track?                                                             |
   | Self-tapping screws required?                                                              |
   | Dead-lock fitted?                                                                        |
9 Security Door:
   Existing/adequate?
   Three Pin locking?
   Dead-lock fitted?

10 Windows:
   Sash-Wood/Aluminium?
   Hopper-Wood/Aluminium?
   Casement-Wood/Aluminium?
   Sliding-Wood/Aluminium?
   Louvres

11 Manhole:
   Construction
   Hinges
   Padlock on inside?

12 Skylight:
   Fixed/Removable?

13 Garden Shed/Garage:
   Lockable?
   Windows?

14 Alarm Systems:
   Existing?
   Brand?
   Monitored/Local?
   Date last serviced by installer?

15 Internal lighting:
   Automatic lighting timer installed?
   Globe wattage (brightness)?

16 External Lighting:
   Movement activated?
   Outside switch
   Are darkened areas lit?
   Front porch light wattage?

17 Telephone:
   Extension by bed?
   Emergency numbers handy?
   Readable?
18 Keys:
   Identification on keys?
   Hidden outside?
   Key with neighbour/service agencies?

19 Etsa Meterboard:
   Inside/Outside Board?
   If outside, key operated lock?

List improvements recommended
in order of priority:

Name of Inspecting Officer: ___________________________________________

Agency Address: ____________________________________________________

Date of Inspection: _________________________________________________

Further Comments: