

A family home, not an institution: the Abbeyfield answer for low-income seniors

Aug 01 2025

[Lauren Broomham](#)



In the leafy suburbs of Melbourne, on an ordinary street, sits an ordinary house. There is no signage or nurses' station. But inside, 10 older Australians sit down together for a home-cooked lunch, prepared by a live-in housekeeper who also checks in on their wellbeing.

This is Abbeyfield. It's not a retirement village or aged care. Instead, it's a 70-year-old international movement – offering housing, companionship, and dignity to older people who can't afford the alternatives.

"I'd never heard of Abbeyfield either," CEO Dimitri Kiriacoulacos, who first encountered the charity as a young lawyer in Adelaide in the late '90s, told SATURDAY. "But once you get inside one of our houses, you see how powerful this model really is."

Normal homes, uncommon purpose

Abbeyfield's model is deceptively simple: small, non-institutional homes, each with 10 to 12 private rooms and ensuites, a communal dining space, and a live-in housekeeper. Residents – generally over 65 – are semi-independent, often managing their own home care, but rely on the housekeeper for meals and a layer of daily support.



Abbeyfield's home in Narrabri, NSW

Unlike retirement villages, there are no Deferred Management Fees. And unlike residential aged care, there are no means tests or assessments.

Instead, residents – mostly pensioners – pay around 70% of their Pension, plus their Commonwealth Rent Assistance and energy supplement, in return for a private room, all meals, and utilities.

"We're not aged care," Dimitri said firmly. "We're community housing. We exist for people who can't or don't want to live alone, and who value companionship."

"We've had residents celebrate their 100th birthdays in our houses. One man recently left after 25 years – he needed to move into aged care but came back to celebrate with us. The house threw a party in his honour."



A group of Abbeyfield Melton House residents and staff celebrate its 30th anniversary in June this year.
Credit: Abbeyfield/Damjan Janevski

Built by the community, now restructured for scale

Founded in the UK in 1956 by ex-Army officer Richard Carr-Gomm, Abbeyfield was always intended to be grassroots: an ordinary house in an ordinary street. The movement spread to Australia in the 1980s, with each home independently owned and governed by local community committees.

But that federated structure hit a roadblock.

“A lot of our committees were tiring, and some struggling with the compliance burden – governance, AGMs, finance,” Dimitri explained. “They wanted to focus on the well-being of our residents, not reporting.”

So in 2020, Abbeyfield Australia restructured 26 separate entities into a single national organisation – a move that now sets Australia apart from every other country in the global Abbeyfield network.

“We’re unique,” said Dimitri. “We’ve done the full merger, expanded into disability housing, and we’re looking to scale.”

Small footprint, big potential

Today, Abbeyfield operates 23 houses across Victoria, South Australia, NSW, Tasmania and the ACT –five of them for younger adults with mild intellectual disabilities. In total, just 250 people live in an Abbeyfield house.



It's a fraction of what Dimitri believes is possible.

"We should have 100 homes in this country, easily," he stated. "The demand is there. We just need the capital to build them."

Historically, that capital came from local councils, governments, service clubs and church groups. But Abbeyfield's new structure – and cleaner balance sheet – is opening doors to more institutional partnerships.

A new home in Bungendore, outside of Canberra in southwest NSW, is being co-developed with the local Council, with DA approval expected soon. The organisation is also tapping philanthropic sources, who also helped fund their recent disability house in Wagga Wagga.

Survival depends on sustainability

But funding remains a challenge. "We fall between the cracks," Dimitri said. "We're not retirement living, we're not SDA, we're not aged care. We don't fit the boxes."

For now, the answer is careful expansion and strategic partnerships. Each new house is tailored to local demand. Cultural fit still matters – residents are interviewed to ensure they'll thrive together. The original housekeeper model also remains untouched.



Abbeyfield's house in Orange

"They're the backbone of what we do," Dimitri said. "They cook, they check in, they become part of the family."

A quiet solution to a big problem

In a sector focused on scale and instability, Abbeyfield is a reminder that bigger isn't always better.

As providers and Governments look for answers to loneliness, ageing in place, and affordable housing, Dimitri believes Abbeyfield is already providing a solution.

"It's not glamorous," he says. "But it works. And it's needed – more than ever."