

POSITION PAPER

Exiting State Care for young people at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness

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for
Youth Homelessness
Representative Council



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ABOUT

The Youth Homelessness Representative Council (YHRC) is a group of 10 young people (aged 18-25) all with lived experiences of youth homelessness. The YHRC meet quarterly to discuss and address issues that affect young people at-risk, or experiencing homelessness. The YHRC is the official youth steering committee for Yfoundations, the NSW youth homelessness peak body.

The purpose of this paper is to set out the position of the YHRC on Exiting State Care. This paper provides a basis for advocacy for systemic changes to homelessness services, community housing providers, and other government and non-government services in NSW and Australia, and makes specific recommendations to improve service support, access, inclusion, and outcomes for young people at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness.

HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

Youth homelessness is a significant social issue in NSW. Census data has revealed that the rate of youth homelessness in NSW (young people aged 12-24) increased from 6,631 in 2011 to 9,041 in 2016[1], which includes rough sleeping, couch surfing, sleeping in homeless shelters or in severe overcrowding. This alarming increase signifies that youth homelessness needs to be given more attention and resources.

EXITING STATE CARE IN NSW

When children and young people transition from government-funded services to the community (including from juvenile justice, out-of-home care, mental health facilities, and rehabilitation) they experience high levels of vulnerability and are at increased risk of homelessness. Appropriate services and supports are in place to assist young people to secure safe and stable housing before they transition back into the community.

Of the 288,800 Australians who accessed Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in 2017-18:

- 8,300 had left custodial settings (5,500 from adult prison and 2800 from juvenile justice)
- 6,900 had left care settings (41% from OOHC, 19% from psychiatric hospitals, 18% from rehabilitation, and 15% from hospitals)[2].

Young people exiting out-of-home care (OOHC) are at particular risk of homelessness. Australian research has found that 64% of OOHC leavers did not have a leaving care plan[3], and 35% of out-of-home care leavers were homeless within their first year[4].

More needs to be done to ensure that young people leaving state care are not exited into homelessness. Actions that may prevent young people from becoming homeless are improved exit planning, more affordable transitional accommodation options, increased availability of wrap-around supports, and the option to extend care placements for those in OOHC.

For many young people, turning 18 years of age does not mean that they are ready and capable to live independently. Some states have agreed to provide support for young people in OOHC until the age of 21. Extended care supports have resulted in better engagement with education and employment, improved health and wellbeing, and reduced interaction within the justice system.

Young people leaving other care settings, including acute mental health care facilities, rehabilitation, and juvenile justice system, also need intensive supports when integrating back to the community. Support needs to be provided well before they exit these care settings, and governments should be held accountable for their outcomes.

It is crucial that young people leaving state care have access to integrated systems and services to help secure housing and appropriate support before, during, and after transitioning out of care. Better exit planning tailored to the individual is key to reducing youth homelessness.

References

1. Australia Bureau of Statistics (2018), Census reveals a rise in the rate of homelessness in Australia, viewed 19th July 2019, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>
2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019), Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2017-18, no: HOU 299, AIHW, Canberra.
3. Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Out-of-Home Care (Canberra, ACT: Parliament of Australia, 2015)
4. McDowall, J, "CREATE's Advocacy for Young People Transitioning from Care in Australia," in Young People Transitioning from Out-of-Home Care: International Research, Policy, and Practice

STORIES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

"I had been living with my foster family for 4 years (foster mum and younger foster siblings), then at 17 and a half I was suddenly exited from care. I had just finished school and was working on a farm. But FACS told me I couldn't stay with my foster family any longer as the other children were all much younger than me. This came out of nowhere. I had no preparation. They moved me to another town and placed me in a unit with older people, many who used drugs. I didn't feel safe and my mental health was significantly impacted. The aftercare was really slack. FACS didn't check in on me. All they did was move me away from my friends and community. Everything went down hill. After 6 months I left. By then my foster mum had passed away, so I moved to Sydney".

- Young Person, 22 year old

"A couple of years ago I wasn't in a good head space. My accommodation was coming to an end and I wasn't handling the stress. I went into hospital as a voluntary patient. I thought I'd stay for a couple of nights, but they ended up keeping me for a month. Every day I was told it would be one more night, but it wasn't. I asked to be released, but they wouldn't let me. I had no idea what was happening, and I didn't have my phone. What I wasn't told was that the hospital wouldn't release me because they couldn't find any accommodation. In the end my former refuge took me back. The refuge made an exception for me so I didn't have to stay in hospital any longer. The hospital did a terrible job - they didn't tell me what was happening. They kept lying to me about how much longer I would be there. They treated me like a child. I had no free will. I am now scared of going into hospital, I'm worried it will happen again. Also, they didn't have a youth mental health ward, so I was with adults - they should have wards for younger people".

- Young Person, 19 years old.

"When I left (Juvenile Justice), I had nowhere to go. My family wouldn't let me back. I tried to find a place to stay, but no one would take me. I couch surfed for a while, and then eventually I found housing, but it's been hard. They (Juvenile Justice) could have helped me".

- Young Person, 19 years old

"I had been living in a youth refuge for a few months, but at 22 I was moved into independent living. On Christmas Day I had nowhere to go. I returned from work to an empty house. So I drove to my old refuge - I wasn't able to join them, as I had aged out, so I didn't go in. I just sat out the front of the refuge in my car. They were my only real connection. People don't consider this, we still need connection".

- Young Person, 25 years old

"I was removed from my mum before my first birthday. I lived with aunties, uncles, my dad, my grandma, lots of different places - but nowhere permanent. By 15 I was living by myself. I struggled going to school every day. I couldn't cook. I didn't know how to pay bills. I had a lot of learning to do - but wasn't taught. No one was looking out for me. I went along to (NFP service) where I have a caseworker and they help me out. But... I didn't know about TILA, I'll have to ask my caseworker about TILA".

- Young Person, 22 years old

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE YHRC

- 1 NSW Government Funded Services (including OOHC, Juvenile Justice, Hospitals, and Specialist Homelessness Services) often don't take ownership or responsibility for the housing outcomes of children and young people once they leave their care.
- 2 Hospitals and Juvenile Justice don't have priority access to beds in Specialist Homelessness Services to refer homeless young people upon discharge or release. This results in many young people exiting care into homelessness.
- 3 For many young people in OOHC, service support ends on their 18th birthday. Within the following 12 months many will end up unemployed, homeless, and/or in the criminal justice system. The abrupt termination of care by the state government at 18 years of age is disruptive to a young persons education and connections to their community, and it is not consistent with parenting standards that see most young Australians remain in the family home well into their 20s.
- 4 Link2Home are unable to pre-arrange accommodation in advance of exiting care, which makes exit planning difficult. This is particularly challenging for young people exiting Juvenile Justice or Hospital who require appropriate accommodation to be secured prior to release.
- 5 Prior to 2014, young people 15-25 years old leaving statutory OOHC as well as those leaving Juvenile Justice or informal care (e.g. Specialist Homelessness Services) were able to receive the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA). TILA provided up to \$1500 to cover the basic costs of moving into independent living. Since then, this payment has been limited to only those leaving formal statutory OOHC. Furthermore, many young people who are entitled to TILA are unaware of its existence or don't know how to access it.
- 6 There is a lack of medium-to-long term supported accommodation in NSW, which means homeless young people have to rely on crisis accommodation. Crisis services only permit a young person to stay for up to 3 months. Moving every 3 months is disruptive and can lead to disengagement from education, employment, and community support. Due to the lack of medium-long term accommodation, young people are often rushed into independent living before they have developed the necessary living skills to maintain a tenancy, setting young people up to fail.
- 7 Often young people leave long-term care arrangements without access to their identification (e.g. Birth Certificate, Driver's Licence, NSW Photo Card), without a Medicare Card, without a Bank Account, or Centrelink entitlements. Without these financial supports and identifications, it is extremely difficult to access housing, healthcare, education, and employment.
- 8 For many young people, when their support periods get "closed" there is little opportunity to reopen support or return to the service for help if things don't go as planned. Aftercare needs to be a mandatory component of all leaving care plans, and should be ongoing until 25 years of age or until the young person is secure, settled, and satisfied in their independent living arrangement.
- 9 Child Protection remove children from families without considering the needs of the whole family. More needs to be done towards supporting the needs of the family, including preservation and restoration.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE YHRC

More needs to be done to support what is a broken system lacking consistent long-term planning, policy, and resources. The YHRC recommends that the NSW government commit to investing in improved leaving care and aftercare planning for all children and young people exiting care, including out-of-home care, juvenile justice, specialist homelessness services, and hospitals, to ensure young people at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness are able to access secure housing and the wrap around supports they need.

- 1 NSW Government funded services should be held accountable for client housing outcomes -**
The YHRC is calling upon the State Government to improve its leaving care planning and after care service support to ensure young people leaving government funded services (i.e. OOHC, Hospitals, Juvenile Justice) exit into appropriate accommodation with wrap-around support. This can be improved through better exit planning, appropriate referrals, better communication and sharing of information between the services.
- 2 Increase funding to Specialist Homelessness Services to enable them to provide fee-for-service beds designated for young people exiting Juvenile Justice and Hospital -** The YHRC have identified that young people leaving Juvenile Justice and Hospitals are particularly vulnerable, as stigma, discrimination, and an inability to secure accommodation prior to release/discharge, places young people at greater risk of homelessness. Currently, there are very few beds available to young people exiting Juvenile Justice or Hospital. This can lead to delayed release/discharge or exits into homelessness. Across the state more beds need to be designated for young people leaving Juvenile Justice or Hospital to ensure they are safe and supported when released back into the community.
- 3 Raise the leaving care age in NSW to 21 for young people in OOHC -** The rush to exit young people from the OOHC system at 18 years of age has significant negative impact on their wellbeing. Whilst some care leavers may wish to live independently at 18, others want to remain supported for as long as possible. The NSW government should raise the leaving care age to 21, and at the same time improve transition planning so that young people have the skills and connections to thrive.
- 4 Expand and better resource Link2Home to enable accommodation to be pre-arranged -** For most people Link2Home is used solely to access Temporary Accommodation. Feedback from young people and Link2Home call centre staff, suggests that Link2Home are unable to pre-arrange accommodation in Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS). This is particularly problematic for young people in Juvenile Justice or Hospital who are required to secure accommodation in advance of release/discharge, but are told by Link2Home to call back the day of release/discharge. This results in a conundrum for the young person adding to their stress and anxiety. Link2Home should have the capability to conduct time sensitive intake referrals, and arrange accommodation on behalf of young people at a suitable SHS for the day of their release/discharge.
- 5 The Transition to Independent Living Allowance should be extended to young people leaving long-term informal care -** The Australian Federal Government should broaden its eligibility criteria for accessing TILA to include young people (15-25 years old) transitioning out of informal long-term care, including SHS, informal kinship care, and Juvenile Justice. Currently, young people exiting long-term informal care arrangements have no access to an independent living allowance, leaving them at-risk of homelessness. All young people leaving care should be able to access TILA as part of their leaving care plan.

- 6 **The NSW Government to invest in evidence-based medium-to-long term housing options for young people** – Supported medium-long term accommodation is needed to house young people for up to a 24 month period. These services would provide wrap-around support and help young people develop healthy routines, improve their living skills, reach their education and employment potential, and to feel happy and safe. The NSW Government should also invest in a range of integrated housing options for young people, such as Youth Foyers. A Youth Foyer provides employment, education, and skills development in a stable and secure congregated living environment. The YHRC is calling for these evidence-based Foyers to be introduced onto TAFE campuses in NSW to support vulnerable young people to complete their education and commence employment.

- 7 **Commitment to 'no exits into homelessness' across all government funded services, including mandatory leaving care plans** – More needs to be done to ensure all young people leaving state care transition into stable, safe accommodation. All young people exiting government services, including hospitals, juvenile justice, and mental health institutions, as well as young people in the OOHC system, should have a comprehensive 'leaving care plan' that includes housing and support services. Leaving Care plans should be mandatory, and include access to important documentation such as Birth Certificate, NSW Photo Card, TFN, and Medicare Card. Young people should also have their own personal Bank Account and be receiving any Centrelink Benefits they are entitled too.

- 8 **NSW Government should increase funding to allow all long-term care providers the ability to provide Aftercare Support** - All NSW government funded services that provide long-term care (including OOHC, SHS, Juvenile Justice, and Hospitals) should have the capacity to provide Aftercare Support. Aftercare support is necessary to ensure all young people have continued financial support, assistance securing and retaining accommodation, access to healthcare, mentoring, and referrals to other agencies. Aftercare Support should gradually decrease over time until the young person is 25 years old, or the young person has identified they are secured and no longer need ongoing support.

- 9 **Families known to Child Protection to be provided intensive wrap-around support with every effort made towards family preservation and restoration** - The families of children who have been assessed at Risk of Harm or at Risk of Significant Harm should receive intensive wrap-around support, family therapy, and case management to ensure every effort has been made towards family preservation and restoration. However, the YHRC wish to note that the safety and wellbeing of children should always be central to any Child Protection intervention.