



Foot in the Door Evaluation

August 2021



Executive Summary

- FiTD provides training to real estate agents and case workers on how best to support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness and the subsidies available to them
- The program was well received across the sector
- The Foot in the Door training improved real estate agents' knowledge and attitudes relating to homeless young people and encouraged Real Estate Agents and caseworkers to collaborate and engage with one another
- The program increased caseworkers understanding of Rent Choice Youth (RCY) and has increased the uptake of RCY.
- The program showed that both real estate agents and SHS workers were impacted by COVID-19. In particular, SHS workers and real estate agents saw an increase in rental unaffordability, property availability, and noticed more tenants experiencing distress and hardship

Recommendations

1

The NSW Government must fund a project similar to FITD which seeks to inform real estate agents of the issues faced by homeless young people. While also, encouraging SHS workers and real estate agents to work together to ensure that young people sustain their tenancies in the long term.

2

The NSW Government must evaluate how and when it pays brokerage to services to ensure these payments are given in an appropriate and timely fashion.

3

The NSW Government must provide additional supports to those young people for whom RCY is not appropriate. This includes building and providing young people with more social housing properties, including new youth-specific social housing which is tailored to meet the needs of young people.

4

The NSW Government must provide data on Rent Choice Youth participant numbers and outcomes, and promptly evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a 'step-down subsidy' model.

Introduction

In 2019–20, 13,700 young people aged 15–24 presented alone to Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in NSW (AIHW, 2020).¹ The NSW Government's 10-year plan, Future Directions for Social Housing in NSW, aims to increase the proportion of the young people who are successfully moved from SHS into long-term accommodation by 10% (NSW Government, 2016).² By 2025, it also seeks to increase the use of private rental assistance products by 60%, to help households avoid or leave social housing (NSW Government, 2016).

To help achieve this goal, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) offers products to help suitable young people – those with living skills and available support – secure and sustain private tenancies. This includes the Rent Choice Youth subsidy (RCY).

With the support of the Real Estate Institute of NSW (REINSW) and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), we designed the FiTD program to train real estate agents and caseworkers on how to support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness and the subsidies available to them, including RCY. The training also aims to increase the collaboration between SHS and real estate agents, and, therefore, the likelihood of young people accessing and sustaining tenancies.

Background

Context and Need for the Program

Young people face greater challenges than any other age group in securing sustainable and affordable housing. In part, this is because young people are economically disadvantaged. They experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and precarious work than the general population (Tiller et al., 2020). This has been a consistent trend for the past decade, with young people's wages falling since the Global Financial Crisis, while older Australians' wages have continued to rise (Productivity Commission, 2020). The economic situation for young people has only worsened during COVID-19, as they are disproportionately affected by the closures of the tourism and hospitality industries (Tiller et al., 2020).

The lack of affordable rental properties in NSW is also concerning. Particularly, for young people who have nowhere else to go. Anglicare's 2021 rental affordability snapshot found that less than 1% of properties throughout Australia are affordable to single young people on Youth Allowance (Anglicare Australia, 2020). In particular, regional NSW is becoming increasingly unaffordable for young people, with rents surging by 11% in the past year - the sharpest annual rise ever (Chau, 2021). Young people are also more likely to experience rental stress than older Australians. In 2017-18, over half (55%) of 15 – 24-year-olds paid more than 30% of their income towards housing costs, which was higher than any other age group (ABS, 2019).

Rent Choice Youth (RCY) is a rental support program for 16 to 24-year-olds who are on a low income and at risk of homelessness. Eligible young people receive subsidised rent and caseworker support. For the first 12 months of the program, they pay 25% of their weekly income, plus 100% of any Commonwealth Rent Assistance they are entitled to. RCY pays for the rest. After the first 12 months, the amount the young person pays increases with the view that over time they will be able to rent privately without any support.

In 2018, Yfoundations consultations revealed that both SHS caseworkers and real estate agents were underutilising RCY. As such, young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness were still struggling to access the highly competitive private rental market. A large-scale survey of Australian renters, conducted by CHOICE, National Shelter and the National Association of Tenant Organisations in 2017, confirmed this. It found that the majority of young people (55%) reported experiencing housing discrimination – with the most commonly cited reason being their age (22%) (Choice, National Shelter and the National Association of Tenant Organisations, 2017). This is reinforced by recent research from Tenant's Union NSW and Youth Action (2021), which found that many young people surveyed had negative experiences with real estate agents. Including feeling “disrespected” and as if there was a power imbalance between them and their agents. Some respondents were scared to ask questions or request repairs (Tenants' Union of NSW and Youth Action, 2021).

From 2018-19 to 2020-21, DCJ commissioned Yfoundations to address this gap through the Foot in the Door (FiTD) program.

Overview of The Foot in the Door program

The FiTD has been running for three years. It began as a training program to improve real estate agents and property managers awareness of the experiences of homeless young people in NSW, and the subsidies and supports available to them. Through the program, real estate agents learn about trauma how and when to seek support when they notice a tenant struggling. This increases the likelihood of young people maintaining a private rental tenancy, which benefits the real estate agents, SHS providers and young people themselves. **The program's main aim, therefore, is to support young people aged 18 to 24 years, who are SHS clients, to sustain a private tenancy.**

However, over the first two years of the program, Yfoundations noticed a disconnect between real estate agents and SHS providers. This meant that regardless of the program's success with real estate agents, young people continued to struggle to access and maintain tenancies. And RCY was continuing to be underutilised. This became evident when real estate agents, who had undertaken the training, offered Yfoundations several properties for young people to rent, under RCY. However, none of these opportunities were taken up by SHS. This disconnect was further reinforced when Yfoundations conducted consultations with the sector.

To address this issue, Yfoundations expanded the program in 2021 to also provide training to SHS caseworkers who prescribe to the Partner Facilitation Group. Consultations with seven Rent Choice Youth Officers from different districts, 10 SHS managers and two workers directly involved in Rent Choice Youth or the PFG group informed the training content.

As part of the sector consultation, Yfoundations also asked its members what they felt the biggest barriers were when engaging with real estate agents. Members felt that affordability and availability, both external causes, were the primary barriers. However, many felt uncertain about how to better engage with real estate agents.

In light of this, the FiTD training for SHS focused on RCY, the benefits of partnering with real estate agents and how to build positive relationships within the private sector, to gain access to properties in a competitive rental market. It also taught them the importance of working with real estate agents to support struggling tenants and prevent tenancy breakdowns.

Both trainings ran for 2.5 hours and are usually delivered face-to-face to up to 15 people. These events are hosted in community or government spaces, and networking is encouraged. As an incentive, FiTD training contributes to real estate agents' annual Continued Professional Development (CPD) requirements.

Methodology

The key questions the evaluation aimed to answer were:

- Are real estate agents and caseworkers satisfied with the Foot in the Door training?
- Does the Foot in the Door training contribute to changes in real estate agents' knowledge and attitudes relating to homeless young people?
- Does the Foot in the Door training encourage caseworkers to refer young people to real estate agents and utilise the RCY program?
- Are real estate agents and caseworkers more likely to collaborate and engage with one another following Foot in the Door Training?
- What was the impact of COVID-19 on the sector?

The program evaluation was mainly quantitative and focused on early outcomes among Foot in the Door attendees. The Project Lead invited face-to-face attendees to complete a hardcopy self-report survey before the training and one following the training.

Change in knowledge, competency and attitude amongst real estate agents and caseworkers were measured by comparing pre-training and post-training self-ratings. This method, compared to a traditional pre- post-self-assessment, controls for response-shift bias.

The post-project evaluation also included a focus on the activities and outputs including:

- program design and development
- stakeholder engagement
- event attendance

This information was informed by the Project Lead's activities and outputs which she collected in a table; records of feedback from stakeholders; and a semi-structured interview with the Project Lead.

FiTD 2021 Project Details

FiTD Pilot

Prior to implementing the SHS training program, Yfoundations piloted it in three services which were both small and large and located in regional and metro NSW. These were:

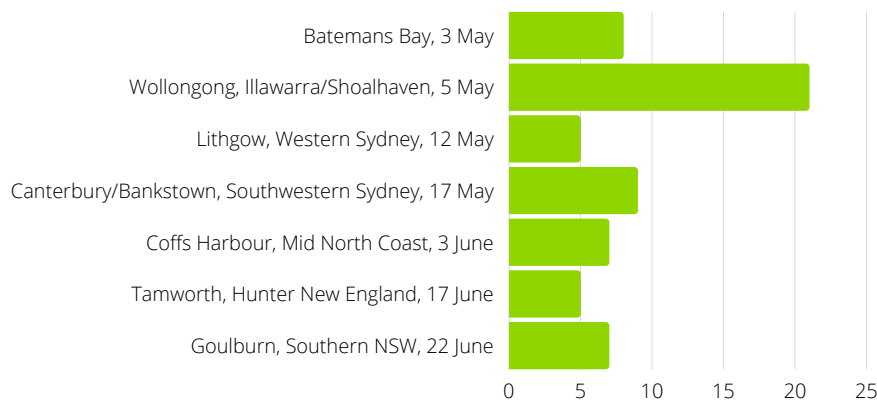
- Port Macquarie/Kempsey
- Blacktown
- Penrith

The FiTD Project Lead also organised a session with various RCY Officers in NSW.

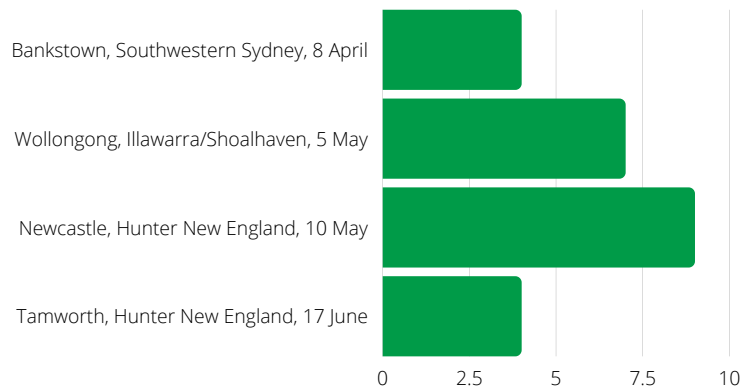
Following the pilots, small changes were made to the contents of the training. Changes included expanding the section on RCY reviews. However, most changes were minor.

FiTD trainings

Following on from the pilots, FiTD delivered a total of 11 trainings. Seven service training and four real estate trainings. This number exceeded the number specified in the FiTD contract.



Worker training sessions delivered by region



real estate training sessions delivered by region

The training content differed slightly for real estate and SHS workers.

For workers it focused on:

- Understanding RCY and similar products
- How to work effectively with young people long-term through the program
- How to build real estate and other stakeholder relationships successfully

For real estate agents it focused on:

- Understanding youth homelessness
- Understanding young tenants, trauma awareness and trauma-informed tenancy management
- Understanding RCY and similar products
- SHS, and how to work with them

FiTD rebrand

The Foot in the Door program had a complete redesign to accommodate the expansion of the training to community and SHS workers. The program redesign consisted of an all-new logo, tagline, style guide and training material.

The Foot in the Door training material was reimagined with new graphics, videos, activities and illustrations to make the material even more digestible and engaging for participants. We then updated our range of Foot in the Door merchandise consisting of keyrings, notebooks, USBs and pens.



Foot in the Door
Partners in Private Tenancy

Impacts of the 2021 FiTD

Impacts on SHS workers

Overall, SHS workers were satisfied with the FiTD program. Indeed, when asked whether they would recommend engaging with FiTD training to a colleague or other service, 81% of respondents replied 'absolutely yes.' This is further evidenced by their comments on training which described the training as 'extremely helpful', 'very relevant' with 'valuable and useful resources.' The comments also described the Project Lead as engaging and relatable.'

The surveys showed that all participants felt more confident approaching real estate agents, after the training. Prior to the training, 21.5% of respondents felt very confident approaching real estate agents (indicated by the response 'absolutely yes' to 'I feel confident approaching and working with real estate agents'), this number increased to 67.5% after the training. The increase in confidence was even more noticeable when analysing individuals respondents in the pre and post-surveys.

Following the training, SHS workers demonstrated a greater understanding of the importance of collaborating and engaging with real estate agents. Indeed, 86.5% of participants responded 'absolutely yes' to the question 'I can now see more advantage of working with real estate to support young people.' This leads us to conclude that caseworkers were more likely to collaborate and engage with real estate agents following Foot in the Door Training.

The training also positively impacted participants' understanding of RCY. Following the FiTD training, 84% of respondents indicated that they had a better understanding of RCY. And a further 67.5% responded 'absolutely yes' when asked whether they had a better understanding of how to communicate and advocate RCY to all stakeholders, following the training.

These responses are incredibly encouraging, lead us to believe that the training will lead to increased uptake of RCY and increased communication between SHS workers and real estate agents.

Impacts on real estate agents

Similarly to SHS workers, the vast majority of real estate agents (90%) who participated in the training said that they would definitely recommend FiTD training to colleagues. This clearly indicates a high level of satisfaction with the training overall for both groups of participants.

When comparing the pre and post surveys the real estate agent's knowledge of community and housing support services increase by an average of 40% after the training. This clearly shows a large improvement in their understanding of the homelessness sector and how it operates. Their increased understanding was even clearer when analysing individuals respondents in the pre and post-surveys.

The largest impact of the training on real estate agents was the increase in their confidence levels. Before the training, 95% of real estate agents participants indicated that they had low levels of confidence when connecting tenants to support services when they needed help. After the training, all of these respondents (100%) had an improved response, indicating that they were either more confident or wholly confident, in connecting a tenant to support services.

Adding on to this, real estate agent participants expressed that they would favourably consider renting a suitable property to a RCY participant, with 57% saying they would probably do so, and 43% saying they would absolutely do so, following the training.

These increases clearly show the need for the FiTD training program which, based on these responses, will lead to an increase in real estate engagement with support services and rent choice products, to help struggling tenants. In turn, this will encourage early intervention, reducing the likelihood of housing instability and homelessness among young people.

The surveys questions also wanted to get a better understanding of how SHS could better interact and communicate with real estate agents. Interestingly, real estate agent participants indicated that their most preferred methods for support services to get in contact were (in order):

1. **emails directly to property managers**
2. **face to face drop-in**
3. **giving printed materials to services**

These answers are incredibly important when considering future engagements with the real estate sector, particularly for SHS workers.

Impacts of COVID-19 on the sector

The surveys also wanted to gather a better understanding of how COVID-19 impacted both real estate agents and SHS workers' work with young people. So that future trainings and/or programs may seek to address these challenges.

A large majority of SHS workers (81%) felt that COVID-19 had impacted their work. In particular, respondents felt that COVID-19 had led to a reduction in crisis accommodation availability and private rental accommodation availability. They also felt that COVID had increased their workload and reduced employment opportunities for young people which is unsurprising. Workers also indicated the lack of face to face interaction made their work and engaging with young people and building trust more difficult.

Real estate respondents provided mixed responses when asked whether COVID-19 had impacted their work with young renters. About half of respondents (47%) said that COVID-19 had absolutely impacted their work with young people, and the other half (47%) were not sure.

These responses could also be indicative of the fact that some real estate agents were not extensively working with young renters.

The post-surveys asked real estate agents to provide examples of how COVID-19 had impacted their work. The top three most common responses were that it has affected market prices (75% of respondents), that it has reduced property availability (75% of respondents) and that more tenants were experiencing distress and hardship (70% of respondents).

Other impacts

During the program's delivery, there were various instances that indicated that The FiTD program led to more cooperation between services and the private rental market and more uptake of RCY.

For example, a service approached Yfoundations directly to ask for support and advice about properties in Western Sydney. We were able to reach out to real estate agents in this area, with whom we had cultivated a relationship with through FiTD, and provide this service with the support they needed.

The Project Lead also shared various examples of where the FiTD program had real-world impacts on the uptake of RCY, and therefore, young people's access to housing.

"We reached a point where we could support services directly. We had been working with some developers, who offered us properties. We were contacted by a service, but the developer didn't want to make a change from hand leased to RCY, when we talked to him and we made him aware of the program, he was happy to change. We were able to directly support and advocate for the program."

Project Lead

This clearly shows the importance of building a strong relationship with real estate agents, which FiTD actively sought to do, to encourage an early intervention approach, reducing the likelihood of housing instability and homelessness for young people.

"Reciprocal relationship is really important. We have a lot of assets that property managers need, there is a real call-out at the moment. We have a high value to property managers, they need our skills and our expertise and we can foster this reciprocal relationship and it really is in early intervention. There is a great opportunity there."

Project Lead

Over the years that FiTD has been running we have heard anecdotally that the number of RCY active clients in the Sydney and Northern Sydney districts has risen significantly. Due to a lack data we are unable to indicate the precise number. We believe this increase is in part due to the FiTD program as there are no other initiatives that work on RCY.

Events and Marketing



The October/November issue of the REINSW Industry journal published an article on the program which was reposted across REINSW social media platforms.

Yfoundations was a key sponsor at the REINSW Annual Gala awards which was attended by over **700 NSW agents** from 25 regions across NSW. The FiTD promotional video was played numerous times throughout the event.

Yfoundations was also a key sponsor for this year's REINSW roadshow events. For this reason, all relevant REINSW printed materials, media, social media posts, and website pages included mentions of the FiTD program. Over **2,400** professionals from the real estate industry attended these events, and the Program Manager distributed **300** information packs to these participants. During these events, the Program Manager also disseminated a FiTD merchandise pack across attendees, to promote training and inform them of RCY products.

FiTD was also well represented at AREC (Australian Real Estate Conference) on the Gold Coast in June 2021 which was attended by over 3,000 people. **Over 200 merchandise packs** were distributed at this event.

The Program Manager set up information stalls at each event and engaged with various stakeholders to promote the program and RCY products.

These events, as well as member visits, led to an increase in enquiries for the program and requests for training. They also allowed the Project Lead to target many audiences at once. The Project Lead engaged with highly influential leaders in the real estate space, such as REINSW CEO Tim McKibbin and REINSW President and CEO and Director of Laing+Simmons Leanne Pilkington.

Following on from this meeting, the Project Lead organised for REINSW CEO Tim McKibbin and REINSW President and CEO and Director of Laing+Simmons Leanne Pilkington, to undertake a service visit at a service in Coffs Harbour. During this visit, Tim and Leanne toured the crisis service to see how young people lived, they also heard from a young person with lived experience of homelessness. He expressed his frustrations at still not being able to find a rental property despite working full time.

This visit enabled these key stakeholders to better understand the challenges young people face in the private rental market and the factors that lead to youth homelessness. This visit, led both Tim and Leanne to reach out to their networks to ask about available properties, which came back with several available properties. Showcasing the direct impact of the FiTD program.

As showcased above, these activities attracted a lot of media attention often facilitated by REINSW and their network. NBN Magazine and Parra News Publication both reported on the roadshow, and ABC Radio Mid North Coast interviewed Yfoundations' CEO, Pam Barker. The Yfoundations Foot in the Door webpage attracted over **500 views** in the 2020-21 Financial Year and impressive social media engagement (seen below) as a result of these promotional activities.

These examples further reinforce the importance of building positive relationships with the Real Estate Institute by delivering programs such as FiTD.

Social Media Statistics

Post Impressions 2,191 –	Post Engagements 97 –
Post Engagement Rate (per Impression) 4.4% –	Post Link Clicks 19 –

Top Posts

View the top tagged published posts from the publishing period.

By Lifetime Engagements

<p>Total Engagements 11</p>	<p>Total Engagements 10</p>	<p>Total Engagements 10</p>
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Final consultation with the sector on RCY

On 24 June 2021, Yfoundations held a consultation meeting with the sector. In this meeting, service providers discussed the RCY program and some of the challenges they have faced when implementing it.

High caseloads and lack of reporting

The RCY clients that SHS assist, are on top of the other young people SHS are contracted to support. This can become overwhelming for staff who end up with extremely high caseloads.

Additionally, some services have been advised not to include RCY clients on their other core reporting data as they are funded separately. In practice, this means that if a caseworker has five core funded clients and five RCY clients, half of their time is not accounted for or reported within their internal reporting systems. However, this practice is not consistent across NSW with some services including RCY clients in their core reporting. In the long term, this could have negative impacts on the reporting of Rent Choice Youth clients as well as service outcomes.

Payments from DCJ

Services felt that there are many issues with the payments they received from DCJ for RCY clients. Firstly, these are irregular, which makes planning very difficult.

"One year, we received a substantial payment, but then the next year we only received a handful because it's the second- or third-year review which doesn't carry as much. This irregularity is not sustainable."

SHS service provider

Also, services do not get paid straight away, payments are only given to services after they have done certain reviews. Almost all services said that they had to chase these payments and reimbursements for brokerage from the department. They reported brokerage being time-consuming and problematic, with some services waiting more than a year to be reimbursed. They also had to chase payments from other services, following the transfer of a young person, wasting time and resources in the process. Many give up and therefore, lose payments.

"Brokerage payments were so slow. We started the process of getting paid back, it was so difficult, so we gave up."

SHS service provider

While some services can absorb these costs for a period, as the program grows, there will be impacts on service delivery. Indeed, due to delays in payments, many services had to put strict boundaries in place which affected the client directly. One service said they now wait for DCJ to approve brokerage payments, before giving them to the young person.

When DCJ did reimburse them, services also mentioned that there was no clarity on what the payment was for and for who, making it difficult for the service to track payments. Many also felt there was a lack of understanding around what brokerage could be used for, including whether it could be used for transport.

Suitability & Effectiveness

However, SHS providers expressed concern that the program doesn't meet the needs of all young people, particularly those who are unable to live independently and work. In this way, they felt that the program could be self-selecting – those who had the least capacity and required the most support were excluded from the program before it began.

Caseworkers also felt that the rising rental costs and low vacancy rates across NSW meant that when the program ended, young people would struggle to afford rental costs. Indeed, as of June 2021, Sydney remains the most expensive city, with a medium rent of \$550 for a house (Domain, 2021) Regional areas, however, have seen a huge surge of 11%, the sharpest annual rise ever (Chau, 2021). Bellingen and Byron, in particular, saw a large rise in rentals costs of 26.8% and 26.2% respectively (Domain, 2021)

"Rent increased dramatically since RCY came to our area (Mid North Coast) which makes it much harder for people to afford a rental on their own after the program is over, particularly if they are single people who may not be working full-time."

SHS worker

Consultation with members has also suggested that due to a lack of social and affordable housing in some areas, the RCY program has become a last resort for young people who require assistance. And used as a solution that is suitable for any and all young people who are homeless, regardless of their needs. This means that young people are pushed to enter the program, even when they are not ready.

Also, once the young person reaches 25, they are no longer eligible for RCY. At present some services are continuing to support young people who have reached the program cut off age because there are only a small number of them. However, if uptake continues and more clients reach that age, this may begin to have a large impact on service capacity and the quality of delivery.

Lack of evidence

The RCY program has now been operational for five years, but the NSW Government has not published any data on the number of young people who have completed the program, those who have dropped out or those who have been excluded. Without this information, it is impossible to determine whether the program has been successful at diverting young people from social housing and into the private rental market.

Recommendations

As this evaluation has shown, the FITD training program has had a large impact on the sector. Unfortunately, the FITD program was defunded following the end of the 2021 financial year. However, we believe that the challenges that FITD originally sought to address are still very much there. Young people still struggle to access the private rental market and SHS workers still have issues implementing RCY.

For this reason, we have the following recommendations:

- 1** | The NSW Government must fund a project similar to FITD which seeks to inform real estate agents of the issues faced by homeless young people. While also, encouraging SHS workers and Real Estate Agents to work together to ensure that young people sustain their tenancies in the long term.
- 2** | The NSW Government must evaluate how and when it pays brokerage to services to ensure these payments are given in an appropriate and timely fashion.
- 3** | The NSW Government must provide additional supports to those young people for whom RCY is not appropriate. This includes building and providing young people with more social housing properties, including new youth-specific social housing which is tailored to meet the needs of young people.
- 4** | The NSW Government must provide data on Rent Choice Youth participant numbers and outcomes, and promptly evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a 'step-down subsidy' model.

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Yfoundations Limited
ACN 144 613 543

Suite 4, 619 Elizabeth Street
Redfern NSW 2016

(02) 8306 7901

www.yfoundations.org.au

admin@yfoundations.org.au

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For enquires related to this evaluation, please contact
Pam Barker - ceo@yfoundations.org.au

