

Yfoundations Submission to the Targeted Early Intervention Reforms

Prepared by
Jess Fielding (Policy Officer)



Executive Summary

Prevention and early intervention programs are vital to improving the outcomes of children and young people in Australia. The benefits of prevention and early intervention programs and services was clearly demonstrated in the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth report¹ accompanying the TEI consultation paper.

Children and young people are highly represented among the homeless population.² Homelessness during the early years, even when experienced for a short period, increases the risk of housing instability or chronic homelessness in adulthood. To mitigate this risk, it is vital we have a service system that can identify and respond to young people before they transition onto a protracted trajectory of homelessness, which once they've begun may be hard to break.

However additional strategies are also needed to address demand factors arising from systemic socio-economic disadvantage. Intergenerational poverty is a reality for many families, with services supporting second and third generations of young people whose families have either been reliant on the public housing system or experienced homelessness at some point.³ Effective poverty alleviation and prevention measures are also needed including raising income support payments and addressing low youth wages and high youth unemployment levels.

Yfoundations commends the NSW Government in its commitment to strengthening prevention and early intervention programs for children, young people and families. This reform provides a significant opportunity to improve the service system that is supporting young people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness in NSW. We are mindful of the recent Going Home Staying Home (GSHS) reform and the consequential damages caused to the Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) Sector as a result of poor planning, poor communication and lack of sector consultation throughout the duration of the reform. Significant workforce skill and expertise were lost as a consequence of the reform process. With this in mind, we urge FACS to consider the feedback provided by the peak agencies (DV NSW, Homelessness NSW and Yfoundations), notably concerning issues around timeframes, tendering processes, communication and information sharing and change management. We are hopeful that by drawing upon GSHS, FACS will follow a more strengths based approach throughout the reform process.

¹ Fox, S., Southwell, A., Stafford, N., Goodhue, R., Jackson, D. and Smith, C. (2015). Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

² 42% of homeless people accessing SHS in 2011/12 in Australia were children and young people (ABS: 2011 Census of Population and Housing)

³ Hannah Buckley, Bronwen Dalton, Joann Fildes, Lorraine Ivancic, Lara Matkovic, Brianna Perrens, Anjana Regmi and Andrew Wearing. Mission Youth Survey 2012, Mission Australia

Recommendations

- *That a spectrum approach be implemented into the TEI service system framework to ensure that young people are always at the center, and that the system can respond to individual need.*
- *That the TEI system supports young people to develop the necessary competencies across the five foundation areas during childhood and adolescence.*
- *Greater resources and support from FACS to expand the Communities of Schools approach to other districts in NSW.*
- *That FACS develop a clearly outlined reform plan that includes commonly agreed outcomes, objectives and appropriate planning, including risk management and change management to assist the sector to move from its existing service delivery outcomes to the new reform service delivery outcomes.*
- *Increased investments into research and data collection systems for early intervention programs.*
- *That FACS commits to linking the TEI system into other NSW Government and non-Government initiatives.*
- *That greater emphasis is placed on improving Australian data and research mechanisms. This will ensure that future TEI programs and services are informed by research relevant to the Australia context.*
- *We recommend that the reform include: realistic timeframes, genuine sector consultation throughout the entirety of reform and transparent policy and planning processes.*

About Yfoundations

Yfoundations' mission is to create a future without youth homelessness. We represent young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness; and the services who provide direct support to them. Yfoundations provides advocacy and policy responses on issues relevant to young people affected by homelessness, and issues relevant to service providers. Our vision is to ensure that all young people have access to appropriate and permanent housing options that reflects their individual need.

Since its formation in 1979 this organisation has called for reform and improvement to broader systemic responses to youth homelessness and young people at risk of homelessness, to promote, protect and build on existing good practice and excellence and to ensure that youth homelessness remains a priority in public policy on homelessness, youth affairs, youth justice, education, child protection, employment, health/wellbeing and housing. In accordance with the United Nations convention on the rights of the child⁴ we advocate that every child has the right to appropriate care and protection.

In pursuit of these goals, we have identified five 'foundations' for the positive growth and development of a young person and the process of ending youth homelessness:

- Home & Place
- Safety & Stability
- Health & Wellness
- Connections & Participation
- Education & Employment

These foundations place youth homelessness in a broader context, recognising that it interrelates with a range of issues, and the ending youth homelessness will require coordination across silos. They provide a framework for reaching out to other service areas to explore collaborative and integrated solutions. We believe it is vital that each young person has the opportunity within each domain to thrive. More information about these foundations is available on the Yfoundations' website.⁵

⁴ Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, (1998), United Nations Convention in the rights of the Child, 17th Report

⁵ <http://yfoundations.org.au/explore-and-learn/publications/the-foundations/>

Introduction

Targeted Early Intervention services are the best opportunity to help young people and their families. Yfoundations welcomes the commitment made by Family and Community Services (FACS) to invest into ensuring we have a robust and responsive prevention and early intervention system for young people and their families.

The efficacy of early intervention and prevention programs in affecting significant and systemic change is reliant upon a well-coordinated and committed system of community services, Government and individuals.

The current service system is crisis-oriented. The system must be able to be proactive for two reasons. Firstly, pre-crisis action is usually less resource intensive, leaving further resources to support other children. Secondly, and more importantly, it avoids the child experiencing the potential traumas of crisis. There are positive indications that the current government is committed to an early intervention framework.⁶ But again there has so far been little indication of how this is to be implemented.

This submission highlights the opportunities afforded to young people and their families when programs and services intervene before crisis is reached. However prevention and early intervention is not possible when one service is working in isolation. For prevention and early intervention to be effective, it requires a well-coordinated, flexible and adequately resourced network of providers working across a spectrum of support areas. The Geelong Project (TGP), which is mentioned, further in this submission illustrates how a spectrum of support model supports young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

1. Service System Design

The targeted early intervention reform provides an exciting opportunity to cast our vision beyond individual programs and services and look at the system supporting all children, young people and families as a whole. A system that appreciates the unique needs of young people and families, and has the ability to provide a dynamic, appropriate and flexible response.

It is important to view TEI within the broader service support system. What is their relationship between TEI programs and other FACS and non-Government programs? How do they intersect with auxiliary support sectors including Housing and homelessness, Out of Home Care, Education, Justice and Health? From a 'whole-of-systems' perspective, where are the gaps in service delivery? How can these gaps be addressed? Where can service delivery be strengthened or amended? Which region(s) of NSW are doing well and which ones need strengthening?

⁶ <http://kevinandrews.com.au/latest-news/2014/11/04/enhancing-prevention-early-intervention-opening-address-family-relationship-services-australia-national-conference/>

Yfoundations believes there is significant opportunity to develop a client focused, locally driven TEI service delivery system that is efficient, robust and sustainable. We urge FACS to refrain from moving around existing pieces of the current system and commit to a genuine design of the system to ensure improved outcomes for young people and their families.

Yfoundations believes, that in order to end youth homelessness, a 'spectrum' approach⁷ is needed. A spectrum approach is client centered, and involves a multifaceted fabric of targeted housing related supports for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The elements include, prevention, early intervention, specialist homelessness youth services, mainstream supports, step up housing, independent housing (non- sustainable) and finally reconnection (sustainable). No one component of the framework is more important than another, and as every young person brings a unique lived experience, it is important that the support system is flexible and can adapt to the distinctive needs of the individual.

Historically, the journey of youth homelessness was assumed to follow along a horizontal continuum. Young people would engage with the service system at a crisis point, and would be then supported to move through the housing system (crisis, transitional, independent), following a standardised pathway. However the lived experience of youth homelessness is seldom linear, and the pathways taken are often unpredictable and unique to the individual.

The spectrum approach builds on the concept of a 'wrap around' and begins with the young person at risk of or experiencing homelessness positioned at the center. The spectrum approach to youth homelessness acknowledges that every young person has a unique set of needs and can respond to individual need.

From a developmental perspective, childhood and adolescence are formative stages of brain maturation. Adolescent is an important time for exploration, experimentation and change. It is important that our service system recognises and is responsive to this unpredictable time in young people lives. We can't expect all young people to follow the same pathway from childhood to adolescence and onto adulthood. Young people are likely to require varying levels of housing related supports depending on what is happening for them at that particular time. Thus we need a service system that has the flexibility to response appropriately to the diverse needs of young people.

Yfoundations believes that for young people to reach their full potential and thrive, it is vital for a basic level of competency must be attained across five key foundation areas. The competency areas include Safety & Stability, Home & Place, Health & Wellness, Connections & Participation and Education & Employment.⁸

The foundations acknowledge the diversity and individuality within young people. The competency level attained is different for each young person and are influenced by various internal (biological) and external (environmental, social, familial) factors. Factors may include poverty, parental educational attainment, and presence of mental illness or disability.

A service system that aims to improve outcomes for young people must ensure that all participants are nurtured and supported to develop the necessary competencies throughout their childhood and adolescent years. When young people develop these competencies during

⁷ Coffey, M, 'Out of Sight' Young people, the Hidden Homeless, Parity Vol. 23 Issue 3, April 2010

⁸ <http://yfoundations.org.au/explore-and-learn/publications/the-foundations/>

their early years, they are more likely to make a healthy transition into adulthood and be active and positive members of the community.

Recommendations

- *That a spectrum approach be implemented into the TEI service system framework to ensure that young people are always at the center, and that the system can respond to individual need.*
- *That the TEI system supports young people to develop the necessary competencies across the five foundation areas during childhood and adolescence.*

2. Service Delivery

Children and young people are highly represented among the homeless population.⁹ Experiencing homelessness as a child or young person greatly increases the risk of lifetime disadvantage and chronic homelessness. To avoid this it is vital that the precipitators of homelessness are identified and addressed to prevent children and young people becoming homeless in the first place, and that services are in place to intervene early when homelessness does occur and to provide housing and support to assist young people to successfully transition to independence.

One successful example of the sort of integrated schools and services approach that is needed occurred in Geelong.¹⁰ Geelong was one of a number of trial sites supported by the *Youth Partnerships* program (governed by Victoria's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development). However, on in Geelong was a fully coherent and robust model for collaboration developed, due to the additional involvement of Swinburne University and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Geelong Project (TGP) can be taken as a model for implementation, since it involves many of the features needed for a holistic and proactive approach to the support of vulnerable children.

Firstly, TGP is a place-based community of schools and services approach. With the focus on place and community it potentially includes the whole population of children, including those outside the schools and services systems, making it less likely that some will fall through the cracks. The sense of community also provides a foundation for work on relationship building. The relationships and the agreements that stem from them allow integrated practices such as youth workers operating into schools easily and shared data systems.

Under TGP a robust practice-oriented shared data system was developed. This not only facilitates inter-organisational coordination, it allows data to be reported on the community, rather than on a school or state level, further reinforcing the whole of child population approach.

⁹ 42% of homeless people accessing SHS in 2011/12 in Australia were children and young people (ABS: 2011 Census of Population and Housing)

¹⁰ <http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/>

The integration in TGP not only allows support systems to address the multiplicity of issues frequently involved in vulnerable children's lives, it is also critical in effective early intervention. Early intervention requires flexible practice approaches since children are identified as being at risk at different stages of developing vulnerability. So while a casework approach may be most appropriate for some at-risk children, an approach that hybridises case work and school counselling may be better for others. This kind of flexible practice requires collaboration between schools and services to develop such models, and also coordination to shift children to different practices as their needs change.

Another challenge of early intervention that also requires an integrated service system stems from the significant overlap between the risk factors for a range of different issues. For example, as mentioned above, child protection and homelessness, share many risk factors such as mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and involvement in the criminal justice system. This means it is impossible to know what problem will manifest from the risk factors of a vulnerable child. There is little point attempting early intervention only for homelessness when the same set of risk factors may lead to drug abuse or suicide. Hence early intervention for any one part of our currently soloed system is in reality early intervention for multiple parts. This can be recognised and managed in an integrated system. So there is a need for better integration between family supports, early intervention programs (such as those in schools) and the homelessness services system to ensure that families are better supported, so that their homelessness or risk of homelessness is addressed early to prevent escalation of child protection issues.

One further challenge of early intervention that requires integration is the necessity assessing the whole child population. A crisis-focused approach waits until it is obvious which children need support. An early intervention approach must proactively seek out the children requiring support, and to ensure all at-risk children are identified all must be assessed. As mentioned above a purely school-based approach may not capture all children, and so a holistic approach such as the place and community based TGP is needed.

Although the approach includes all children, this does not imply a universal provision of the same services. As an early intervention approach it is targeted. In TGP initial assessment was achieved through the Student Needs Survey, supplemented by pre-existing referral processes. The survey is largely administered through schools, but can also be administered to children outside the school system and so can provide a first step assessment of the whole child population to identify those most likely to be at risk. After this further assessment of identified children determines the practice response.

The successes to date of TGP have been documented¹¹, and initiatives inspired by it are being set up in other communities including in Sydney's Northern Beaches and Ryde districts. Northern NSW are also in the process of formalizing a program based upon the Geelong model.

Place and community-based projects such as these are logically State Government responsibilities. However, the Federal Government has a critical place. The strong likelihood that these initiatives will reduce pressures on the Federal welfare system provides a strong rationale for Federal Government support and encouragement. A key role the Federal Government could play is in assistance with data collection. For example, Federal Government

¹¹ <http://www.thegeelongproject.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/The-Geelong-Project-FAHCSIA1.pdf>

administration of the Student Needs Survey would ensure consistency across sites and could eventually lead to a census similar to the Australian Early Development Index.

Recommendations

- *Investment from FACS to expand the Communities of Schools across all districts of NSW and that the TGP model become a statewide approach to early intervention for young people.*

3. Program Improvement

The GSH reform resulted in a significant loss of workforce skill, specialist knowledge and experience within the SHS sector. It is also caused considerable disruption to existing relationships between service providers, and also with young people. There were also significant adverse impacts on young people trying to access services, which we believe could have been avoided.

We urge FACS to ensure the sector is prepared for significant change.

Sector preparedness and change management

'Reform', generally leads to 'change'. Stakeholders seldom anticipate change in exactly the same way and often certain services are left dissatisfied as a result. Change may occur in a number of ways including improvement to service delivery, better outcomes for young people or more efficient use of resources. For these outcomes to be achieved however, change may require the reallocation of resources to 'other' or 'new' service providers. Funding reallocations may force longstanding service providers to cease delivery of a particular program or may force the closure of their service entirely, as was witnessed in the GSH reforms. Yfoundations would like to see FACS initiate sector preparedness activities throughout the reform process.

We are also concerned that changes to the workforce may lead to the loss of corporate knowledge and skills, as was also witnessed during the GSH reform. The disruptive loss of human capital was damaging to the SHS sector, and the ramifications are still being experienced today.

We urge FACS to ensure the TEI sector is adequately prepared for significant and potentially unfavorable change at an organisational, community and sector wide level. Any changes to the current TEI service delivery system will have flow on effects on other service systems and supporting young people and their families. It is important that all potential outcomes are discussed with providers during the initial stages of the reform. Despite the commitment made by FACS that the funds allocated to TEI will not be reduced, it is important that services be aware that the aggregate number of contracts may shrink as a result of the reform, and are prepared for how this might change their service delivery.

These flow on affects need to be discussed with service providers throughout the reform process and not only at the conclusion of the reform process.

Recommendations

- *FACS needs to ensure the sector is prepared for change we recommend the development of a clearly outlined plan that includes commonly agreed outcomes, objectives and appropriate planning, including risk management and change management to assist the sector to move from its existing service delivery outcomes to the new reform service delivery outcomes.*
- *Increased investments into research and data collection systems for early intervention programs.*

4. Program Support

We appreciate that the targeted earlier intervention program service system is operating within a limited (no-growth) budget. It is therefore important that the new TEI system operates smarter without working harder, while remaining viable. For this to happen it's essential that the TEI service system operates in conjunction with other mainstream Government and non-Governments initiatives supporting young people and families including Health, Education, Criminal Justice, Housing and Homelessness, Out of Home Care, Domestic and Family Violence. It is important that these Departments input into the TEI reform process from the initial stages.

Need for greater Australian research in the areas of prevention and early intervention.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young people (ARACY) report has highlighted the dearth of current Australian research and literature pertaining to prevention and early intervention programs and service delivery design for children and families. Although it is possible to draw upon international literature to guide service design and delivery, it is important that greater investments are made into strengthening our understanding of prevention and early intervention within the local Australian context. A deeper understanding will ensure that our programs and service delivery systems effectively respond to local need.

Improved mechanisms for collecting and retaining data

The number of young people and families at risk of or experiencing homelessness remains unknown. Yfoundations has been advocating for improvements to data collection systems for many years. The data collection mechanisms used to enumerate the total number of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness fail to account for the 'hidden homeless', notably young people couch surfing or staying in other informal accommodations are not adequately captured within the current measurement tools employed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) or Australian Institute of Welfare (AIHW). Initiatives responding to youth homelessness remain limited in their efficacy without accurate data.

Recommendations

- *That FACS commits to linking the TEI system into other NSW Government and non-Government initiatives.*

- *That greater emphasis is placed on improving Australian data and research mechanisms. This will ensure that future TEI programs and services are informed by research relevant to the Australia context.*

5. Reform processes

The processes guiding the TEI reform are incredibly important and are a determining factor in the outcomes for the service system. Based upon our previous learning's from GSH we urge FACS to commit to undertaking a transparent, strengths-based reform process with clear public project plans and realistic timeframes. We are particularly concerned about the following areas:

Adequate Timeframes

We urge FACS to commit to undertaking all stages of the reform within realistic and achievable timeframes. The timeframes must be reasonable for all stakeholders involved in the process.

The purpose of the reform

FACS must make the purpose of the reform explicit from the initial period of the reform process. The question on the evidence basis for service design changes is critical. It needs to be clearly established what exactly is supposed to improve under the reforms so this can be tested. It is also important for current service providers to be aware of the outcomes of the reform that FACS is anticipating. We strongly advocate that FACS commit to a genuine and equitable process of improving service delivery for young people and families as made explicit in the consultation paper.

We urge FACS to clearly state what the reforms are aiming to achieve in terms of outcomes as well as strategic objectives.

Competitive tendering

Yfoundations strongly advocates against using a competitive tendering process for the TEI reform. Drawing upon the Going Home Staying Home (GSH) reform, significant fragmentation of pre-existing relationships has resulted from the competitive tendering process employed. Services that had previously been working collaboratively were forced to compete against each other, which caused monumental division and great mistrust across the sector. We warn against using competitive tendering in the TEI reform.

Sector Consultation

It is encouraging to see FACS' engage with various stakeholders during the early stages of the reform. We urge FACS to employ highly consultative mechanisms throughout the entire reform period and that all stakeholders have sufficient mechanisms and opportunities in which to provide feedback.

Recommendations

- *We recommend that the reform include: realistic timeframes, genuine sector consultation throughout the entirety of reform and transparent policy and planning processes.*