

POSITION PAPER

Housing 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 Housing. 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.

It is crucial that young people have access to safe, stable housing, as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Home should be an environment that promotes growth and fosters development.

HOUSING FOR HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN NSW

Housing is a critical foundation from which young people can develop their self-confidence, community, and employment needs. Stable and safe housing enables a young person to thrive. Without access to suitable and stable housing, a young person cannot end their experience of homelessness.

For young people in NSW their housing concerns are very different than previous generations. Housing in NSW is characterised by a decline in homeownership, increasing private rental costs, and a decline in the availability of social housing, as well as an increase in the rate of youth homelessness. High rental costs, low incomes, and lack of affordable housing stock make accessing stable accommodation a challenge for many young people[2].

The need for young people to have access to housing is a fundamental right. Article 27 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that safe and well-maintained housing is necessary for children and young people to reach their full potential[3].

The Youth Homelessness Representative Council have acknowledged that homelessness is much more than just rooflessness. A stable home encompasses safety, comfort, security, and belonging. With safe, stable housing young people are able to build all other life domains, including education, employment, social networks, personal relationships, as well as health and wellness.

For many young people experiencing homelessness, they will typically bounce from place to place - couch surfing, sleeping overnight with friends and family, or in overcrowded accommodation - before accessing a Specialist Homelessness Service[4].

A transient lifestyle can cause great stress and anxiety for a young person. Living in a constant state of uncertainty is particularly disruptive to learning and often a young person will become disengaged from education. Growing up with this level of stress and uncertainty greatly increases risk factors for young people including poor mental and physical health, drug and alcohol use, disrupted education, and unhealthy relationships.

It is important that young people find stable and long-term housing as quickly as possible. In addition to stable and appropriate housing, it is vital a young person is supported to connect with other local services that will assist them to reach independence, building their confidence and self-worth. Enhancing positive connections (e.g. employment services, training services, psychological support) will assist a young person to end their experience of homelessness.

[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] Welfare Rights Centre and Shelter NSW (2014), The impact of rent assistance on housing affordability for low-income renters: NSW.

[3] United Nations General Assembly (1959), Declaration of the Rights of the Child, United Nations.

[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) Census of Population and housing: estimating homelessness, 2011

QUOTES FROM YHRC

Why is stable housing important to you?

"As a young person, having safe and stable accommodation is a fundamental human need. The impact of not having a safe and stable environment can have astronomical effects on a young persons development. From experience it can be a very scary and dark time and you simply feel that no one is listening, this is your time to hear".

"Stable housing should be an environment where you feel comfortable, somewhere you are willing to return to after a day out. You shouldn't have to stay out late or stay at a friends house constantly. Your home should be the safest and most comfortable destination to go to".

"Stable housing is important to me because it is a safe living environment for me and I don't have to stress or have to move all the time. It increases my chances of pursuing my life".

"A stable home to me is a home in which I am safe, a place I can grow from, and a place where I have a future. But most of all, a place that I would welcome a family to".

"Safe, secure and long term accommodation (or more importantly, a place to call home) is vital to the growth, development and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. Simply put, housing is a basic human right that everybody should have access to".

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE YHRC

- 1 There is a significant lack of medium-to-long term supported accommodation in NSW, which means 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 hugely disruptive and can lead to disengagement from schools, employment, and community support. Because there is a 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.
- 2 Rent Choice Youth is a great new initiative, but it is not available everywhere in NSW, and there are not enough workers to support the program.
- 3 There are no affordable private rental properties for young people on Youth Allowance or Newstart, and very few properties affordable for Australian's earning minimum wage, meaning young Australian's on Youth Allowance, Newstart, or earning minimum wage must rely on service support to find and retain housing.
- 4 Young people who do try to enter the private rental market face discrimination. People under the age of 18 sometimes have difficulty finding a landlord that is willing to rent them a property. Landlords may worry that a young person will damage the property or not be able to afford the rent.
- 5 Boarding Houses are often the only rental properties willing to take on a young person as a tenant. However, Boarding Houses are often unsafe, unhygienic, and unaffordable. The YHRC believe Boarding Houses are not suitable or appropriate for children and young people.
- 6 Living in a share house is not always appropriate for young people experiencing homelessness as they may have experienced trauma or have complex mental health issues, which make it difficult to live in share housing.
- 7 Link2Home is not a reliable service for young people. Most young people only use it to access Temporary Accommodation. Young people have commented that the Link2Home staff can be intrusive and unhelpful.
- 8 Young people often need to choose between housing (i.e. keeping a roof over their head) and their education and/or employment opportunities. Housing and employment/education opportunities can be located far apart and transport is expensive and/or not readily available. More needs to be done to overcome the barriers between housing and education/employment.
- 9 There is a need for better system of sharing and communicating data and information between services and agencies. Young people are often required to retell their story over and over in order to access the support they are entitled to. For a young person in the midst of a crisis (i.e. homelessness) retelling their story can be highly distressing and retraumatising.
- 10 There is a need for residential mental health support away from a hospital environment for young people with moderate to severe mental health issues. Hospital should be the last resort for young people with mental health issues, not their only option.
- 11 Exiting State Care (OOHC, Hospitals, Juvenile Justice) places young people at risk of homelessness as there is often no adequate planning in the lead up to their exit.

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 stable, safe, and accessible housing, to ensure young people at-risk of, or experiencing homelessness are able to access the housing support they need.

- 1 More medium-to-long term Specialist Homelessness Services for young people** – Supported medium-long term accommodation services are needed to house young people over a 6 - 24 month period. These services would help young people develop healthy routines, to improve their living skills, to reach their education and employment potential, and to feel happy and safe. These medium-long term Specialist Homelessness Services should be trauma informed with 24/7 staff. To end homelessness NSW needs to invest in medium to long-term housing.
- 2 Expand Rent Choice Youth** – Rent Choice Youth is a great new initiative helping young people enter into the private rental market. Unfortunately, it is geographically limited. The YHRC is calling on the NSW Government to allow Rent Choice Youth to be available to more towns and cities across NSW. Allowing services to be flexible with their geographic boundaries, enabling young people to find accommodation in a location that suits their needs. To support this more workers are required to help young people into private rental tenancies, and to limit the number of clients per worker to ensure the clients have enough time and support to succeed in their tenancy. Effectively helping young people to maintain their tenancy will be much more valuable than responding to their needs once they become homeless.
- 3 More affordable housing across NSW** – NSW requires 7,500 additional affordable rental dwellings each year until 2026 to make up the shortfall in affordable housing[5]. To support this, developers should be compelled to include affordable housing when building new apartment buildings. The YHRC recognise that we should not only add to NSW housing stock, but look to make more effective use of existing stock, including implementing a vacant property tax, requiring owners to pay revenue to the government if their property is unoccupied for more than six months a year.
- 4 Regulate Boarding Houses and Implement an accreditation process and minimum housing standards** – Boarding houses are a common response to homelessness in NSW, providing crisis, temporary, and transitional housing for people unable to rent in the mainstream private sector[6]. However, most Boarding Houses are totally inappropriate for children and young people, they are unsafe, hazardous, unhygienic, and often unaffordable. More needs to be done to secure the rights and safety of Boarding House tenants. YHRC is calling on the NSW Government to regulate Boarding Houses to ensure they are in line with tenancy rights and are compliant with minimum safety standards.
- 5 Increase the availability of One Bedroom Affordable Housing Options for Young People with complex needs** – Share housing is not always appropriate for children and young people with complex mental health needs and/or a history of trauma. Research has indicated that for many people living with mental illness a single tenancy is preferable to any shared arrangement, as they may have had negative experiences with share housing, adding to stress and an inability to cope[7]. The YHRC is calling for an increase in the number of studio/one bedroom housing (linked with outreach support), which is more appropriate for people with complex needs.

- 6 **More opportunities for outreach case management** – Many young people lose the support of case management when they move between services or accommodation, to mitigate this issue the YHRC is calling for more flexible outreach support (not affiliated with accommodation) so that young people can have consistent continued support as they move between services.

- 7 **Improve Link2Home** – A well resourced and informed Link2Home is needed to ensure young people feel respected and supported. Link2Home can be improved with shorter wait times with trauma-informed trained staff to assess and identify people at-risk of homelessness to enable quick responses to meet their needs. Furthermore, Link2Home should offer an online directory of current vacancies' to enable young people to refer themselves.

- 8 **Invest in Youth Foyers** - The NSW Government should invest in a range of evidence based approaches that provide wrap around support for young people, such as Youth Foyers. A Foyer is an integrated learning, housing, and support service, focusing on education and employment goals. A Youth Foyer provides employment, education, training, and skills development in a stable and secure congregated living environment. Young people exiting a Youth Foyer are much better equipped to be good employees and more likely to sustain employment[8]. One example of a successful Youth Foyer is the Education First Youth Foyers in Victoria run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in partnership with Launch Housing. The YHRC is calling for these evidence-based Foyers to be introduced onto TAFE campuses in NSW to support vulnerable young people into employment.

- 9 **State and Federal Government agencies to streamline sharing of information** – The YHRC is calling on both State and Federal Government agencies and services to review how they can better and more easily share information with other agencies in order to support young people at-risk and experiencing homelessness, so that they can access support more easily. Getting the right help at the right time is integral to ending homelessness. YHRC members have shared their experiences of Government services not “talking”, which means they have to retell their stories, adding to their distress during their lowest points. State and Federal agencies (i.e. Centrelink, Service NSW, Births Deaths Marriages, Department of Community and Justice, Education, Medicare and others) should improve and streamline communication in order to provide wraparound support to young people and vulnerable people in need.

- 10 **Invest in non-hospital community residential support services** – The bright lights, noises, and high stress atmosphere of hospitals are not conducive with treatment of mental illness. Emergency rooms should not be the first point of call for young people with mental health needs. A non-hospital specialised community residential accommodation service option for young people (16-24) with complex mental health needs is needed in every Local Health District across NSW to reduce the burden on expensive in-patient hospitals.

- 11 **Commitment to ‘no exits into homelessness’ across all government agencies** – 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 and drug and alcohol facilities, correction facilities, detention centres and mental health institutions, as well as young people in the out of home care system, should have a comprehensive 'leaving care plan' that includes housing and support services.

[5] Yates, J (2018), Social and Affordable housing projects 2016-2026, Community Housing Industry Association NSW

[6] Tenants Union of New South Wales (2018), Five Years of the Boarding Houses Act 2012 in New South Wales, A report by the Tenants' Union of NSW

[7] AHURI (2002), Linkages between housing and support – what is important from the perspective of people living with a mental illness, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Swinburne/Monash Research Centre Ecumenical Housing Inc.

[8]Foyer Foundation 2018, Introduction to the Foyer Foundation: Transforming lives of Young People. Page 3 - 4