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'More Than a Warm Bed & a Hot Meal' - Holistic Approaches to Youth Homelessness Through Short Term Accommodation

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'More Than a Warm Bed & a Hot Meal' - Holistic Approaches to Youth Homelessness Through Short Term Accommodation

Abstract

Youth homelessness is marred by problems around family breakdowns, mental health concerns, substance use and abuse, and the lack of stable accommodation (Homelessness Taskforce 2008). With noted decreases over the last decade, youth homelessness still remains a contested policy topic, with need to develop a streamlined approach in understanding solutions. An emphasis on early intervention is an increasing part of a commitment to decreasing the idea of young people becoming homeless in the first place. National and State Governments are working hard on developing policy positions that promote a shared responsibility to the problem. Renewed financial commitments are being profiled, and funding reforms, including the new branding associated with services, is being rolled out and implemented. This paper will review strategies and specific responses to youth homelessness through a strength based and holistic short term youth accommodation service model, recently implemented in south west Sydney. Furthermore, attention will also be focussed on how community collaborations are led by innovation within practice itself, and commitment to work strategically with community stakeholders, including the young people themselves.

Keywords

hot, meal', -, term, accommodation, bed, warm, than, holistic, &, approaches, 'more, youth, homelessness, short

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'MORE THAN A WARM BED & A HOT MEAL'

– Holistic approaches
to youth homelessness
through short term
accommodation

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MISSION AUSTRALIA
Fairfield Youth Connections
(November 2010)

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'More than a warm bed & a hot meal' – Holistic approaches to youth homelessness through short term accommodation

Youth homelessness is marred by problems around family breakdowns, mental health concerns, substance use and abuse, and the lack of stable accommodation (Homelessness Taskforce 2008). With noted decreases over the last decade, youth homelessness still remains a contested policy topic, with need to develop a streamlined approach in understanding solutions. An emphasis on early intervention is an increasing part of a commitment to decreasing the idea of young people becoming homeless in the first place. National and State Governments are working hard on developing policy positions that promote a shared responsibility to the problem. Renewed financial

commitments are being profiled, and funding reforms, including the new branding associated with services, is being rolled out and implemented. This paper will review strategies and specific responses to youth homelessness through a strength based and holistic short term youth accommodation service model, recently implemented in south west Sydney. Furthermore, attention will also be focussed on how community collaborations are led by innovation within practice itself, and commitment to work strategically with community stakeholders, including the young people themselves.

Problems for homeless young people

In south west Sydney, according to the Regional Homelessness Action Plan for Greater Western Sydney (Housing NSW 2010), 1774 people were considered homeless during the 2006 Census collection period, of a total population of 878,010 people. The majority of homeless people were staying with friends (54%), which is higher than the NSW state average of 40%. Furthermore, south west Sydney has a higher proportion of homeless young people aged 15 – 19 years old living in the region (27%; around 479 young people) than the state figure of 20%. This also includes an additional 302 (17%) homeless young people in the region aged 20 – 24 year old, again higher than the state average of 13%. Overall, the top reasons for why people became homeless in the region included domestic violence (30%); double than the state average, followed by time out from family (13% – more than double in comparison to state average) and relationship/family breakdown. Accommodation placements lasted longer in the region, with more people staying for periods of between 4 – 13 weeks (28% compared to 22% state average).

In the same report, acknowledgment is made to the limitation of case management support for homeless youth, a lack of housing stock specifically for youth, insufficient support for pregnant youth, and a need to provide streamlined approach for young people leaving institutional care. Specific attention is also required in working more effectively with young people from CALD backgrounds, who are an evident demographic across south west Sydney.

According to BoysTown (2010), youth homelessness is also plagued by various concerns and difficulties perpetuated by self harm and suicide ideation. Further to this, Milburn et al. (2006) suggests that a high proportion (69 – 77%) of homeless youth engage in some form of substance use, and that only

half of those experiencing some form of mental health concern (up to 50% of youth homeless population) access any form of support. Not surprisingly, rates of mental health concerns in homeless youth are at least twice as high than non homeless youth (Kamieniecki 2001). Over 50% of homeless youth practice unprotected sex, 17% are same sex attracted, 44% need some form of interpersonal counselling support, and 83% need some form of assistance with being unemployed.

The importance placed by young people on why they may leave their family home environment that subsequently leads to some form of homelessness provides scope to also understand respective need. Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that over 70% left due to conflict with parents. The next highest reason for young women was due to anxiety or depression (56.7%) and then violence at home between family members (41.3%), whereas for males it was a desire for independence (44.3%) and then anxiety and depression (38.5%). Additionally, a desire for adventure was also listed by both males and females as another very important reason to leave home.

Progressively, people are acculturated in a living condition that is perceived as part and parcel of being homeless. This identity provides an understanding for young people to become part of a sub culture where their realities are characterised by such behaviours, ideals, perspective and knowledge (Johnson & Chamberlain 2008). Ongoing problems also arise for certain groups of homeless young people, including newly arrived young people who may not have an agreed understanding of how to comply with expectations within youth accommodation service provision, and how to access such support in the first instance of becoming homeless (Couch 2011; Centre for Multicultural Youth 2010).

Problems for youth Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS)

Of the 106,500 people that access some form of accommodation services in a given year, near to 35% are young people aged 25 and under (National Youth Commission 2008). The introduction of the federal government's white paper on homelessness, The Road Home – A National Approach to Reduce Homelessness (2008) emphasised the importance of sector development, especially on existing services developing their respective

capacity to work collaboratively with other specialist homelessness services (SHS; previously known as Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services). However, local services, especially youth accommodation services in south west Sydney, are still challenged as to whether this change and commitment moves beyond the tokenistic policy commitment to actual practice. Existing providers over the last 3 years have

either reshaped their model of service delivery, moving away from traditional short term accommodation support, to more medium to long term support. Therefore, an ongoing strain continues to exist in being able to successfully intervene, and transition young people between various time limited intervention periods. For example, when Mission Australia took on the funding to become the provider of short term accommodation in October 2009 within the Fairfield local government area, the then medium term accommodation service, Cornerstone, operated by Presbyterian Youth Services, provided the next term of support after the three months initially spent at Mission Australia. However, in late 2010, this service ceased to operate due to a lack of recurrent funding. Since then, there has been no additional commitment, or establishment of another mixed gender medium term youth accommodation service. Therefore, making it difficult for stakeholders not just in Fairfield, but in greater south west Sydney, and metro Sydney, to support youth beyond just short term and or crisis support.

The report on Australia's Homeless Youth (National Youth Commission 2008), acknowledged that SAAP services may find it difficult to work with young people with mental health concerns. This is then compounded by a lack of coordination between youth accommodation and mental health service providers, who often have differing perspectives on care needed. Other high needs and complex behaviours may also deter program participation, generally leading to a lack of engagement, service refusal and exit. Lack of staff capacity is also to be recognised, where the workforce is characterised with limited professional skills (Homelessness Taskforce 2008), and wages that may deter the recruitment of professional practitioners to increase such skill deficits. This is further underpinned by the casualisation of workers, and the need to create job security. However, this phenomenon could be offset by implementing a model of service delivery that enhances service provision by employing relevant trained individuals in roles that create a professional response to such high and complex needs. Job satisfaction would also combat a high turnover of workers, who may leave this type of work due to stress, and a lack of professional supervision support provided both internally and externally.

Developing an effective response

Traditionally, youth refuges are seen as a place where many young people with disruptive life circumstances and behaviours spend some time in. They are perceived as a half way from residing in a home, to then becoming homeless. In many of the case studies recently reviewed on life course institutional cost of homelessness for vulnerable groups (Baldry et al. 2012), many had previously stayed in youth refuges, but continued towards adulthood in a life of disadvantage. Other research has also suggested that as young people transition into homelessness, it leads to other anti social behaviours, including participation in criminal activity (Martijn & Sharpe 2006) however, has not distinguished between disorders that are present prior to homelessness and those that develop following homelessness. Hence whether psychological disorders are the cause or consequence of homelessness has not been established. The aim of this study is to investigate causal pathways to homelessness amongst currently homeless youth in Australia. The study uses a quasi-qualitative methodology to generate hypotheses for larger-scale research. High rates of psychological disorders were confirmed in the sample 35 homeless youth aged 14-25. The rates of psychological disorders at the point of homelessness were greater than in normative samples, but the rates of clinical disorder increased further once homeless. Further in-depth analyses were conducted to identify the temporal sequence for each individual with a view to establishing a set of causal pathways to homelessness and trajectories following homelessness that characterised the people in the sample. Five pathways to homelessness and five trajectories following homelessness were identified that accounted for the entire sample. Each pathway constituted a series of interactions between different factors similar to that described by Craig and Hodson (1998. *Psychological Medicine*, 28, 1379-1388. Therefore, how are we as a sector counteracting such problems when such young people enter our specialist homelessness services? Are we expected to maintain a tokenistic approach where we just deal with the presenting issues and nothing more? As a service, we should provide scope to assist in developing strategies beyond a warm

bed and a hot meal, and instead provide pathways that enhance service delivery through collaborations with other key stakeholders in the community. It is possible to achieve inclusive practices with young people, providing opportunities for participation in programs to also yield forms of empowerment, whilst enhancing resilience and other strengths each young person has. This type of engagement can also sustain meaningful contact with homeless young people, their peers and wider community (Wearing 2011). For this to be achieved, we need to create a commitment for short term accommodation services to be dynamic in its approach, not just relaying on good will and good intention, but rather, the unique ability to be the starting point for effective intervention, counteracting serious social and welfare needs each individual may come into the service with.

Providing appropriate support for newly homeless youth can also led to them returning to their family home; deterring longer term and entrenched factors around homelessness occurring due to support young people may receive in returning home (Milburn et al. 2007). Families here are seen as an asset, rather than a risk factor based on the young person's individual perspectives and expectations. More so, where conflict exists within families, this too can be acknowledged as an area to possibly address in the hope that family restoration may occur. But again, this approach needs to be applied in a timely manner, with service delivery geared towards such support. Conversely, there is a small decline in young people returning home after being supported by SAAP services; acknowledging that many have already left home before engaging with such services, especially in later teens (Ryan 2003). A lack of emphasis on then promoting the opportunity for such young people to return home is an important aspect of understanding service provision for such young people, hence the multifaceted approach of an effective model. In essence, some will be able to be reunited successfully with home, others won't. But nonetheless, the youth accommodation model needs to be shaped around the individual, their circumstances, and achieving their best outcome.

Case Study: Fairfield Youth Connections – Mission Australia

ver time, SAAP models have varied, with each service generally prescribing to a specific method. According to Bisset et al. (1999), approaches include outreach models; working with individuals and connecting respective resources to promote solutions, intensive support models; striving to deal with underlying problems that lead to homelessness, co-ordination models; promoting the facilitation of service provision beyond accommodation, and crisis models; limited to just dealing with the presenting problems. Fairfield Youth Connections (FYC): Mission Australia, opened in October 2009, implementing an eclectic multi faceted five component approach in its goal as being more than a

warm bed and a hot meal (Figure 1). The FYC model is committed to developing sustainable outcomes, as opposed to perpetuating a cycle of homelessness by not addressing more than presenting needs. FYC also combines various key characteristics an early intervention model for youth homelessness promotes, including timely responses to family support, understanding family dynamics and context, engaging parental and youth perspectives, highlighting family restoration opportunities, working collaboratively with other key stakeholders; including schools, promoting critical reflective practice, eclectic service approaches and working with diversity (Crane 2009).

FIGURE 1: Fairfield Youth Connections (FYC) Service Model Overview

Operates the following 5 service components:
Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Building capacity whilst developing resources and networks with local stakeholders, including local high schools and health services in responding more effectively with youth at risk or experiencing homelessness» Empower local partners to meet social and welfare needs through information/support/referral optional across community» Community partners participate in a training workshop that overviews risk and protective factors, trends from current research, and accommodation & youth support services information
Early Intervention Outreach <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Case management/Counselling support by Adolescent & Family Counsellor» Referrals received from local partners (in education component above) to assist young person before the possibility of becoming homeless (rough sleeping/couch surfing)» Facilitated intervention undertaken directly in community e.g. local park, family home etc
Intensive Accommodation Support <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Supported short term: up to three months» Male & female» 15 – 18 years» Holistic and intensive case management & counselling support mapped across 13 life domains: accommodation, family, education & training, employment, recreation, financial matters, physical/sexual/mental health, alcohol and other drugs support and intervention, identification documentation, legal issues, daily living, personal & social skills, ethnic culture» Complemented by structured living skills program, alongside weekly group work and recreational activities» Family restoration endeavoured (where appropriate)
Post Crisis Support <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Case management/Counselling support by Adolescent & Family Counsellor» Continued support for young people transitioning from intensive accommodation support» Outreach support also available to other local service providers/partners in complementing their service delivery and scope for support» Whole of community approach in working collaboratively in creating sustainable outcomes, which may include family and medium – long term accommodation services
Transitional Social Housing <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Semi independent medium term: up to eighteen months» Male & female» 16 – 21 years» Community housing option for young person to sign own lease and develop independent living skills after living in supported accommodation» Generally, young person needs to be engaged in full time education or employment» Outreach case management support provided to complement accommodation

Client concerns are profiled when the young person undertakes their initial assessment jointly informed by their referral into the service. Table 1 profiles the most common concerns listed on referral for a sample of clients entering the service between July 2010 and July 2011. A high proportion of clients coming into the service had already started their journey into homelessness, by either couch surfing or sleeping rough. As mentioned previously with a cohort of this type, other key issues are evident, including family breakdown, mental health concerns, educational disengagement and unemployment.

TABLE 1: Client concerns

Assessed concerns from intake & referral assessment	(n=58)
Couch surfing	58%
Family breakdown	47%
Educational disengagement	38%
Mental health issues	32%
Rough sleeping	32%
No income	28%
Significant alcohol and other drugs issues	25%
Unemployment	25%
Lack of personal belonging	24%
Insecure living skills	22%
Poor physical and sexual health	22%
Community and social isolation	16%

Case management and counselling interventions foster the notions of a strength based approach by assisting clients to create narratives that reflect their true realities – not the ones that retain participation in the service. For example, there is an ongoing pressure in refuges for young people to comply with respective rules and regulations enforced by the service. As such, there is a likelihood that clients will not willingly share the truth around substance use, and other problems they may be experiencing. However, under the FYC service delivery approach, people are esteemed for their honest narratives, enabling workers and clients to create a collaborative, shared approach in overcoming challenges that deter solutions. Rather than diminishing young people as completely dependent on how the system is going to cater for their needs (Bessant 2001), an important part of social inclusivity is developing strategies that enable youth to express their own understanding. In turn, we can overcome labels and certain limitations placed on them based on an ‘at risk’ dominant rhetoric that seeks first to place the problem in a box, rather than how to get out of one. Empowering their understanding of personal, social and familial strengths beyond service delivery is another part of providing sustainable and long term solutions. Table 2 overviews some of the top client outcomes achieved across all components of FYC; with noted achievements in enhancing family relationships, and positive transitions into new accommodation options after successfully completing a short term accommodation placement addressing respective needs; with trend also including the ability to return home with family.

TABLE 2: Client outcomes

Areas addressed through service delivery	(n=58)
Enhanced family relationships	65%
Access and transition to new accommodation	49%
Access to supported accommodation	46%
Independent living skills	40%
Income and financial support	39%
Job search	38%
AOD support and intervention	38%
Anger management	21%
Mental health support	21%
Sexual health education	19%
Develop personal strengths	18%
Family restoration	16%

Staffing arrangements play a significant part in creating and implementing an effective model of service delivery, consisting of a Service Manager, an Administration Support Officer, an Adolescent and Family Counsellor, a Case Manager and a team of Youth Workers. Apart from coordinating the team and providing respective regular supervision, the Service Manager continuously develops partnerships with local stakeholders, ranging from schools, child protection agencies, mental health providers and legal entities, including Police. They are also instrumental in undertaking training workshops in the Education component and for mapping resources made available for each component, including housing stock in transitional accommodation support. The Administration Officer, though three days a week, greatly assists in coordinating and supporting the Service Manager with accounts payable, banking, petty cash, staff timesheets, and purchasing. Unique to this model is the employment of a full time Adolescent and Family Counsellor (AFC), who delivers psychological and therapeutic interventions across all components. Working in local schools and youth agencies provides an enhanced response, complemented by the Case Manager position; streamlining case plan development whilst working inclusively with the team of 3 part time youth workers. By having the AFC work closely with the Case Manager, needs are assessed accordingly, and outcomes are mapped. Youth Workers subsequently provide recreational support, by facilitating activities that promote social inclusivity, including sporting, and social activities across the community. Therefore, an ongoing strength to the model is an underlying emphasis on working collaboratively amongst the staff team, streamlining roles and responsibilities that enhance positive client engagement, and tangible outcomes. This approach is further bolstered through an electronic information management system, where all relevant case notes are shared and maintained to enhance communication amongst staff, subsequently assisting professional responses to young people and wider community (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Inclusive client outcomes

Stephanie, 17 year old female from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, came to FYC after a time of couch surfing and rough sleeping due to a significant family breakdown that occurred from being the victim of grievous bodily harm perpetrated by her own parent. Prior to this matter, Stephanie had experienced a history of sexual and physical abuse during her early teens, which had led to several suicide attempts and extremely high risk taking behaviours. Stephanie was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and wasn't consistently taking prescribed medications or attending scheduled appointments with the local youth mental health service.

During her time with FYC, she undertook intensive case management and counselling support, working through areas of trauma previously experienced. Stephanie developed a greater awareness of self and how to interact with others, and created goals to engage positively in further education, training and employment. As a result, she reengaged in a Cert II at TAFE, and successfully transitioned to supported medium term accommodation. Contact with family both locally and internationally has also been re-established. Stephanie continues to receive outreach case management and counselling support, further maintained by additional mental health service provision. Through this collaborative approach, Stephanie is focussed on achieving realistic goals offset by inclusive community and family support.

Moving from just a 'refuge' to a sustainable 'program' response

Supported accommodation for young people, generally staffed around the clock, still need to be at the forefront of suitable accommodation; especially considering the needs their young people may have, and the issues they have previously experienced that led to becoming homeless in the first place. The notion that we should be providing more semi independent and or independent placements through social and affordable housing is still needed, however, how can young people with such high and complex needs be placed in these options if such needs aren't dealt with first through supported accommodation? For young people to successfully transition from supported short term accommodation, they need to be involved in an environment that is underpinned by a collaborative approach. The need to also create an accommodation service that promotes the space as a 'home' (Robinson 2001) is also an important part of maintaining effective engagement. Young people need to feel included, enabling them to express self comfortably whilst exploring and consolidating an identity underpinned by strengths and abilities.

Many youth refuges may be well known for being a breeding ground of violent incidents that occur between clients (Jordan 2012), which in turn can lead to a tenuous placement and possible exit from service due to this factor. Youth refuges may also have a reputation in emphasising the need for clients to comply or subsequently be kicked out leading to the inability to ever return, whilst also creating a negative image for the young person which decreases the likelihood for other youth accommodation services to accept them into their service. Incidents of this nature is all too common, with many young people then not seeking any further accommodation support, rather choosing to couch surf, or turn to rough sleeping options. Therefore, creating a holistic program response, rather than a temporary shelter, can address significant behavioural needs, whilst supporting the ongoing development of social inclusivity and engagement.

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