



Submission to the Discussion Paper  
Modernising Youth Housing and  
Homelessness Services in the ACT

March 2011

[www.youthcoalition.net](http://www.youthcoalition.net)

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

Submission to the Discussion Paper Modernising Youth Housing and Homelessness Services in the ACT  
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March 2011

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Thank you to the Youth Coalition staff team for their support.

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 100 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues, along with providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

## 1.2 Youth Housing and Homelessness in the in Australia and the ACT

We often hear the reference to ‘street kids’ but in fact most homeless young people are invisible to us. The data tells us that nationally 79% of homeless youth (12-18) are ‘couch surfing’ and living in other unstable situations. This generally means that they are temporarily staying with friends, relatives, family, and sometimes with complete strangers. These young people will often be sleeping on couches or on the floors of these people’s houses until they outstay their welcome and move on to the next place – hence the couch surfing term.

Of the remain youth homeless population, nationally 15% are living in a refuge, hostel or transitional housing and 1% are sleeping rough (on the street, in a car or tent or squatting).<sup>1</sup>

In Canberra, on any given night, the data tells us that 1,364 people are homeless. 60% percent of those people are under the age of 25 years. 47% are living with relatives and family, or even complete strangers, couch surfing, while another 47% are in boarding houses, refuges etc.<sup>2</sup>

There are a variety of reasons why children and young people become homeless that are often outside of the control of the young person. The general public often has a view that young homeless people are run-aways and could really return home if they wanted to. In reality many young people become homeless due to family breakdown, family violence and child abuse.

Statistically 45% of homeless young people identify interpersonal relationship problems including family violence and parent/adolescent conflict as the primary reason for becoming homeless. The next most common reasons are accommodation

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<sup>1</sup> MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008 Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006, Counting the Homeless Project 2006 page 15. This figure technically refers to the percentage of homeless school students in Australia who are residing with friends, relatives, moving around or other temporary accommodation. The homeless school student census is a reasonable representation of the broader youth homeless population.

<sup>2</sup> Youth Homelessness Matters Day Campaign Kit, National Youth Coalition for Housing and Youth Coalition of the ACT, 2010.

issues (18%) such as being evicted or unable to find suitable accommodation and financial reasons (14%) such as unable to pay rent or other financial difficulty.<sup>3</sup>

### **1.3 Process for Developing and Format of this Submission**

The Youth Coalition welcomes this opportunity to provide input into this important work.

This submission is one of many made over a fourteen year period by the Youth Coalition and is based on the following:

- Previous Youth Coalition submissions to the ACT Government;
- Focused consultations;
- Engagement with Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services consultations process;
- One-on-one consultations with member services and organisations; and,
- Current and topical research on youth affairs.

This submission has been divided into 7 sections, which include the following:

1. Introduction (this section)
2. Summary of recommendations
3. Response
4. Conclusion

This submission represents an opportunity for the Youth Coalition and stakeholders to identify and advise ACT Government of emerging issues, areas in need of additional resources and collaboratively develop social policy in the ACT.

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<sup>3</sup> 2006/07 AIHW National SAAP Data Report published in 2008.

## 2. Summary of Recommendations

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Section 2 provides a summary of the recommendations this submission. It is vital that these recommendations be referred to in the context of the broader submission.

### What are the best options for integration across and within the service system?

#### **Recommendation 1**

That the ACT Government recognise through the implementation of the youth homelessness service system that:

- Better service integration does not solve problems of an under resourced service system, and;
- The positive outcomes that can occur from service integration take time and resources to become apparent.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That government and community services map existing referral and partnership pathways, and engage the sectors supporting young people in identifying barriers or challenges they face in providing integrated support.

#### **Recommendation 3**

That systems governance models recognise the skills and professional experience that exists in the youth housing and homelessness sector in the ACT.

#### **Recommendation 4**

That systems governance has provisions and resources for agencies to offer wrap around and integrated responses to a client in a non-linear manner, that can provide short, medium and long-term support, as needed.

#### **Recommendation 5**

That the new service system provide clear agency role and responsibilities definitions, and common agreement as to the mechanisms and systems governance.

#### **Recommendation 6**

That systems governance structures be created with resources allocated to assist service providers in the transition to a new service system, and that the cost of the youth sector's potential new contract obligations are remunerated accordingly.

#### **Recommendation 7**

That service integration should be founded on a 'as needs' basis, to ensure meaningful referrals are made.

#### **Recommendation 8**

That any common assessment and referral protocol is:

- Developed with consideration of existing frameworks for assessment, referral and planning for young people, such as the Common Assessment Framework (OCYFS) and the Pathways Planning (DET);
- Developed with input from the service sector; and
- Allocated resources for implementation and evaluation.

**Recommendation 9**

That peak bodies such as the Youth Coalition of the ACT are considered key partners in any new service system reforms, in providing training, sector development opportunities, co-ordination and support.

**Recommendation 10**

That frontline workers are supported to engage in service visits and face-to-face inductions with allied services, as part of a comprehensive work force development strategy for the youth sector in the ACT.

**What practice interventions and approaches work best for which clients?****Recommendation 11**

That the ACT Government review the recommendations of the 'Telling It Like Is Report', and address any key gaps in the service system that still exist.

**Recommendation 12**

That services working to support young people are resourced to provide specialist support to a variety of vulnerable young people.

**Recommendation 13**

That the service system approach youth homelessness with a spectrum of support model that recognises the unique needs of each young person.

**Recommendation 14**

That the service system practice framework is underpinned by:

- Clearly defined roles;
- Professional trust and respect;
- Common assessment frameworks;
- Resourced networks and collaboration mechanisms;
- A comprehensive workforce development strategy;
- Support for peak bodies; and
- Flexibility in service response.

**Recommendation 15**

That any steps to addressing youth homelessness involve a whole of government, whole of community, wrap around approach.

**Recommendation 16**

That the ACT Government provides positive leadership, implementation advice, resources and support to community sector agencies seeking to work collaboratively.

**Recommendation 17**

That ACT Government commit to resourcing ongoing evaluation and review mechanisms for the service system, in order to provide best practice models for the ACT.

**Recommendation 18**

That the ACT Government develops any standards, in a timely fashion, in line with best practice, as developed nationally.

**What approaches to early intervention and prevention work best for young people at different ages and at different stages of homelessness?**

**Recommendation 19**

That the ACT Government clearly articulates the difference between prevention and early intervention responses to youth homelessness.

**Recommendation 20**

That the ACT Government resource the development of an early intervention framework that encompass the broader the children, youth, family support, and education sectors.

**What is the best way of providing a crisis intervention response, where should it be located, what should it look like and how long should it last?**

**Recommendation 21**

That Assertive Outreach models of support for young people in the ACT be further developed and properly resourced.

**Recommendation 22**

That the current level of crisis accommodation beds is maintained until the new service system is implemented, and then only reduced as need is reduced.

**Is there a role for family conferencing and mediation services at the point of crisis? If so, how would it work? If not, why not?**

**Recommendation 23**

That the service system include a professional, targeted youth mediation/resolution program that is resourced to work specifically with young people experiencing housing issues, with dedicated and formal links to youth housing services, and capacity to work with young people moving in and out of need.

**What are the best accommodation options that assist young people to stabilise and prepare for independent living?**

**Recommendation 24**

That the recommendations from the Living Skills Tool Kit Pilot Project be resourced and acted upon.

**Recommendation 25**

That Housing First as an approach for young people be supported by evidence base that indicates improved outcomes for young people.

**How can the reliance on public housing as the only housing outcome for young people be shifted to include the private rental market as a viable alternative? What types of services are needed to assist young people access and maintain tenancies in the private rental market?**

**Recommendation 26**

That future city planning for the ACT include whole of government strategies to support the development of affordable housing for young people in areas with the appropriate infrastructure and support.



**Recommendation 27**

That a working group be established and resourced to explore an accreditation process for young people to engage with, that has recognised links to the private rental market, and seeks to address existing barriers to young people entering the private rental market.

## 3. Response

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Section 3 of this submission seeks to respond to the questions as laid out in the Discussion Paper.

### 3.1 What are the best options for integration across and within the service system?

“The existing evidence suggests that homeless people are more likely to experience mental health conditions than those who are not homeless. Moreover, it suggests that prevalence rates of substance use disorders among homeless persons exceed general population estimates and that co-morbidity (co-occurrence) of substance use and other mental disorders is common.”<sup>4</sup>

It is commonly identified that government and non-government service providers seek better integration of services, to minimise duplication, avoid gaps and achieve better outcomes for clients. The move to greater collaboration is a desired outcome both locally and nationally, and is clearly outlined as a focus in the Australian Government’s 2008 ‘The Road Home’ Homelessness White Paper<sup>5</sup>.

Clear lines of communication are an essential component of any moves to further integrate agencies in the ACT. When discussing the youth homelessness sector, it is important to recognise that many services may already have existing and productive working relationships, that have developed over time, and promote best practice and good service delivery for clients. It is clear that when addressing youth homelessness, there is the potential for multiple agencies to become involved. The Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) believes that the discussion paper, and any subsequent new model that may be developed from it, will provide a unique opportunity to form an integrated service system that can better support young people with complex needs in the ACT.

Young people who are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness, require flexible and responsive supports to address: physical and mental health issues, financial assistance, involvement in the criminal justice system, family support, and care and protection issues.

To better integrate and align the current service system will require a proactive engagement of the many different types of supports outlined above, and needs to be approached within the local context of the ACT. While there are currently 12 funded agencies providing youth homelessness services, there are many more community sector agencies, who may be funded by the Youth and Family Support Program or alternative funding bodies, that support young people with housing and homelessness issues.

The future landscape of community services for children, young people and families in the ACT will require a much higher degree of collaboration, and will see a diverse number of agencies, programs and funding streams work together in new ways. To enable this, and to ensure that existing services are augmented to provide better outcomes for vulnerable young people, the Youth Coalition believes it is vital that

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<sup>4</sup> The integration of homelessness, mental health and drug and alcohol services in Australia authored by Paul Flatau, Elizabeth Conroy, Anne Clear and Lucy Burns, AHURI, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The Road Home Homelessness White Paper, Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008.

allied, stakeholders are involved and consulted in planning and developing any new models.

There is a lack of research and evaluation into the integration of services seeking to address homelessness in Australia. However, a report commissioned by the Queensland Government, entitled 'Closing Gaps and Opening Doors: The function of an integrated homelessness service system' offers some key findings that would be useful to inform the ACT as we move forward.

These findings included:

- "Integration does not have to be fully developed across the entire service system. Rather, consideration needs to be given to the level of integration required for each circumstance. Integration should be 'fit for purpose' accounting for the degree to which cooperation, coordination and collaboration are warranted;"
- "Integration does not solve the problem of an under-resourced service system;"
- "Where institutional integration arrangements have deliberately and genuinely involved the community sector, stronger and more sustained commitment to addressing homelessness has transpired;"
- "The study confirms the findings of Walsh (2000) and Leutz (1999) that service integration takes time to establish and "costs before it delivers positive outcomes;"
- " 'Innovation-on-the-run' is the norm for services which have been stretched beyond capacity and still are required to find shelter and draw on scarce resources to not only house clients but bring together the requisite services (health, medical, counseling, budgeting and welfare) for their complex needs."<sup>6</sup>

Whilst this report was focused on services in Southeast Queensland, there are some important messages that could assist the ACT in moving forward with modernising the youth homelessness sector. As discussed throughout this submission, many service providers already strive to collaborate with other services and allied programs.

#### **Recommendation 1**

That the ACT Government recognise through the implementation of the youth homelessness service system that:

- Better service integration does not solve problems of an under resourced service system, and;
- The positive outcomes that can occur from service integration take time and resources to become apparent.

#### **Recommendation 2**

That government and community services map existing referral and partnership pathways, and engage the sectors in identifying barriers or challenges they face in supporting young people in providing integrated support.

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<sup>6</sup> Closing Gaps and Opening Doors: The function of an integrated homelessness service system', Chief Investigators: Dr Robyn Keast, Dr Jennifer Waterhouse, Professor Kerry Brown, Dr Glen Murphy, 2008.

### **3.1.2 What would be the best approach to systems governance?**

While there are many potential models for systems governance, the best practice approach to any model should have basic commonalities.

#### **Existing Structures**

Any new systems governance model should recognise the skills and professional experience that currently exists in the youth housing and homelessness sector in the ACT. Whilst there is always a sense that the community sector can do 'better', that should not diminish the acknowledgment that many service providers are already engaged in meaningful collaboration and integration practices that maximise outcomes for clients. By building on the existing relationships, and providing opportunities for services to inform any new systems, we can take advantage of the current understanding and expertise in the sector.

#### **Recommendation 3**

That systems governance models recognise the skills and professional experience that exists in the youth housing and homelessness sector in the ACT.

#### **Flexibility**

A high degree of independence and flexibility needs to be offered to service providers, that recognises the value of diversity in services and their delivery models. The invaluable experience of local knowledge and understanding of the current issues informs the service delivery model.

Providers need to be able to build on individual rapport and personal circumstances of a client, which can greatly assist in offering the best possible support and assistance. The inherent danger with a new systems structure that has a central governance model is that agencies may be tasked by funding bodies to accept inappropriate referrals, or be limited in their capacity to respond to young people who they may have spent some time in building rapport with, and who have only recently felt able to or needed to request assistance.

Considering the spectrum of support concept as explored in the discussion paper, it is vital to conceptualise that homelessness is not a static or purely physical issue, and that young people in particular are likely to move in and out of need. It is clear that the discussion paper has explored many models, and has presented flexibility and a continuum of care as best practice.

#### **Recommendation 4**

That systems governance has provisions and resources for agencies to offer wrap around and integrated responses to a client in a non-linear manner, that can provide short, medium and long-term support, as needed.

#### **Incorporating Service Diversity in Government and Non-government Agencies**

It is important to consider the potential differences in philosophy, responsibilities and resources that may exist between government and non-government agencies, as well as those that exist in the community sector as a whole. Issues such as mandatory reporting, legal requirements, primacy of client, confidentiality, perception of support from a young person's point of view, after-hours support, and funding obligations are

some examples of this. When considering new systems governance and service integration, these potential differences need to be clearly mapped and understood, to avoid unmet expectations between services, and which may result in poorer outcomes for young people.

Conceptualising a 'lead agent' role in this environment is a complex task, which requires clear role definition and common agreement as to the mechanisms and management structure. Failure to have 'buy in' or meaningful professional engagement from the outset can lead to fractured service delivery and poor outcomes for young people.

#### **Recommendation 5**

That the new service system provide clear agency role and responsibilities definitions, and common agreement as to the mechanisms and systems governance.

#### **Resources**

As previously discussed, better governance and integration of services does not necessarily answer concerns about an under-resourced service system. Whilst the ACT enjoys relatively high levels of funding for Housing Services, we still have a high turn away rate for emergency accommodation.

Better outcomes for clients through better integration and new systems governance can only be realised if the new paradigm recognises that many services are already stretched to capacity. While we support the concept of better wrap around services for young people, we are concerned that this may translate into increased casework expectations, without the commensurate increase in resources and up skilling that may be required.

This is particularly relevant in the current environment in the ACT, that will see the Youth Support Program (YSP) and the Family Support Program (FSP) funding streams merge, and an increased focus on Family work. We believe this may lead to the diminished representation of young people's issues in the ACT, and has ramifications for the Specialist Housing Services that work with young people.

#### **Recommendation 6**

That systems governance structures be created with resources allocated to assist service providers in the transition to a new service system, and that the cost of the youth sector's potential new contract obligations are remunerated accordingly.

#### **3.1.3 What degree of integration is required at different parts of the system?**

As each client has differing needs, and these needs will increase and decrease over time, the degree of integration cannot be considered a fixed concept. However, it is clear that mechanisms need to be put in place that can promote a more holistic response to a young person seeking assistance with housing and homelessness issues. The recurring themes of physical and mental health, education and employment, financial assistance, alcohol and other drug use, and family reconnection obviously require a range of services and support models, and therefore a high degree of integration. The ability to quickly offer appropriate support to young people, regardless of the level or type of intervention needed, should form the basis of this discussion.

Service integration should be founded on a 'as needs' basis, to ensure meaningful referrals are made. Simply dictating that services need to collaborate more does not necessarily improve outcomes for young people.

Informed consent from clients in relation to information sharing and confidentiality is essential. The right of a client to not access services also needs to be embedded in any new model, and exercising this right should not exclude young people from other services.

**Recommendation 7**

That service integration should be founded on a 'as needs' basis, to ensure meaningful referrals are made.

**3.1.4 What mechanisms need to be in place to ensure a seamless delivery of service?**

**Common Assessment and Referral**

The Youth Coalition offers broad support for a common assessment and referral protocol. However, there are risks inherent in this, especially when considering the broad scope of agencies and services that may be affected. As outlined in previous sections, many service providers in the ACT already operate highly efficient service delivery integration systems, based on years of professional relationships that are responsive to the needs of young people. Trust and experience of common goals and unique abilities are invaluable components of this.

Anecdotally, there are two questions encountered when discussing common assessment and referral protocols with the community sector for this consultation. These are:

- Why should my service, with its existing assessment tools, which have been developed over time, and refined to meet the needs of a specific service target group, be subject to outside review and change; and
- How to capture the commonalities of a diverse sector, with differing philosophies and local issues?

Queries have also been raised in regard to how a new assessment tool would be developed and introduced across the region. If service providers are to have meaningful engagement with the process, the development requires: sincere consultation and input in the development stage; an understanding of contractual obligations, if any, to implement any such program; and allocated resources for retraining of staff.

**Recommendation 8**

That any common assessment and referral protocol is;

- Developed with consideration of existing frameworks for assessment, referral and planning for young people, such as the Common Assessment Framework (OCYFS) and the Pathways Planning (DET);
- Developed with input from the service sector; and
- Allocated resources for implementation and evaluation.

## **Leadership, Partnership and Sector Development**

Consultations for this submission included correspondence with youth and homelessness peaks and major stakeholders in Queensland, Victoria, and South Australia. It is worth noting that all states and territories are facing, or have recently faced, similar reforms and policy shifts.

This provides the ACT with a valuable opportunity to listen to what works in other jurisdictions, and allows us to better understand some of the challenges and barriers that eventuate with such changes. Common responses from other jurisdictions, as well as local consultations, and previous reports undertaken by the Youth Coalition were focused on leadership and partnerships, as well as supporting positive approaches to workforce and sector development.

It is clearly stated by the youth and youth housing sector that the government can play a significant role in supporting collaborative and integrated service delivery, by openly seeking tenders that promote these values. The upcoming merger of the YSP/FSP is an example of this already occurring in the ACT. The Youth Coalition has stated some support for the anticipated outcomes of this realignment, however, the process and time constraints imposed on the sector, have, we feel, possibly endangered the meaningful nature of the partnerships approach.

As discussed previously, it is vital to the effectiveness of a new systems governance structure that all parties are aware of the resources and limitations of partner/allied services, and clear maps are created. Anecdotal evidence exists from consultations with the sector, of service agreements falling down, and clients expectations of supports being unmet, due to overloading of one or two services, which can in turn lead to poor referral rates in future engagements.

The use of panels and networks can be extremely useful. To consolidate and formalise ad hoc referral structures, many respondents discussed the benefits of having regular meetings of service representatives. This was described as most useful when incorporating a regular meeting between middle management and direct service delivery workers, as well as a separate forum for directors.

Peak bodies can play an important role in assisting sector wide reform and engagement and supporting better service delivery and systems integration. Both the Youth Coalition and the ACT Council Of Social Service have a proven record of working with their members and stakeholders to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable people in the ACT. Practically, peak activities focusing on sector development can be valuable, by providing training, developing and distributing resources, undertaking research and offering secretariat and co-ordination support. Peak bodies can also assist broader community sector agencies to share information, and create and maintain important networks and forums.

Significant value is added when frontline workers are supported to engage in service visits and face-to-face inductions of allied services. This assists not only the workers sense of what other services can provide, but also allows for more sincere 'warm referrals', which can be important when working with vulnerable young people who may have poor perceptions of other services or trust concerns.

### **Recommendation 9**

That peak bodies such as the Youth Coalition of the ACT are considered key partners in any new service system reforms, in providing training, sector development opportunities, co-ordination and support.

**Recommendation 10**

That frontline workers are supported to engage in service visits and face-to-face inductions with allied services, as part of a comprehensive work force development strategy for the youth sector in the ACT.

**3.2 What practice interventions and approaches work best for which clients?**

It is fair to say that the broad principals of a flexible, proactive, integrated and responsive approach to youth housing and homelessness issues should underpin all practice interventions.

This is echoed in the discussion papers addendum, '*A look at the literature and best practice*', under the title '*Key features of best practice models: Choice*'.

"Each of the services provides a range of choices for young people in terms of the types of accommodation options and support services. This means that the service response can be tailored for individual needs, rather than young people having to fit into programmatic requirements."

**Young People**

Young people may offer important insights into these questions. In 2004, The Youth Coalition undertook research looking at young people's experiences and attitudes towards youth homelessness and the services that support them. The report, '*Telling it like it is*<sup>7</sup>' offered 7 main recommendations to the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (DHCS). In regards to this submission, we believe the following sub-recommendations from the report may be useful to review:

- Recommendation 1b: That consideration be given to increasing the flexibility of operating hours of existing youth services to improve accessibility for young people;
- Recommendation 3a: That a study exploring the connections between alcohol and other drug use within the family and homelessness be conducted focusing on contemporary prevention and early intervention options including assertive outreach; and
- Recommendation 5a: That the ACT Government appoint additional youth outreach workers to support young people in public and community housing tenancies; such support to include living and practical skills development commensurate with independent living.

Also in the report young people noted the following gaps in relation to the refuge system:

- Age specific services – there was agreement that mixing young people who have just become homeless with those young people who have been homeless for a long time isn't a good idea, and that the needs of 12 – 14 year olds are vastly different to those of an 18 year old. An exception that was noted relates to siblings wishing to remain together;
- Separate services for young men and young women especially for victims of domestic violence;
- Crisis services that met demand of high needs young people (i.e. mental health, AOD);

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<sup>7</sup> Telling it like it is: Listening to Young People about Youth Homelessness in the ACT and the services that Support them, the Youth Coalition of the ACT, 2004



- A crisis service for Aboriginal young people; and
- Services that accept couples, young people with siblings, young parents, and are accessible to young people who identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender.

#### **Recommendation 11**

That the ACT Government review the recommendations of the 'Telling It Like Is Report', and address any key gaps in the service system that still exist.

#### **Differing Needs**

Young people in the ACT who are at risk of, or who are, experiencing homelessness and housing issues require a multitude of interventions, based on their relative need and the time and environmental context of the problem. It is very difficult to discuss specific interventions for specific young people at any given stage, as their needs are fluid and not predetermined.

Some consideration needs to be given to unique sub groups of young people, without being prescriptive or exclusive. Issues of developmental stages of adolescents should be considered when providing support to a wide age range of young people. These considerations may be particularly important if services are providing supported accommodation, and have a mix of ages and genders. Some young people of differing backgrounds and personal histories may form better engagement with services that have a specific focus. While interventions should be based on considering the whole needs of a client on an individual basis, there is still room for specialised support programs targeted at particular needs. This may include, but is not limited: to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, newly arrived or refugee status young people, young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bi sexual, transgender or intersex, young people who suffered significant trauma, or those with mental health and/ or alcohol and other drug use issues requiring therapeutic interventions, or those with past or present care and protection orders.

There are too many specific programs to list here, which are run to support target groups of young people, be that based on gender, race, locality, or care and protection backgrounds. Instead, it is better, perhaps, to first look at the range of responses available, and to measure those against a spectrum of support.

#### **Recommendation 12**

That services working to support young people are resourced to provide specialist support to a variety of vulnerable young people.

#### **Key Principals of a Spectrum of Support**

The following is an excerpt from the April 2010 edition of Parity, published by Council to Homeless Persons, entitled '*We Need a 'Spectrum' of Housing and Support for All Young People at Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness*', By Michael Coffey, Co-Chair National Youth Coalition for Housing.

"The proposition here is simple. For each young person at risk of or experiencing homelessness, the system won't work if the required access to any of elements of the spectrum is missing.

The elements (in no order of priority) are:

### *Prevention*

This is often left out of the larger picture, but this is the broader work of Government agencies, peaks and service providers to address the structural causes of youth homelessness. In our use of the term here, it is this 'structural' characteristic which distinguishes it from the 'individualised' characteristic of early intervention.

### *Early Intervention*

This is the works of service providers who work specifically and individually with children and young people at risk of homelessness to 'turn off the tap'. There is a need for new programs in this area to address the more invisible groups of young people such as couch surfers.

### *Specialist Youth Homelessness Services*

A range of service providers who provide short to long term 'onsite' assessment and casework/management support in a combination of housing and support. These services also provide multiple elements of the spectrum and a co-ordination (with mainstream support, reconnection and housing) and advocacy role to support the young person's transition out of homelessness.

### *Mainstream Support*

By this we mean all the other services, which work towards either prevention, early intervention or support during and after periods of homelessness.

### *Step-up Housing*

We used this tentatively with new words to describe this as either semi-supported or transitional housing. Step-up describes the housing (with support) that sits in between intensive support and independence.

### *Independent Housing (sustainable)*

This is what we previously called 'exit housing' or 'sustainable tenancies' for young people. We need to see much more of the stimulus housing going to young people.

### *Reconnection (sustainable)*

Programs that work to reconnect young people with employment, family/community, education and good health and wellbeing beyond the initial period of homelessness.

There are various models and services that relate to each of these elements. Some models, such as Foyers, have numerous applications throughout the spectrum.

### *Bringing it all Together*

The sector has always said that someone needs to be in a position to coordinate and case-manage this spectrum. In the current set up, the specialist youth homelessness service is ideally placed to provide oversight and co-ordination to mix and match the elements of the spectrum as required at the stages of early intervention, crisis and intensive support, restoration, the transition to independence and maintaining

tenancies.”

Some young people respond well to group programs that aim to foster positive communications styles and peer interactions. Others require more one to one work, under an assertive outreach model, that has the scope to build and maintain rapport over an extended time, before a first ‘episode’ of support is provided. However, all young people require quality, flexible services.

### **Recommendation 13**

That the service system approach youth homelessness with a spectrum of support model that recognises the unique needs of each young person.

### **Strengths Based**

A strengths based approach focuses on the belief that people have skills and personal resources for their own empowerment. It is a way of moving beyond a deficits defining focus, and looks at what is working well, and aims to support the adaptive growth of people’s resilience.

Some common components include:

- People are active participants in the helping process (empowerment);
- All people have strengths, often untapped or unrecognised;
- Strengths foster motivation for growth; and
- Strengths are/ can be internal and environmental<sup>8</sup>.

#### **3.2.1 How can a wide range of practise frameworks be best integrated into the service system?**

As discussed in previous sections, there are numerous models and systems integration structures, formal and informal, which currently exist in the sector. The Youth Coalition believes that it is better to approach this question by outlining the fundamental principles we would like to see in any move to better integrate a wide range of practice frameworks.

These fundamental principles are:

- Clearly defined roles;
- Professional trust and respect for expertise between government and non government agencies, and between allied services;
- Common assessment and referral frameworks, that have been designed by local services, and that carry formal agreements of use;
- Resourced networks and collaboration mechanisms, that provide opportunities for differing levels of service management to discuss common issues;
- A comprehensive workforce development strategy, that addresses a fluid workforce profile, and provides resources for new, or new to agency, staff to better understand and build relationships with the broader service system;
- Support for peak bodies to assist in collaborative practice models for the sector; and
- Flexibility in service response, to assist in providing targeted services, and to enhance meaningful referrals, that is appropriate to the client’s current and anticipated needs.

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<sup>8</sup> The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice. Longman: White Plains, NY, Dennis Saleebey, 1992.

Consultations for this submission also highlighted a need for Government to be involved with any proposed service integration discussion, both as active partners in supporting young people, and as a conduit for positive communication between agencies seeking to work in more collaborative ways.

**Recommendation 14**

That the service system practice framework is underpinned by:

- Clearly defined roles;
- Professional trust and respect;
- Common assessment frameworks;
- Resourced networks and collaboration mechanisms;
- A comprehensive workforce development strategy;
- Support for peak bodies; and
- Flexibility in service response.

**Wrap Around Model**

The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) defines wrap around services as:

“...Services that constitute an area of speciality that does not warrant a separate service in a particular context, but instead ‘wraps around’ and sensitises mainstream services to the issues relating to the area of speciality. ‘Wrap-around services’ also involve multiple service providers collaborating around and with a client, to plan and respond to their individual needs and aspirations<sup>9</sup>.”

The Youth Coalition believes that this approach, by definition, requires the active partnership of multiple government departments beyond the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, with departments such as ACT Health, the Chief Minister’s Department, Territory and Municipal Services and Justice and Community Safety, to be successful. It is vital that non-government agencies also adopt this model formally at a senior level, to inform the daily practice and on the ground service delivery. We are looking forward to the upcoming work of the ACT Accord on Housing and Homelessness, which will see many departments and agencies working together.

**Recommendation 15**

That any steps to addressing youth homelessness involve a whole of government, whole of community, wrap around approach.

**Government Facilitation**

The Youth Coalition believes that Government has an important role to play in maximising the benefits of better service system integration. Recent moves to encourage partnerships and collaboration in the broader youth sector have included clear statements in tender offers that only such partnered approaches will be favourably looked upon.

Whilst the Youth Coalition supports this move to better collaboration, we believe that government can assist this process to be a more meaningful and creative exercise, by providing support and advice as to best practice in partnerships, as well as offering implementation advice that is informed by an understanding of resource limitations and long term strategic directions.

<sup>9</sup>FaHCSIA website, [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np\\_time\\_for\\_action/national\\_plan/Pages/terminology.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/national_plan/Pages/terminology.aspx), accessed January 2011.

The Youth Coalition anticipates that this process could also offer practical assistance, such as supporting the development of standardised Memorandum Of Understanding forms, supporting processes to do with role definition and offering practical advice on issues such as financial risk sharing, partnered reporting obligations, and methods to minimise administration costs. This support from the ACT government could come as a locally developed and published resource pack, or with the allocation of the resources of a branch of DHCS.

There is a concern amongst the sector that services may be required to expand on existing service delivery requirements with a commensurate increase in resources or funding. It is important that government departments responsible for the service system reforms have a clear and consistent communication policy, and consider the capacity of the sectors current resources when developing new models.

**Recommendation 16**

That the ACT Government provides positive leadership, implementation advice, resources and support to community sector agencies seeking to work collaboratively.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

With such major shifts in policy, funding streams and transitions to new service systems that the homelessness and housing sector will be facing in the near future, the Youth Coalition believes it is important for the government to resource and embed mechanisms for cyclical review and evaluation. This process can assist in many ways to minimize disruptions to service users, keep track of potential difficulties faced by service providers and maximize the positive opportunities presented from better service system integration. The current YFSP Framework does not have specific resources clearly allocated for this process, which places a greater burden on the community sector to maintain clear communication pathways with allied services and the government funding bodies.

**Recommendation 17**

That ACT Government commit to resourcing ongoing evaluation and review mechanisms for the service system, in order to provide best practice models for the ACT.

**3.2.2 What standards need to be developed and implemented?**

Professional standards and quality assurance systems are already built into the fabric of the current service system. Procedures such as Raising the Standard, and regular reporting to funding bodies, alongside commitments to best practice and evidence based service programs, such as the ACT Homelessness Charter, ensure that housing service providers are delivering quality support to young people in the ACT.

Consultations undertaken by the Youth Coalition for this submission revealed the following common themes regarding this question:

- Standards need to be meaningful and measurable, and have the common agreement of a diverse range of services that may have differing philosophical approaches;
- Standards must be transferable across a wide range of allied services. Many of the larger community service providers in the ACT have multiple targeted,

programs or streams, such as aged care, disability support, and mental health. It would benefit both clients and services referring to allied services to have a common set of standards, and for expectations of quality of service to be met. Further to that, agencies that are currently adopting voluntary accreditation, or implementing quality management systems should not be disadvantaged by a new model that fails to recognise this work;

- Smaller service providers will require support and resources to transition to any new model of reporting, if the standards are to be built in to funding agreements;
- As part of a comprehensive workforce development plan, service providers should have access to resources and support to assist in reaching and maintaining standards. This requires a broad, long term and strategic approach to issues such as staff retention, up skilling and professional recognition for working in an accredited or standard compliant agency; and
- It is important that any standards that are developed in the ACT address not only issues of rights based client participation, confidentiality and access to quality service, but also engages service providers on issues such as governance, internal procedures, and collaboration.

Much of the above is reflected in the recent submissions from the community sector to the FaHCSIA discussion paper *'A National quality framework to support quality services for people experiencing homelessness'<sup>10</sup>*.

#### **Recommendation 18**

That the ACT Government develops any standards, in a timely fashion, in line with best practice, as developed nationally.

### **3.3 What approaches to early intervention and prevention work best for young people at different ages and at different stages of homelessness?**

As discussed in previous sections of this submission, it would be impractical to provide a comprehensive list of early intervention and prevention programs in this format; however, some key principals can be ascertained.

#### **Prevention**

Addressing the root cause of homelessness is perhaps beyond the scope of this submission, and the subsequent reforms that will occur in the ACT at the completion of this research, however, this is a clear policy goal, both locally and nationally, and a common desire in the community and the service sector.

Preventing young people becoming homeless is a task that requires a whole of government, non government and community approach, that seeks to address issues such as social inequality, poverty, mental health, alcohol and other drug use, and care and protection concerns. It is a process that requires responses from a variety of community services and government agencies, before a young person enters the youth housing and homelessness service system.

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<sup>10</sup>FaHCSIA website, [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np\\_time\\_for\\_action/national\\_plan/Pages/terminology.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/national_plan/Pages/terminology.aspx), accessed January 2011.

## Early intervention

An important issue to consider is early identification of issues and support needs of young people. By providing resources to support such initiatives as the Re-engaging Youth Leadership Group, (a collaborative approach involving the ACT Department of Education and Training Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services and the Youth Coalition of the ACT which aims to support young people disengaged from education, and create community partnerships in local regions), and the DHCS convened Children and Young People Sharing Responsibility Steering Committee, the government and non- government sector can work together to identify gaps in service delivery and find solutions to assist in wrap around services.

There are nearly 10,000 homeless school students in Australia aged between 12 and 18 years old<sup>11</sup>. In the Federal Government's White Paper on Homelessness the government commits to the following:

- Provide additional specialist support to children including brokerage funds to assist them to return to home and school.<sup>12</sup>
- Deliver additional services for up to 9,000 12–18 year olds at risk of homelessness to remain connected with their families, where it is safe and appropriate, as well as access to education, training and employment.<sup>13</sup>

In consultations for this submission, community sector workers discussed the effectiveness of early intervention programs and services. Workers described an early intervention approach that had the resources and flexibility to respond quickly to issues as being highly effective, however, it was clearly stated that services are often unable to, or unaware of, the sometimes fast changing needs of young people in crisis situations, and therefore are not always able to intervene in the timely or comprehensive manner that the problem may require.

### **Recommendation 19**

That the ACT Government clearly articulates the difference between prevention and early intervention responses to youth homelessness.

### **Recommendation 20**

That the ACT Government resource the development of an early intervention framework that encompass the broader the children, youth, family support and education sectors.

## **3.4 What is the best way of providing a crisis intervention response, where should it be located, what should it look like and how long should it last?**

### **Crisis support**

As discussed previously, the recurring themes presented during consultations were that young people need a quick, well-resourced and broad range of supports in times of crisis. Some young people will only request support in peak times of stress and need, and therefore its is vital that youth support services are promoted, and relationships developed, before the flash point, to assist when that request is made.

<sup>11</sup> MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2008 Youth Homelessness in Australia 2006, Counting the Homeless Project 2006 page 13.

<sup>12</sup> The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, Dec 2008 (pp. 52, 56).

<sup>13</sup> The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, Dec 2008 (pp. 30, 36)

This can include services such as drop in, or youth centres, where young people are able to develop rapport with workers over time, and are made aware of where to seek help from, when and if needed. This relationship can be damaged if a young person seeks assistance, and the service is unable to provide timely support.

The issues surrounding homelessness often translate to a young person moving quickly to and from different locations, for instance, couch surfing, or relying on friends and family to provide short stays or infrequent support. Outreach services can and do play an integral part in times of crisis support, and should be resourced to offer out of office, and if appropriate, out of hours support.

Youth workers consulted for this submission also discussed a 'window of opportunity' when offering support to young people in crisis, that can be elusive to pinpoint. This window of opportunity seems to be presented to workers anywhere along the spectrum of escalation to de-escalation of the crisis, and offers the best chance to engage with the young person and develop support strategies that either assist in preventing the problems peaking, or increase the likelihood of the problem being positively resolved.

It was noted that a 'pattern of active holding' was sometimes the best support to a young person at the peak of the perceived crisis. This can relate to maintaining an engagement with waiting lists for preferred support services, such as refuge accommodation or mental health workers, but also to the young person's ability to actively and willingly engage with goal setting and behavioural change.

It takes a highly skilled and well-resourced workforce to be able to offer the comprehensive and varying levels of support outlined above. It was noted that most services do not currently feel that they have the capacity to respond to multiple crisis interventions in such a fashion, and yet conversely, that many of their clients will have more than one episode of crisis support, often concurrently.

Some workers discussed the concept of a 'flying crisis team' that was made up of multi-disciplinary workers, including staff skilled and experienced in conflict resolution and/or mediation, that could work intensively with a young person at the time of greatest need, and or provide 'active holding' support that will assist engagement with services at a more appropriate time, or while awaiting services availability.

#### **Recommendation 21**

That Assertive Outreach models of support for young people in the ACT be further developed and properly resourced.

#### **Crisis Accommodation**

It is apparent from both the Literature review for this discussion paper, and the consultations undertaken by the Youth Coalition, that the current models of crisis or refuge housing have issues requiring new thinking. Services in the ACT reflect the findings of the 'Road Home' Homelessness White Paper that for many young people, multiple transitions can adversely affect support structures, service interactions, and outcomes.

However, services also report that with the current housing environment, combined with limited staff and support resources, and alternative accommodation options, there is still a clear need for young people to have access to crisis/short term accommodation.



This may have particular relevance to the findings of the literature review that discussed a high proportion of young people reporting their need for housing support stemmed from family/relationship problems, and raises the issue of 'time out' or respite style support, that could provide a temporary space in which to involve external community sector support.

Current crisis accommodation support is also needed for young people escaping violence or unsafe environments, who are already living independently, for example, or have arrived in the ACT from another jurisdiction.

For the crisis accommodation support system to undergo reforms, however, requires a broader system of collaboration and structure to be resourced. If refuge spaces, already at full capacity, are to aim to reduce transitions, other alternatives and supports need to be in place.

#### **Recommendation 22**

That the current level of crisis accommodation beds is maintained until the new service system is implemented, and then only reduced as need is reduced.

### **3.5 Is there a role for family conferencing and mediation services at the point of crisis? If so, how would it work? If not, why not?**

Consultations revealed that youth sector workers have a strong commitment to working with young people and their families, and place a high value on the process of family conferencing and mediation, if appropriate. However, it is clear that this process is a highly complex one.

#### **Skills and Resources**

Whilst most youth services are keen to engage with family, it is recognised that mediation, conflict resolution and allied services require highly skilled and experienced workers, due to many complicating factors. While there are common principals, such as open communication and positive use of language, that covers broader youth work, many family dynamics are complex and can be difficult to navigate in a time of perceived crisis. There is a need for a dedicated youth homelessness focused service to provide mediation services. This service would need to be available to young people and their families across the territory, and have provision to respond quickly, and/or provide 'active holding'. While many services do provide similar support models, they are often tasked with unworkable caseloads, leading to long waiting lists, or insufficient integration with specialist housing services.

#### **Recommendation 23**

That the service system include a professional, targeted youth mediation/resolution program that is resourced to work specifically with young people experiencing housing issues, with dedicated and formal links to youth housing services, and capacity to work with young people moving in and out of need.

### **Young People**

The discussion paper, when outlining the spectrum of support models, illustrates a 'Family Focused' and 'Community Focused' response to pathways of support. While its true that supporting a young person to stay, or return, to a family home is a desired and commendable goal in many cases, there will always be situations that require a move towards supported or independent living. These situations may not be

as clear-cut as neglect or abuse in the family home that prompts young people and services to seek an exit into support services.

It is acknowledged that a young person who is experiencing neglect and abuse should not be living in an unsafe environment, and the discussion paper and subsequent consultations have made this clear. However, considering the high number of unsubstantiated reports that ACT Care and Protection receives each year, it is obvious that many families require differing levels of support that community services are struggling to provide. Young people may desire to live independently of their families for a range of issues that may not be resolved with mediation. This can include, but is not limited to: overcrowding, financial burdens on parents, young people of parents with mental health or substance use issues, geographical barriers to access to services or employment and inter-sibling conflict.

These issues can not all be positively resolved with mediation services only, instead needing a medium to high level of long term support that can offer multiple solutions that respond to the young person and their families immediate needs, as well as developing strategies that will prevent the situation deteriorating once the peak crisis has been addressed. This could include models of crisis and/or short term accommodation discussed in the previous question.

### **3.6 What are the best accommodation options that assist young people to stabilise and prepare for independent living?**

Every accommodation option should assist young people to stabilise and prepare them for independent living, and assist in providing living skills programs.

The Youth Coalition believes that more work needs to be done to assist young people to adjust to the practical housing issues faced in the ACT. The Youth Coalition is currently implementing a Living Skills Tool Kit Pilot Project, which is an action research based project aimed at developing a sustainable method of embedding living skills development for young people in the youth housing and homelessness, and broader youth services sector in the ACT.

#### **Recommendation 24**

That the recommendations from the Living Skills Tool Kit Pilot Project be resourced and acted upon.

#### **3.6.1 How would/could a Housing First approach for young people work?**

The Youth Coalition has concerns that a Housing First model may not result in positive outcomes for young people, unless adequately and sustainably resourced. Young people may not have the intrapersonal or practical living skills necessary to live independently when first seeking housing support.

“Perhaps the Housing First approach is less suitable for addressing certain groups in the homeless population such as the young homeless. The average age of clients in the North American studies tended towards people in their late 30s and early 40s. People who become homeless in their teens or early twenties may have fewer personal resources with which to cope in their own tenancy; for example, their social networks may be less resilient while life skills such as financial management are less developed<sup>14</sup>.”

<sup>14</sup> Part C \_ Think Pieces 297, Quilgars et al., 2008, [http://www.rethink.org/how we can help/our services/housing.html](http://www.rethink.org/how_we_can_help/our_services/housing.html) Accessed 15 February 2011.

The Youth Coalition believe that further research and evaluation needs to be undertaken on this issue.

We further believe that all accommodation options should offer young people the opportunities to develop group or shared house living skills, as the reality of the ACT rental market dictates that many young people will not be able to source or afford single dwelling housing in the private market. These skills could be incorporated into a comprehensive living skills program.

**Recommendation 25**

That Housing First as an approach for young people be supported by evidence base that indicates improved outcomes for young people.

**3.7 How can the reliance on public housing as the only housing outcome for young people be shifted to include the private rental market as a viable alternative? What types of services are needed to assist young people access and maintain tenancies in the private rental market?**

It is vital that young people in the ACT are supported to enter the private rental market, and that those tenancies are supported in some way to avoid negative experiences.

The Youth Coalition believes that there is an opportunity for government, the community sector, and the private sector, to develop an understanding of the issues faced by young people seeking to rent in the private market, and to address barriers that may be presented. This could be a project of considerable importance to all stakeholders, and provide positive opportunities for a whole of Government, and whole of community, approach to youth homelessness.

In brief, the Youth Coalition envisions this as an ongoing and important response to youth homelessness in the ACT, and one that may involve discussions with the private rental market to develop a program that would assist young people to evidence their readiness and capacity to hold private rental tenancies.

**Recommendation 26**

That future city planning for the ACT include whole of government strategies to support the development of affordable housing for young people in areas with the appropriate infrastructure and support.

**Recommendation 27**

That a working group be established and resourced to explore an accreditation process for young people to engage with, that has recognised links to the private rental market, and seeks to address existing barriers to young people entering the private rental market.

## 4. Conclusion

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The Youth Coalition thanks the ACT Department of Disability, Housing, and Community Services for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper, *Modernising Youth Housing and Homelessness Services in the ACT*.

The rethink and assessment of how we deliver services to support young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in the ACT affords us the chance to construct an overall service delivery framework that recognises and encompasses the following key ideas;

- That service integration does not solve sector resource and capacity issues;
- That a properly coordinated response to homelessness that clearly identifies the role of mainstream agencies (such as the police, schools etc) as well as specialist services (i.e. homelessness, youth support, mental health, alcohol and other drug services) in providing a spectrum of support to young people is required;
- That there is currently examples of good practice, skills and knowledge within the youth housing and homelessness, and broader youth sectors in the ACT which can be utilised to inform future direction.
- That we need to not only design services using an evidence base, but also contribute to the ongoing development and understanding of service system effectiveness through good evaluation of both individual programs and overall response; and,
- Young people need to be key partners, and informants in design, implementation, and evaluation of the service system.

The Youth Coalition and stakeholders look forward to further opportunity to identify and advise ACT Government of emerging issues, areas in need of additional resources and collaboratively develop social policy and service system response to youth homelessness in the ACT.