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To the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support;

On behalf of the Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition), I would like to thank the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services for the opportunity to input into the *Maximizing Potential: Improving life transitions for young people in care* discussion paper (the Paper).

About the 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.

Response to the Paper

The Youth Coalition reviewed the Paper, and commends DHCS for seeking discussion regarding the very important and complex issue of young people moving from out of home care orders into adult life.

The Youth Coalition, in formulating our response to the Paper, consulted widely with key stakeholders in the out of home care arena. Targeted consultations included meetings with Marymead, Richmond Fellowship ACT, CREATE Foundation, the Grandparents and Kinship Carers association, and the ACT Council of Social Services.

This process was augmented by feedback from other youth support services, and was formed in part by the Youth coalitions recent review of our Policy Platform: *Young People in Care*, which is an attachment to this submission.

Further to this, the Youth Coalition reviewed research papers and reports such as: 'Conceptualisation of social and emotional wellbeing for children and young people and policy implications', ARACY, 2010; 'Youth Justice: Criminal Trajectories Australian Institute of Criminology' 2003; and The Territory's Children: Ensuring Safety and Quality Care for Children and Young People: Report on the Audit and Case Review, 2004.

The Youth Coalition has chosen to respond to selected questions for discussion as outlined in the summary of the Paper.

Overarching Comments

For the purposes of this submission, we will refer to young people 'transitioning out of care', 'leaving care plans' and the concept of 'after care'. However, all stakeholders raised concerns regarding this language.

Consultations showed that many service agencies and kinship carers have found that when a young person is faced with the concept of transitioning out of care, they can experience feelings of distress. Service agencies report that the terms transitioning out of care, leaving care, and after care plans can create a sense of impending abandonment, and have a destabilising effect, as it may imply that young people have to leave their carers/foster family, or in other ways, be cut off from support.

Suggested language in response to this included 'moving towards independence', which can be seen as a more strengths based approach.

Recommendation 1.

The Youth Coalition recommends that Department of Disability, Housing and Community Service engage with out of home care providers and the community sector to develop a strengths based terminology to describe young people who have been on care order and are transitioning to independence.

The Youth Coalition believes that the proposed 'service model' has many positive aspects. However, we believe that the Paper is lacking in detail as to the resourcing of the new models, and will require strong legislative change to ensure better outcomes for young people transitioning out of care. As it currently stands, the model appears to more of a framework.

What service models or components of service provision will achieve the best outcomes for this group of young people?

When considering what components of service provision would achieve the best outcomes for young people, it is important to recognise the complexity faced by service agencies, carers and kinship carers when supporting a young person in this context.

As one respondent described the role:

'Carers do their utmost to prepare young people moving from care to be financially independent, to have reached an adequate level of training or education, are emotionally stable, (some level of reconnection, where appropriate), with sometimes disparate families and have resilience for what lies in store for the future'.

Any 'service model' that seeks to support young people in this content needs to recognise the multiple barriers and difficulties faced to achieve the best outcomes. Support for young people and their identified carers are needed in many domains, including education, employment, accesses to health services, living skills and housing.

Recommendation 2.

The Youth Coalition recommends that any proposed 'service model' contains:

- *A strong commitment to wrap around services;*
- *A sincere commitment to a whole of government approach, that can respond to the multiple barriers faced by young people in care.*

Proposed 'service models' should also have a strong commitment to engage with young people to have input in the services and support structures they will be accessing. It is vital that young people feel valued and listened to as active participants in their own lives, and have meaningful opportunities to express their wants and needs to carers, DHCS and other service agencies.

Recommendation 3.

The Youth Coalition recommends that the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services incorporate clear guidelines for service agencies to:

- *Involve young people in any decision making;*
- *Ensure that staff are trained to incorporate feedback from young people, where appropriate, in a meaningful manner;*
- *And that any proposed 'service model' have a clearly stated mechanism for feedback and complaints.*

What support services do young people transitioning from care require in the planning preparation stage?

Clear indicators and benchmarks are needed when a young person is preparing to transition from care. Leaving care plans should be considered living documents, that aim to engage a young person and all identified stakeholders as early as possible in defining goals and barriers. Simply having a leaving care plan does not offer any measurement or means to define progress. Pathways to secure housing, employment/education, and well-defined support structures are vital to the preparation stage. Many young people exit care with out having the necessary living skills, and may require ongoing support of varying levels.

Recommendation 4.

The Youth Coalition recommends that all young people in care have a leaving care plan, and that:

- *Leaving care/transitioning from care plans are developed a minimum of 3 years prior to a young person reaching 18 years old, where appropriate, or at start of orders in other cases;*
- *The leaving care plan involves the young person and appropriate stakeholders, and reflect the young persons needs and wants;*
- *Leaving care plans are used to identify goals and barriers as soon as practically possible;*
- *Leaving care plans have clearly defined benchmarks or indicators of progress with mechanisms for regular review.*

In the Youth Coalition's consultation, educational engagement and attainment was the most frequently cited concern for young people in care. Whilst this submission is focused on transitions and leaving care plans, it is impossible to look at a young person's future plan, without considering their current needs. It is clear from our consultation that much more needs to be done to assist young people in care to have positive engagement in education.

This is a complex issue that requires all stakeholders to work together to achieve better outcomes. Carers and service agencies require much more support to engage with education providers when a young person is seen to be at a risk of disengaging. This support could include increased resources to educational providers, greater access to private tuition, and more support being available from other service agencies, such as Canberra Institute of Technology, or mentoring programs.

It is vital that DHCS, the ACT Department of Education and service agencies work towards higher retention and attainment rates for vulnerable young people.

Recommendation 5.

The Youth Coalition recommends that young people in care are supported to maintain engagement in education through:

- Resource allocation to professional development opportunities for education providers to recognise and support young people in care;
- Intensive support during key transition stages, such as moving from primary to high school, high school to collage, and collage to further study/training, or transitioning between alternative or non mainstream education settings;
- Resourcing carers, kinship carers and service agencies to provide support

Young people in out of home care, and young adults who have been in care, are currently overrepresented in the criminal justice system. This contact can have many negative effects on a young person's life, both immediately and over time. Research on juvenile offending has shown that young people facing courts and being sentenced/remanded to custodial settings can have poor outcomes later in life, including an increased chance of recidivism. We believe that young people in care in the ACT require more early-in-the-life-of-the-problem intervention programs, aimed at addressing underlying causes of criminal behaviour. Any proposed 'service model' should have resources for intensively providing support and assistance to young people and their carers in the case of criminal offending, especially in cases involving long-term remand or a custodial sentence.

Recommendation 6.

The Youth Coalition recommends that any proposed service model provide resources for intensive support to young people in care who are facing criminal matters.

What support services do young people transitioning from care require in the transition and after care phase of the model?

Overwhelmingly, the Youth Coalition consultations identified that access to secure and appropriate housing was the major practical concern for carers and service agencies alike. While we acknowledge that ACT Housing is working towards addressing this issue, stable, appropriate and affordable housing is a real and difficult barrier to young people successfully transitioning from care.

The high cost of private rental markets and the potential disadvantages in education and employment skills combine to create solid barriers for young people transitioning from care. We also recognise that for many young people, simply providing accommodation does not address pathways to homelessness.

There are many potential cross related issues that can affect a young persons housing status, such as geographical location, transport issues, income, living skills, alcohol and other drug use and mental health. No young person leaving care should be exited to homelessness.

It is important that any proposed 'service model' recognise that young people leaving care may require intensive support during this critical stage of their lives.

Recommendation 7.

The Youth Coalition recommends that young people leaving care be offered intensive support to secure stable, appropriate and affordable housing as a high priority by ACT Housing.

Young people turning 18 are faced with a number of challenges and opportunities. New legal rights and responsibilities are presented, and young people transitioning out of care may lack the required living skills to face these challenges. It is a concern for young people and carers that support ceases to young people and their carers at this arbitrary age. All carers and service agencies who we consulted stated that many young people needs varying levels of support well beyond their 18 birthday. One respondent stated '*...the reality is that the majority of these young people...have had lots of disruptions in their care, many different carers, and many stops and starts so they haven't had a continuum up to this point...to presume that they will be able to jump onboard is unrealistic*'.

Carers often describe providing support far beyond the age of 18. While the support need may not always be intensive, or long term, the fact is many young people require flexible and responsive episodes of support as they transition to independent living and adulthood, and may not have the family or social support structures outside of service providers or foster carers.

Any proposed 'service model' needs to have the capacity and resources to offer support on as needs basis to young people, and their carers beyond the age of 18. The Youth Coalition supports the notion of this support being accessible to young people and their carers. It is often considered 'normal' for any young person who leaves home for the first time to require support from friends and family.

It is also not unusual for a young adult to move back and forth from independent living, however, young people transitioning out of care may not have these informal or family bonds, and yet they are expected to become independent at 18 despite obvious barriers.

Recommendation 8.

The Youth Coalition recommends that after care support is provided to young people transitioning out of care, and their carers, until the age 25, or as needed until the age of 25.

Can you suggest any innovative ways to provide services for this group of young people?

Three major concerns were raised during the consultations for this submission:

- Educational attainment and connectedness;
- Support for young people and their careers beyond the age of 18;
- The need for assertive and flexible outreach models.

Flexible outreach models were raised regarding young people in out of home care who have recently reached 16, and may be disengaging from educational providers and mainstream supports.

Recommendation 9.

The Youth Coalition recommends that any proposed 'service model' have sustainable resources allocated to support assertive outreach models of support to young people who are not engaged with mainstream services.

The Youth Coalition again thanks the Department of Disability, Housing, and Community Services for the opportunity to provide feedback on *Maximizing Potential: Improving life transitions for young people in care*. We would welcome the opportunity to work with DHCS to support the youth sector to have input into the further development of the service framework and models.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 6247 3540 or at director@youthcoalition.net if you wish to discuss this letter further.

Sincerely,

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