

The Need for Youth Homelessness Services in Outer-suburban and Rural Areas: Through the Eyes of a Young Person with Lived Experience

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Hayden is 21 years old and has been staying at the Hope Street Youth and Family Services youth refuge in Brunswick West since December 2018. He left his home in Melton, in Melbourne's outer west region, after suffering unbearable issues in the family home. Hayden is not the only one in his family to have experienced homelessness, with his older brother also having sought support from the homelessness service sector.

Hayden knew where to go for help when he became homeless. 'I had heard of Hope Street through my brother and my friends in Melton, and I knew that was where I could go for help in my local community,' he says.

Hope Street's First Response Youth Mobile Outreach Service team greeted Hayden when he arrived seeking support, and immediately started looking for crisis accommodation so that Hayden wouldn't have to sleep rough on the streets. It only took the team a couple of days to find a bed, but it was some 45 kilometres away in Brunswick West, in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne in Hope Street's youth refuge. Melton, an outer suburban growth corridor with high rates of youth homelessness and disadvantage, currently has no refuge for young people seeking crisis accommodation, and whilst Hope Street is in the process of building one, it will not be complete until later this year. With no other alternatives, young people experiencing homelessness in Melton are forced to leave their home community in search of crisis accommodation in the city or inner suburbs.

Whilst grateful to have been given a safe place to call home in his time of crisis, Hayden said moving from Melton to Brunswick was scary. 'There's a very different atmosphere

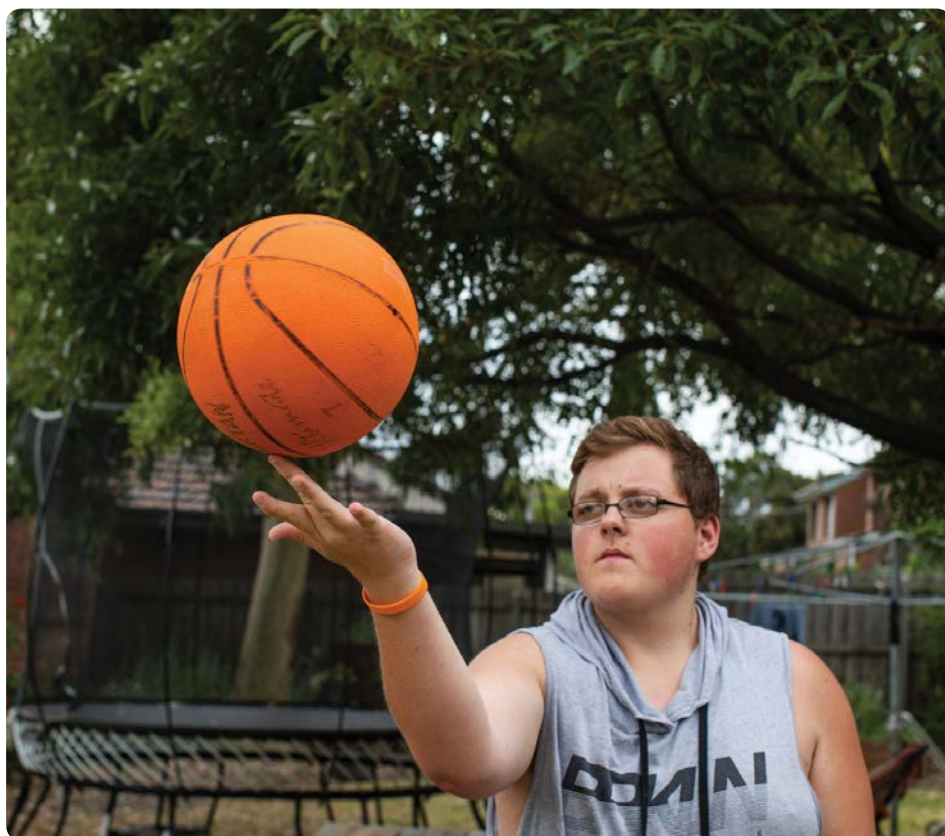
over in Brunswick, it's a little more posh compared to the west. Traffic is different, the trams, public transport, the streets and shops — it's all new and different, very busy and quite overwhelming,' he said.

Having grown up in Melton, he was not familiar with the tram system and had always relied on buses to get around. 'I had to learn an entirely new public transport system. I had to learn how to cross the road and watch out for trams, and you have to be so quick with getting across the road. Luckily I made a friend in the refuge who was also new to it all so we sort of figured it out together,' he said.

In moving from Melton to Brunswick, a 45-minute car drive or a two-and-a-half hour public transport journey away, Hayden became isolated from his community which, he feels, had

a negative impact on his mental health. 'It's really hard to be away from community, friends and family. Personally, it's affecting me mentally because at the end of the day I'm isolated up here. It's hard for my friends and my girlfriend to come and visit me cos it takes them so long to get here and back before they've even spent any time with me, and they're studying or working. It's really starting to affect me mentally cause I'm really missing everyone and I'm so isolated,' he said.

'If I could have received crisis accommodation in Melton, my friends could have been visiting me, pushing me to get out of the house and do things and fix my life. All my friends can do now is message me — they can't rock up to the house and pop in and get me out of the house to have lunch and that,' he said.





He also said his sense of safety has been affected by the move. *'I felt safer in Melton cos I knew everyone and I knew how to get around and where everything was. I felt safe there no matter what time of the day or night it was cause if I saw any trouble I would know how to weave my way out of it,'* he said.

Hayden is currently waiting to hear whether he has been successful in his application for a one-bedroom property that is a part of the Hope Street in Melton program — a youth Foyer like model. When asked how he would feel if he got the news that his application has been approved, he said he would be delighted. *'If I got*

that news I would have the biggest sigh of relief to be honest and I'd be so emotional, cause all the thoughts going through my mind would just disappear. I'd be feeling so happy and relieved that I'm going home, back to the place where I belong, back to my friends. I would probably be so happy that I'd probably cry, to be honest. It's where I need to be,' he said.

And if he doesn't get this spot? Hayden plans to keep waiting patiently and hope that another spot comes up soon. *'I'm not the only one on the list of people who need housing in Melton. There are other people who need it just as much as I do. If I don't get it then*

it just means that someone else needed it more than I did,' he said.

We asked why Hayden feels it's important for young people who are experiencing homelessness to be able to find crisis accommodation in their own area or community. *'When you give a young person the chance to stay in their own community and find the care they need there, you are helping them physically and also mentally. You are keeping them in their own community, a place they feel safe in, a place where they are known, a place where their friends are. If they have to go somewhere else, they are so isolated. When you don't see the people you love every day, you start to get mentally affected and it starts to mentally scar you and you start to feel alone. In the situation that we're in, you don't want to ever feel alone. You need everyone there with you, it's good to stay in your own community,'* he replied.

Hayden is one of the many young people experiencing homelessness who has been forced to choose between sleeping rough on the streets in his own community in outer-suburbia, or moving closer in to the city to access crisis accommodation. Hope Street Youth and Family services is on a mission to build youth refuges that will provide crisis accommodation in growth corridors around Melbourne so that young people like Hayden can access the support they need without having to leave their community.

Hope Street is thankful that the Victorian Government has released the operational funding for the First Response Youth Service to commence supporting vulnerable young people and young families experiencing homelessness. The release of the operational funding also enables Hope Street to secure the rental of two properties to be used for crisis accommodation for young people and young families experiencing homelessness, while the Hope Street First Response Youth Refuge in Melton is under construction, due for completion later this year.

* NB: two weeks after this article was written, Hayden heard the much-welcomed news that he will be moving back to Melton to reside in the Hope Street First Response refuge (interim model in rented properties) in late April. He is delighted, to say the least.