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Housing is a Human Right — Federal Government Reform is Needed

Protected by legislation, youth homelessness services need adequately allotted social housing funding for young people

There have been great strides taken towards advocating for children and young people experiencing homelessness across the sector. Yet the fact remains, Australia needs legislative reform backed up with a major injection of resources to address this extensive crisis. Young people and young families bear the brunt of the housing crisis. The shared vision and policy direction outlined in the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan quite frankly fails young people and their children by not even acknowledging them — that is leaving them out. This means that resources will not be equitably distributed for young people and young families across social and public housing or in the National Plan for service delivery models. This is not sustainable for

Australian society or for the crisis level child and youth homelessness rates.

It is time that children and young people were recognised as being separate to adults. The National Plan needs to be enhanced by the youth homelessness sector's advocacy and expertise. As a leader in youth specialist service development and delivery, the Hope Street model can be applied across Australia for truly sustainable and equitable outcomes and serve the obligations outlined by the High Court's ruling on the right to access to adequate housing, among other important rights, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a ratified international rights treaty which Australia must uphold with a critical urgency.

This real change for young people and their dependants can only be achieved through a dedicated *National Youth and Child Homelessness and Affordable Housing Strategy* prioritised as legislation in the Australian Parliament with consultation from experts (including specialist youth homelessness organisations such as Hope Street) in the field working on service models that are sustainable and human rights based.

Australian children and young people are at great risk of being left out of the forthcoming 10-year National Plan. A national framework specific to child and youth homeless experience is needed to address the crisis. The Hope Street model is evidence-informed, intersectional, sustainable and therapeutic in design, reflecting the diverse cultural community of Australia. It is tailored to a young person and their children's specific needs for priority areas that uphold their human rights and give them a brighter future, allowing a strong return on investment.

The current structure of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan fails to provide service delivery resources. It fails to articulate sustainable service delivery models, scaling up of youth specialist programs and a children and youth centred framework. There is lack of child and youth specific rights embedded into legislation to uphold UN treaties that are binding to Australia.

In the words of Brian Burdekin, AO:

'Following my National Inquiry on Homeless Children I appealed to the Australian High Court to change Australian law to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The High Court ruled that the Australian Government must respect the rights of all children set out in that important Convention — including the right to adequate housing. Furthermore, we got the High Court to rule that the Australian Government and all government officials were obliged to respect the rights of all children set out in the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' including: the right to adequate housing; the right to special protection; the right to protection from abuse and exploitation; the right to education. Equally binding, these rights serve as a foundation for holistic and integrated support for children and young people that experience homelessness. Disgracefully, the Australian Government introduced legislation to nullify the High Court's decision in the following year, in spite of our international treaty obligations.'

Unfortunately, the current Federal Government's National Housing and Homelessness Plan still leaves children and young people out.

It is ignoring the multidisciplinary approach required to respond to homelessness early and the evidence that homelessness truly impacts on children and young people differently to adults and is continuing to ignore the obligations of the international treaty on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Australia must uphold its obligations to the human rights of children and young people and be an ambitious leader in responding to the injustice of child and youth homelessness. Wrap-around supports set children and young people up for a far brighter future and is an investment in the social infrastructure of the nation — in its children and young people.

Without federal reform to provide a national framework for child and youth homelessness services with allocated social and public housing and resources to the sector, state and territory governments are unable to keep up with the financial investment required to match increasing local demand on services for children and young people experiencing homelessness and to uphold their human rights.

So, what could an integrated seamless response — one that recognises the complexity and reality of children's lives encompassing education, health, care and safety needs, cultural and community connection — look like? Hope Street can demonstrate the evidence-based approach for early intervention, prevention and sustainable youth focused supported housing options for young people and their children.

A national framework for young people to prevent homelessness has a significant beneficial return for communities. The Australian Government understands access to secure and affordable housing has significant social, economic, community and personal benefits, as discussed in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. However, an allocation of resources and opportunities for collaboration for youth specific approaches are not outlined, which means the youth homelessness service sector needs a national vision to broaden recognition of the issue and how to confront it. The need for reform on a national level for children and youth



Photo courtesy of Hope Street

homelessness is arguably a focus for the youth sector and community services, but this youth-specific reform needs to be a priority area for the Australian Government, advocates and the wider community.

YACVic CEO Mary Nega said on the issue, *'the [Federal] Government's 'adjustment for inflation' to income support by less than one dollar a day, which came into effect on 20 March 2023, is token and unrealistic. If they're serious about a commitment to equitable housing access, the government must raise the rate to give lower income young people a foot in the door.'*

Youth specific approaches to homelessness begin with raising the rate of Youth Allowance and Job Seeker at least to the Australian Poverty Line (\$489 per week) and subject to CPI as is applied to the Aged Pension. Affordable housing in the private rental market is out of reach for young people. A competitive rental market means young people are exposed to homelessness at higher rates. Simply put, this lack of affordable housing options means

there are ongoing structural barriers to a stable pathway out of homelessness. More young people and young families need fast-tracked access to public housing and subsidised social housing. With homelessness rates at crisis levels, social housing reform needs youth measurement targets to ensure this cohort is provided for, without discrimination or perpetuating entrenched poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. Secure and affordable access to public and social housing needs to be equitable and fair, which would mean allocating a percentage of housing that is reflective of the minimum percentage of recorded young people and children who are homeless, protected by legislative reform.

The Hope Street model is deliverable and sustainable and is nation-leading in its holistic approach. Allocation of resources for youth specific responses to homelessness must, as part of the service model, meet young people where they are at for early intervention and prevention of long-term homelessness. Hope Street provides therapeutically designed



Photo courtesy of Hope Street

facilities for crisis intervention geared towards stable and sustainable housing outcomes with a guaranteed return on investment as an upstream method. The 'continuum model' at Hope Street is nation-leading for its ability to enhance a young person's skills development in a therapeutic environment geared towards sustainability.

This 'continuum model' has a service delivery plan to break the cycle of homelessness into four sections: immediate; emergency; stable and sustainable housing. This early intervention is vital to accessing essential community services such as bulk-billing primary healthcare options and Centrelink services, as well as supported crisis accommodation.

This is underpinned by more short stay housing options to intervene in the cycles of homelessness such as rough sleeping, couch surfing and living in overcrowded dwellings. If a young person is still at risk of homelessness, they can access stable medium-term accommodation for

18 to 24 months, focusing on goal setting and personal development to achieve their full potential. These therapeutically designed independent units offer one or two bedrooms for young people and their families as a stable foundation for their goals. For sustainable housing, which is long term, access to resources for skills development prevents further episodes of homelessness. Currently, the demand for these services outstrips the resources available, which can only be addressed if there is youth specific reform to fund service delivery methods.

Service delivery to meet each stage and to end the cycles of disadvantage early works as young people are taught valuable skills to achieve their goals in five priority areas, all whilst under the guidance of youth specialist case management. These five-priority goal areas for skills development, tailored to the young person, are centred in: health and wellbeing; life skills for maintaining a tenancy arrangement, such as

cooking, education, employment and training opportunities; and cultural and community connections.

Hope Street response services recognise the integrated, wrap-around supports that young people and their children need to go from surviving to thriving. Building skills for young people through goal setting in priority areas in a therapeutic setting supports them to be empowered with hope for their future. This level of tailored service delivery is essential to securing outcomes and preventing young people from having to be homeless long term. It is a foundation of hope and human rights.

Wrap-around service delivery in a holistic setting is exactly what young people are entitled to when they need community support. To make this sustainable for young people we need to invest in their skills with youth specific approaches to prevent the reoccurrence of homelessness across their lifetime. Allowing a young person and their family to grow with hope for their future, community connection and potential for living independently, accessing education, employment and training, is vital for thriving communities across Australia.

Experiencing homelessness as a child and as a young person has a fundamental impact on a person's development. Early intervention and prevention allow young people to access key milestones for equity and as a foundation for their human rights to be met, and which benefits the whole society..

Achieving national reform on housing is vital to the future of Australia. It is the opportunity to prevent cycles of homelessness from recurring and to halt the crippling impact of long-term homelessness on individuals, communities, governments and economy. This not only changes the lives of young people but also shapes their experience in the community. Across Australia, young people and children are bearing the brunt of the housing crisis and are being left behind by the current National Plan for Housing and Homelessness.

The return on investing in social capital and services (for example, housing, income, health) specifically for vulnerable young Australians would be true social justice.