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Young people leaving care & their experience of Homelessness

Preliminary findings from Queensland University of Technology Research study in Qld & Victoria

Response to the Queensland Commission of Child Protection Inquiry Discussion Paper – February 2013

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This submission responds to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (QCPCI) discussion paper in respect of leaving care. It draws on, but is not limited to, the unpublished interim report of a study currently being conducted by Dr Phil Crane and colleagues in the School of Public Health and Social Work at Queensland University of Technology.

The QUT study into leaving care and homelessness

The Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness *The Road Home* identified young adults who were making the transition from care as a group likely to experience periods of homelessness (FaHCSIA, 2008). Poor life transitions, including moving out of the child protection system or statutory care, are identified as one of the main pathways into homelessness (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Johnson et al., 2010; Maunders et al., 1999). Support at such transition points can have a preventative effect (Johnson et al., 2010; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Wade & Dixon, 2006), and can be considered as opportunities for early and/ or timely intervention in respect of homelessness.

The Homelessness and Leaving Care Project is a research study funded by the Federal Government (FaHCSIA) via Swinburne University of Technology's *Institute for Social Research*. The Swinburne University of Technology group of researchers led by Assoc. Professor David Mackenzie, is one of four funded research collaborations funded as part of the National Homelessness Research Agenda 2009-2013. Dr Phil Crane from the School of Public health and Social Work, QUT is a member of this group. The QUT study has been developed in partnership with the CREATE Foundation, the peak body representing the voices of children and young people in out-of-home care.

Whilst there is some empirical data on young adults' post care experiences of homelessness there is a need to develop a better understanding of how support to young people in care and post-care is conceptualised and made available so as to prevent homelessness occurring in the years following leaving care (Heerde et al, 2012). Thus this project focuses on examining: What is useful to prevent and respond to young people's post care homelessness?

The study is small in size and limited to two states, Queensland and Victoria. These states have been selected as they reflect different approaches to post-care support and so allow for a level of comparative analysis to be undertaken. Recommendations will be made regarding subsequent research needed in to develop more effective practice approaches which achieve preventive and early intervention outcomes. This will include investigation of the establishment of action research strategies to explore critical areas for practice development.

The research design is qualitative and includes semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 young adults who have been in care and experienced or been at risk of homelessness, conducted twice over a 4 month period (the first round of interviews have been completed); focus groups in both

states (largely completed), interviews with professionals and staff at services working with young care leavers, and an analysis of post care support available to the young people for both states. Ethics approval was gained early in November 2012 from the QUT Research Ethics Unit (approval number 1200000504).

Preliminary Findings

The first wave of data collection for the 1-1 semi-structured interviews occurred during November and December 2012. Twenty young adults were interviewed, 10 in both Queensland (Brisbane and Toowoomba region) and Victoria.

Some of the key themes identified from the Queensland sample of young adults interviewed in our first wave of interviews were:

- **Care experience**: A negative experience of being in "care", with the majority having experienced numerous placements (including foster placements, kinship and residential), where many did not see their CSO often, and where they felt that their views were not heard/taken into consideration. Some had experienced "harm", whilst being in the care of the department (e.g. being assaulted by carer, sexually abuse, not being given money);

- **Transition planning:** The majority indicated that their CSO/ CSO's did not actively plan for their transition from care. In some cases they were homeless on their 18 Birthday with one young person reporting they were told "you're no longer our problem". There was no planning on building independent life skills, such as learning to drive. There was generally no planning for their accommodation beyond the age of 18yrs, and specifically no Department of Housing application or referral. In some instances the young people indicated that the CSO created the "TFC Plan" but did not consider their views or aspirations. For example one young person indicated they wanted to go to University but was discouraged as the CSO said it was not a realistic goal. Despite this the young person has subsequently enrolled in University. No referrals to mental health services/therapeutic support/ 'sexual/family planning' once they had turned 18, with some young people saying they had to seek information from "Dr Google" (internet).

- **Experiences of Homelessness:** As expected the young people interviewed had a range of experiences of homelessness, ranging from literal homelessness to a deep sense of not belonging or having a 'home'. The range of risks experienced by this small sample of 20 young people included being required to perform sexual favours to survive on the street or when living with 'older/violent boyfriends', having to steal for food, witnessing other homeless people attack/assault other people, being 'physically assaulted' themselves. A number of the young people indicated they did not get support from homeless shelters because there were no beds or because they did not meet service criteria. Use of drugs and alcohol was cited as a means of numbing the pain/forgetting what was happening.

- **Housing options:** None of young people interviewed had Department of Housing assistance or support/referral. The majority stayed with friends, boyfriends, a share house, boarding house, private rental, or in caravans. Some young people sought help/accommodation from their former foster parents, biological parents, kinship relatives and or moved back with them. It is apparent that the family connections of young adults needs to be understood in

terms of them forming families of destination, which may positively include some people from their family of origin and in care placements.

- **Preventing Homelessness:** All of the young people interviewed indicated the need for services for young people when they leave care until the age of 25yrs, and all felt that 18 years was too young to live independently. All young people stated that the Department needs to ensure there is more effort made and mandatory requirements for transition from care planning, and ensure that long term accommodation has been secured before they exit care. All young people interviewed said they would benefit from youth worker/support worker post care, someone who can help them with finishing studies, learning to drive, getting a job, accessing counselling, and life skills. The need for options for young people who need support if they run away/left placement at younger age (13 years onwards) was also raised as critical by those who had experienced this.

The preliminary findings from our research to date are that:

- Young people's understanding of 'leaving care' often does not match the statutory point of leaving care;
- Young people have a need to access tailored support services which can fulfil the 'role' of a parent in the dynamic and flexible way this generally occurs for other young adults (e.g. providing support and advice on an as needs and as called for basis, moving in and out of adult supported accommodation, supporting connection to education, training, work and community, learning a range of living skills over time often through a mix of informal and formal education eg how to budget, cook, drive and basic 'independent from adults' support life skills). The nature and breadth of such support is consistent with that utilised by early intervention into homelessness services such as in the Commonwealth funded Reconnect program;
- Specific regard needs to be taken during and after leaving care to the building of relationships and networks for young people which build 'family of destination' opportunities, including engagement with the young person's extended family of origin with a view to maximising positive relational opportunities into adulthood as desired by the young person;
- Increased access, prioritisation of, and subsidy for affordable and stable housing options which can shift and be renegotiated as a young person moves through young adulthood. This needs to include access to a range of accommodation and housing options, and higher placement on public housing waiting lists;
- Improved post care information provision to young care leavers about the various entitlements and services they can access;
- Training of service providers to gain a better understanding of the issues facing young care leavers which can render them vulnerable to homelessness, along with strategies for early intervention which prevent homelessness and sustain tenancies.

Responses to the Commissions February 2013 Discussion paper

Q18: To what extent should YP continue to be provided with support on leaving the care system?

The simple answer is this question is to the extent that they need that support for their longer term wellbeing.

If young people transition 'from care', what is it they transition 'to'. The state having assumed a level of responsibility for young people taken into care must necessarily consider, as parents and those acting in parent like relationships with young people do more generally, what is it we hope for those in our care, what responsibilities do we have, and how long does our commitment last.

The construction of young people transitioning *to independence* embedded in the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld) s75(2), and referred to in the Commission's Discussion Paper (February 2013, p.140) is itself problematic and needs revision. Young people experience many forms of transition, with the notion of transition to independence generally referring to economic rather than social aspects of life (though independence from parental authority can also sometimes be in mind). In reality young people develop **new forms of interdependence** and their relationships to key institutions associated with education, the labour market, family and community shift in profound ways. The positioning of state responsibility as ending at 18 years is a system centric and legalistic approach to what is a profoundly socio-cultural multi-faceted and variable process that goes well beyond the 18 years benchmark for gaining a range of 'adult' rights and statuses in contemporary Australia.

Chronological benchmarks, such as at what age support should be provided to, whilst sometimes administratively necessary, should not be a substitute for appreciating and responding to the variability in how young people experience leaving care and the support they need to build wellbeing in their lives. For example the leaving care literature (Johnson et al. 2010) broadly distinguishes between young people who experience 'smooth' and 'volatile' transitions from care. Experiences of homelessness are typical for those who experience volatile transitions but even those with relatively smooth transitions can be at significant risk of homelessness due to more limited resources and supports they often have access to. Our current study reinforces this.

A second issue pertains to the point at which leaving care is understood to occur. Some young people in our study indicated that they thought they had left care when they left their last placement, often into a homeless or transient situation. Notions of young people 'absconding' and 'self placing' are not concepts young people themselves utilise and can be interpreted as consistent with the Department considering the young person is now responsible for their own support. Processes for supporting young people transitioning from care need to appreciate that homelessness for some young people occurs whilst they are in care, and that this requires a more substantial response than currently exists. Such young people need access to appropriate service supports before they formally leave care, some of which may be place. It is common for services supporting young people in care who have exited endorsed placements to notify the Department that the young person has accessed their service but receive little or no response or support from the Department. There is a need for an NGO service to support young people leaving care who fall

into this category. This could be undertaken by the same Reconnect-like post leaving care service that is recommended later in this submission.

In our study the key difference to emerge between the two states where interviewees came from was the support received after leaving care. In Victoria transitional housing for young care leavers, prioritisation on the public housing waiting list, and a formalised funded system of access to an aftercare support service provide some aspects of a systemic approach. By comparison in Queensland there is a less comprehensive approach and less experience of post care support by the young people interviewed.

Q19:In an environment of competing fiscal demands on all government agencies, how can support to young people leaving care be improved?

In our first round of interviews many participants identified that they would benefit from being linked with a youth worker and post care support service, which could assist them with sustaining and changing accommodation, completing their studies, learning to drive, getting a job, relationships, accessing counselling and developing life skills. Timely information, facilitated access to appropriate housing and accommodation, and being linked in to housing services were themes for good or improved practice.

Suggestions on what could prevent young care leavers becoming homeless included:

- More support services for young care leavers until they reached 25 years;
- Increased effort or mandatory requirements for transition from care planning;
- Improved access to public housing and suitable accommodation;
- Improved service response from adult oriented services in addressing issues related to young care leavers including access to education or employment opportunities, addressing mental health and AOD use issues, and financial budget management;
- Improved Centrelink (Department of Human Services) service provision for young adults up to 25 who have left care.

Specific suggestions were also made around being placed earlier on the public housing waiting list (say at age of 15years), being provided with information on getting a bond loan, rent assistance, tenancy laws and rights/responsibilities, maintaining a rental property etc from a housing service, and having access to affordable and safe housing which was close to public transport, services, and in safe neighbourhoods.

More broadly, and as indicated in many of the interviews, a range of issues and challenges co-existed for these young people, interacting in various ways with their capacity to experience stability in their living situation. This included mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and importantly an often rocky path in developing what could be termed a 'family of destination'.

Non-government agencies, and non-profit agencies in particular, are much better placed to respond flexibly and appropriately to the support needs of young adults post-care.

This said at one level the range of types of supports and services that can help young people who have been in care stay out, or get out of homelessness, are not qualitatively different than for other

young people. This territory is well trawled by the youth homelessness research and literature. Of particular resonance with the accounts in this small study is the notion of a continuum of responses from broad prevention, through early intervention to accommodation and sustainable housing options and community engagement.

Funding should be provided for an aftercare state-wide support program, delivered by NGO's, to meet the needs of young care leavers from 18-25 years, which is person-centered and provides support (including supported referrals) across a range of life domains. Whilst itself a cost there would be savings by employing a more community based approach to post care support arising from a reduced need to have planning and associated decisions processed within the Department, and massive savings on downstream costs (as outlined in Section 6.1.2 of the Discussion Paper).

The model of service which seems to have a particularly good fit for supporting young people pre and post care who are vulnerable is that of early intervention youth homelessness practice as articulated in the Commonwealth Reconnect program. The variability of needs presented by young people in our study and other studies suggests a model is needed which is person-centered (not system centered), responsive (not tied up in bureaucratic processes), and flexible (able to respond holistically to various arenas of a young persons life drawing on a wide range of possible support strategies that fit the context of the young person at a particular time). This resonates with the call for an integrated approach by Raman, Inder and Forbes (2005) referred to on p.147 of the Discussion Paper. The Reconnect model is highly regarded, as evidenced by three evaluations (ARTD 1998, Ryan 2003, FaHCSIA 2012) and various other studies since it's inception in 1996 under the first Howard government.

Reconnect-like post-care support services targeting young people during post care planning and post care itself experiences delivered by non-government agencies with adequate funding, would provide a well founded response framework for young people leaving care. Good early intervention youth homeless practice could be easily tailored to those exiting care present, and provide a mechanism for the state to play an appropriate role in the provision of additional effective support until such time as a young person who has been in care can establish themselves and be supported through more generic community mechanisms.

This model is voluntary for young people, responsive to family (broadly defined), and focussed on supporting a young person to build connection with family, stable accommodation/ housing, education, work, and community, in ways that have a preventive effect on future homelessness. In the post-care context it is this type of support that young people say they need access to. Many young people post care are struggling to develop relationships with people and institutions which platform their wellbeing.

A problem currently exists that young people leaving care are not able to have their life status and needs adequately assessed. To this end our study is also interested in how the situation of young people post care might be able to be assessed against key indicators of assets, resources and risks. The development of such a tool or tools for voluntary use would enable a young adult's situation post care to be appreciated and form the basis of more intensive support than otherwise available. Further research and development is needed to develop such tool/s but a great deal is already known about pathways to severe levels of difficulty young people may experience post homelessness such as homelessness, mental health, and/ or AOD use related issues.

Q20: Does Qld have the capacity for NGO sector to provide transition from care planning?

In our study the preliminary findings from the first wave of interviews with young adult's experiences of homelessness and leaving care have highlighted that transition from care planning should be made mandatory and young care leavers should be key and knowing informants in this process. Young people should be explicitly consulted on their particular needs with the plan used as a tool for developing and adapting support strategies to the young person's changing situation. This dynamic approach to planning needs to be against a backdrop where Government accepts its fiscal responsibility to resource the support needs of young people exiting and post care. Such support is largely best provided by non-statutory NGO's which are better positioned institutionally to build and sustain trusting relationships with young people exiting and post care.

The capacity of NGO's to deliver this (with appropriate funding) is demonstrated by the success of the Commonwealth Reconnect program. Critical however is a shift in the culture of program governance to one which fosters ongoing inquiry into how to achieve good outcomes as an ongoing component of practice around complex needs, rather than Government assessing for outcomes in terms of compliance and over-specified output measures. The Reconnect program achieved its sustained positive reputation and outcomes through incorporating action research into the program fabric, so that services are encouraged to explore what it would take to gain positive outcomes for young people in their particular context, with geographic, cultural and service system variations meaning 'no one size fits all'. Rather the combination of good practice principles, including supporting ongoing action research within each participating service, and a toolbox of possible strategies which includes supported referrals, case work, negotiation with and on behalf of young people with housing providers, and tenancy support. Various forms of research and evaluation provide complimentary evidence for formative and summative purposes. NGO service providers need the contract environment established by departments to allow and encourage such good practice. Important components of this include:

- Requiring agencies accepting funding to undertake **ongoing inquiry** (action learning and action research) into good practice as an embedded process accountability, specified in funding guidelines and service contracts. FaHCSIA developed resources on using participatory action research are designed support such a cultural shift in how the drive to outcomes is achieved (eg see Crane and O'Regan 2010), along with hosting regular good practice forums, which are supported but not controlled by government. Such resources can be accessed at http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/housing-support/publications-articles/homelessness-youth
- Program management which 'rides the program horse with soft hands' is needed. In other words use of a stronger notion of **partnering and two way communication** between Department-NGO funded services than often apparent in a narrowly understood contract management approach. Contract management needs to be undertaken in such a way as to create the conditions for NGO's to develop approaches to practice that deal with high levels of client and system complexity in ways that drive to positive outcomes (eg greater life situation stability and enhanced resilience);

- A clear articulation of **good practice principles and a practice framework** for support for young adults post care which is based on good quality evidence from both formal research studies and context specific understandings and experiences.

The question is not so much about capacity but having a well constructed meta-program logic which means that energy is expended in ways which enhance the resilience and wellbeing of young people post leaving care. Efficiency in this sense is a product of good program design to create overall coherence and accountability, together with the endorsement and training to nuance and adapt practice which flows from such design into what is productive in particular geographic and cultural contexts, and with particular young people.

Recommendations

1. Funding should be provided for an **aftercare state-wide support program**, delivered by NGO's, to meet the needs of young care leavers from 18-25 years, which is person-centered and provides support (including supported referrals) across a range of life domains.

2. Such a program should reinforce and support an **ongoing inquiry approach** into the development of good practice in the provision of post care support.

3. Development of a **good practice principles and a practice framework** for support for young adults post care which is based on evidence from both formal research studies and context specific understandings and experiences.

4. **Improved access to housing** in particular public/ social housing, transitional housing (as in Victoria) and other appropriate accommodation.

5. Queensland Government to develop **a whole of government strategy for adult oriented services to be responsive** to young adults who have left care.

6. **Training** is provided to service providers (both Government and NGO) on better understanding issues facing young people leaving care and factors leading to homelessness.

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