

Donna Bennett

CEO, Hope Street Youth and Family Services



Sixteen year old Jason grew up in an environment of family violence. From 12 Jason's mother would offer him alcohol and drugs. At 13 he began spending nights on the street and in abandoned houses. At 14 he was kicked out of home permanently.

The Hope Street in Melton Program gave Jason the first safe stable housing he had ever experienced. Through counselling and case management he has learnt life skills, healthy eating and focussed on addressing his mental health issues. Eventually Jason was able to settle into finding employment and training and begin an apprenticeship.

In a recent issue of *Parity*, Arthur Papakotsias, CEO of Neami National, wrote 'If you are asking someone else to show hope, optimism and to challenge themselves then the least they can expect is for you do the same'.¹

Jason's resilience and growth and Arthur's challenge have framed my thoughts around what I see as crisis and hope in youth homelessness in Victoria.

A System In Crisis

Despite innovative solutions that have helped Jason and others like him, the homelessness and housing sectors have gone backwards over the last couple of decades. Successive government policy has disadvantaged and locked out vulnerable young people from accessing other models of housing — leading to a system in crisis.

I am concerned that current models of housing are creating barriers perpetuating young people's homelessness.

Transitional Housing

In the '80s and '90s there were Office of Housing properties dedicated for young people with support provided by SAAP funded workers — these were Youth Housing Programs. These programs were dismantled, or consumed via 'amalgamations' in the late 1990s and the properties were placed within a new model named Transitional Housing Programs (THMs). Over the past 5 to 10 years there has been a noticeable decline in the number of young people who have been able to access THM housing due to the severe lack of public and community housing options, preventing the necessary through-put required to make this model effective.

Only four per cent of Hope Street clients in our crisis accommodation programs were accommodated in Transitional Housing during 2013/2014. That is just four singles and one couple out of 152 young people.

Public Housing

'Public housing is intended to provide a safety net for those Victorians unable to afford or access the private housing market at a particular time in

*their lives.'*² In response to the huge demand for public (affordable) housing, successive governments have changed the eligibility criteria which have now become restrictive to the point that most young people who experience homelessness are not able to access public (affordable) housing and are cascading through the 'safety net'.

Out of the same 152 young people only four (2.5 per cent) successfully secured public housing. Young people who are homeless, in crisis and in the homelessness crisis accommodation system face waiting periods for up to and in excess of 15 years in some areas.

It is no surprise the situation of public housing in Victoria was described by the Victorian Auditor General, in his report on Access to Public Housing as 'critical' and he noted that the 'long-term provision of this vital public service is at risk'.³

Private Rental

We have all read the newspaper articles regularly reporting the increased cost of housing including private rental pushing more and more people to the outer suburbs for a more affordable home. Now imagine being on the lowest form of income, facing high levels of discrimination, having no rental history and no-one to provide a reference, not being able to speak English, being under 25 years of age with a mental illness/condition, having no family support, being disengaged from school and local community ... the picture is clear, complex and extremely distressing for young people who live it.

Only a small proportion of young people are able to access private

rental and to do this they need to have one or more of the following:

- full/part time employment
- shared private rental
- access to specialist youth support services
- non discriminating estate agent/ landlord
- social and family supports

Most importantly they need access to the full Youth Private Rental Brokerage, an initiative of the National Partnership on Homelessness.

17 per cent (27) of young people from our crisis accommodation programs secured private rental.

Housing Associations

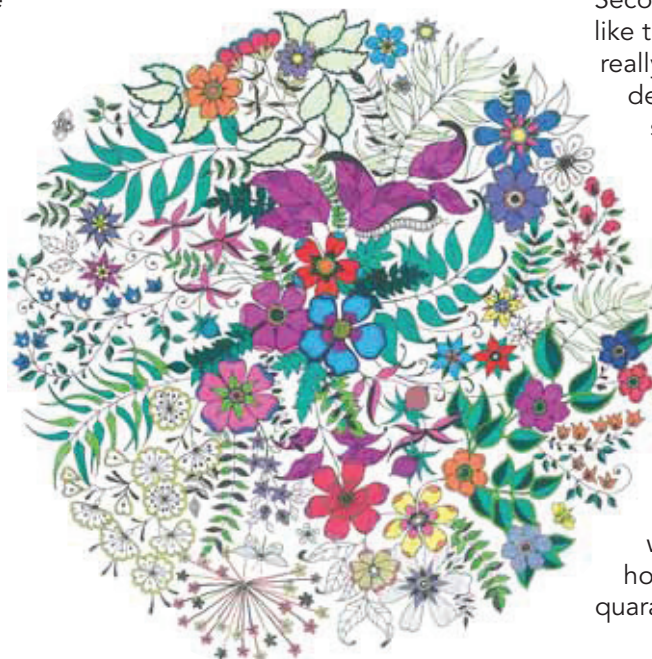
In the last 10 to 20 years we have seen a burgeoning of housing associations and other community housing providers. These are portrayed by social policy as the future for social housing.⁴ There is a strong expectation that Community Housing Providers will cater for most people in the community who are unable to access Office of Housing properties or affordable private rental. With only one per cent of young people from our crisis accommodation programs accessing community housing, young people are being denied access to this model of tenancy. Rents are too high for those receiving the Youth Homelessness Allowance. The full allowance is more than 40 per cent below the Henderson Poverty Line.

Impact on Young People

What does all this mean for young people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless? Research consistently identifies that young people who do not have safe, stable accommodation /housing are more likely to remain homeless for extended periods, remain unemployed, disengaged from school, use substances and alcohol, remain disconnected from family and community, have poor health outcomes and continue to circulate within the homelessness and allied service systems long-term.

Hope Street's Response

Hope Street has been providing specialist youth homelessness focused services to young people for over 30 years. We operate a range of programs including supported crisis accommodation; after hours crisis response; youth foyer like models in two growth corridors; specialist counselling; outreach case management. We are in partnership with Melbourne Health and with the Royal District Nursing Service further enhancing our specialist interventions with young people.



*'Mandala' by Kathy
Hope Street Youth and Family Services*

Young people who access our services receive an individually designed wrap around response that includes immediate, short-term and long-term goals. Our approaches are centred on early intervention and prevention and focus on all aspects of each young person's life. Young people determine and drive the achievement of their goals. I have seen hundreds of young people blossom and make significant meaningful changes in their lives. Like Jason our specialist interventions enable young people to learn life skills, build confidence, address their health needs, re-engage with school, attain employment and sustain housing. These life changing outcomes occur with the support of allied service systems as well as the wider community.

The optimum achievement is young people independent of the Homelessness Service System.

Have a look at to Hope Street article *Stabilising more than blood sugar: Effective use of sector partnerships and collaboration*, in this edition of *Parity* for more information.

Where is the Hope?

Firstly, I see hope in the resilience of young people, like Jason, who show their capacity to grow and change and contribute to society.

Secondly, I can see that foyer models like that operated by Hope Street really work; providing individually designed wrap-around services to support young people to address emotional and health issues, continue their education, build positive relationships and learn to become successful tenants.

Thirdly, we have a new State Government in Victoria; there are opportunities to be pro-active and take a longer term approach to youth homelessness. Early intervention will only work if there is more housing and sufficient tenancies are quarantined for young people.

Fourthly, we can build on what we already have in place — I implore all homelessness and housing services to identify barriers for young people and look at creative ways to remove these.

Finally, the Federal Government has the opportunity to continue and extend the reach of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness. This is a significant responsibility in ending youth homelessness.

Endnotes

1. *Parity*, February 2014, Volume 27 Issue 1, Innovation in Mental Health and Homelessness, Council to Homeless Persons.
2. *Pathways to Fair and Sustainable Social Housing System, Public Consultation Discussion Paper*, State Government of Victoria, April 2014.
3. *ibid.*
4. *Social Housing — A Discussion Paper on the Options for Improving the Supply of Quality Housing*, April 2012, Department Human Services, Victoria