

The Need for More Purpose-designed Specialist Youth Refuges in Growth Corridors

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More purpose-designed specialist youth refuges, such as the First Response Youth Refuges operated by Hope Street Youth and Family Services, are required to meet the supported crisis accommodation needs of young people and young families in Melbourne's growth corridors and across the state. Currently, Victorian youth refuges provide just 127 beds for the 6,000 young people without a home.¹ The only alternatives to government-funded crisis beds are low-cost private accommodation and rooming houses, which are often sub-standard, unsafe and perpetuate the vulnerability and trauma experienced by young people.²

Young people require localised, specialist youth refuges to meet their supported crisis accommodation needs within their home communities.³ This enables them to remain connected with their community, education and employment, which mitigates further negative outcomes from their experience with homelessness. Young people should not have to choose between relocating to youth refuges far from their homes and communities; sleeping in boarding houses often in shared and inappropriate spaces with adults; or sleeping rough in their community.

Young people tell us they want to remain within their communities when accessing crisis accommodation. Relocating elsewhere to access an available bed causes stress related to leaving their friends and extended family behind, having to quit education and/or employment, and having to navigate the nuances of an unfamiliar location. These stresses are on top of the trauma already experienced due to homelessness and the preceding

home situations, most often involving domestic and family violence.⁴

'There's a very different atmosphere over there, it's a little more posh compared to my home town — it's all new and different, very busy and quite overwhelming. 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. It was hard for my friends and my girlfriend to come and visit me because it would take them so long on public transport before they'd even spent any time with me. It really starting to affect me mentally cos I was missing everyone and I was just so isolated.'

— 21-year old Hope Street client from Melton

'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.'

— 21-year-old Hope Street client from Melton

'I have children in this area and this is my home, but there were no beds available for me when I was homeless, so I ended up in

a refuge in Brunswick and then out in a transitional house in Melton. I had to travel for hours on public transport from Melton to Melbourne every day to be able to see my children and to attend my doctors' appointments. I did all this while pregnant and then having a newborn baby too. I was grateful for the support I received, but it would have been amazing to have gotten that support in my home community.'

— 23-year-old Hope Street client from Whittlesea

While the 2019 investment by the Victorian Government into additional youth homelessness 24/7 supported crisis accommodation is a welcome and celebrated addition to the Melbourne central business district (CBD) youth homelessness response, it does little to assist the many young people and young families requiring supported crisis accommodation in growth corridors. Population growth projections predict that the numbers of young people living in growth corridors will continue to rise exponentially, in areas in which youth homelessness, poverty and family violence are already significant challenges that are only expected to exacerbate. The majority of young people experiencing homelessness will come from outlying growth corridors.^{5,6} In order to prevent young people from having to leave their communities and relocate into the CBD to access crisis accommodation, more specialist youth refuges are required in growth corridors.

On the back of Hope Street's 40-year history of running our flagship Youth Refuge in Brunswick, our strategic focus over the past decade has been on working in partnership with local communities in outlying growth corridors to the north and west of



A vision of the completed First Response Youth Refuge, supplied by Brand Architects.

Melbourne to provide place-based specialist youth homelessness programs including supported crisis accommodation. To this end, the Hope Street First Response Youth Service (Youth Refuge and Mobile Outreach Service) launched in the City of Melton in 2018–2019, thanks to funding from the Victorian Government and contributions from business and philanthropic partners, and has thus far supported 434 young people including dependent children.

The Hope Street First Response Youth Service is an innovative new model designed to respond to youth homelessness via a place-based approach in growth corridors around Melbourne. The Service consists of two components — a Youth Refuge providing supported crisis accommodation, and a mobile outreach service available 365 days per year including after hours. Both components provide early intervention first response support to young people aged 16 to 25 years old who are experiencing homelessness.

The First Response Mobile Outreach Service component launched in June 2018 thanks to a major grant from The Ian Potter Foundation and co-funding by Hope Street. An interim First Response Youth Refuge model, providing crisis accommodation for young people in privately rented homes, has been in operation since March 2019, funded by the Victorian Government. Construction of the purpose-built Youth Refuge is currently underway, and due to be completed in mid-2020. The state-of-the-art refuge will consist of eight individual bedrooms for young people with ensuites and a two-bedroom family unit. It will accommodate 100 young people including young families experiencing homelessness each year (with the

Mobile Outreach Service supporting an additional 100 young people per year). The refuge will be a first for the City of Melton and the north-western growth corridor. Over 35 businesses contributed building supplies and goods either fully donated or heavily discounted, representing a savings for Hope Street of over \$500,000. Philanthropic partners also made generous contributions towards the capital costs. While Hope Street has had to postpone the planned launch event due to Covid-19 restrictions on public gatherings, we look forward to finding innovative ways to showcase the Youth Refuge once construction is complete.

In the next one to two years, Hope Street plans to take the First Response Youth Service to the City of Whittlesea north-eastern growth corridor. The service, which will support 200 young people and their children per year, will incorporate construction of a purpose-built 13 bedroom supported crisis accommodation centre (youth refuge) and a 24/7 wrap-around response including a mobile outreach component. The Whittlesea City Council has committed the long-term peppercorn lease arrangement of 2,500 square metres of council-owned land to Hope Street, on which the First Response Youth Service will be built. Increasing local crisis accommodation is a need identified by the Whittlesea Housing and Homelessness Action Group's 10-year housing and homelessness plan, and the Hope Street First Response Youth Service is one of the Whittlesea City Council's identified advocacy priorities for 2020. Hope Street looks forward to securing funding for this initiative in the City of Whittlesea, when the construction of the First Response Youth Refuge in Melton is completed in May 2020.

Beyond the City of Melton and the City of Whittlesea First Response Youth Services, a specialized youth refuge will also be required in other growth corridors that are void of this type of service.

We must move proactively and promptly to provide for the supported crisis accommodation needs of young people who are experiencing homelessness in growth corridors. The impact of Covid-19 will only multiply these needs, and as such the time for investment in these critical services is now. Hope Street looks forward to continuing to collaborate with local communities and our partners across the Government, corporate and philanthropic sectors to develop specialist homelessness services that enable all young people and young families to have a safe place to call home.

This article is based on an extract from Hope Street's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness which is available for download at: <https://www.hopest.org/news/articles/305-victorian-parliamentary-inquiry-into-homelessness-responding-to-youth-homelessness>.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.mcm.org.au/homelessness/accommodation>
2. Northern and Western Homelessness Networks, *A Crisis in Crisis: the appalling state of emergency accommodation in Melbourne's north and west* (<http://www.nwhn.net.au/Crisis-in-Crisis.aspx>)
3. Johnson G, Gronda H and Coutts S 2008, *On the Outside: Pathways in and out of Homelessness*. Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne
4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2012, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2011–2012*
5. <https://forecast.id.com.au/melton>
6. <https://forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea>