

The Need for Youth-specific Private Rental Assistance Programs

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Specialist (youth-specific) place-based private rental support is a viable response that can prevent and divert homelessness in young people and young families. As social housing has become focused on those most vulnerable, and home ownership has become less obtainable, the private rental market has become the primary source of rental housing for most who would qualify for social housing.¹ The private rental market is perilous even for the most capable tenants due to complicated legislation, high competition for lower cost properties, and prohibitive rental costs in comparison with incomes. Vulnerable groups, including young people, face increased risk of tenancy failure.² With targeted specialist support and flexible brokerage, young people can access and sustain private rental accommodation, alleviating the pressure on social housing wait lists and decreasing homelessness.

While the Government's investment in the Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) and PRAP Plus is a welcome addition to the homelessness response, Hope Street Youth and Family Services believes a youth-specific alternative is required to adequately respond to the unique needs of young people aged 18 to 25 years old, and young families, who are seeking to enter and/or sustain private rental accommodation. Such programs are best delivered via place-based responses in those areas experiencing the highest rates of youth homelessness and private rental entry

and sustainability barriers for low income earners — growth corridors to the north and west of Melbourne.

Because PRAP is not youth-specific, young people are competing with the general homeless population for support, and are struggling to access it at the rates they need to. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, on any given day in Victoria in 2019, 15 per cent of all clients seeking support from specialist homelessness services were aged 15 to 25 years old.³ And according to 2016 Census data, nationally, young people aged 12 to 24 years old make up 24 per cent of the homeless population.⁴ And yet, anecdotally we know that in the northern regions of Melbourne the 18- to 25-year-old age bracket makes up only eight percent of PRAP clients.

Young people and their support workers tell us that there are barriers to them accessing the PRAP program. These include the need to have an existing support worker to advocate for their access to the program; the reliance on them reporting to PRAP

access points in order to request above the standard levels of support; the fact that PRAP support is not localised or place-based; and the short-term limit (six to 12 weeks) of case worker support as part of PRAP Plus. Young people who are not yet within the homelessness sector and are therefore without a case worker, those who don't have enough money to access public transport to attend PRAP access point appointments, and those whose mental health further limits their ability to conceptualise and navigate service systems, are falling through the gaps. Young people, particularly those who have experienced trauma and whom lack support systems as a result of their experience with homelessness, need specialist youth-focused support and interventions rather than generalist approaches.

Hope Street's Hope to Home program is a unique, evidence-based model that prevents and diverts homelessness in young people (aged 18 to 25) and young families and provides them with a rental history, enabling access to

other tenancies in the future and reducing the risk of returning to the homelessness service system. It does this via a place-based approach, engaging the support of community stakeholders, including local real estate agents, private landlords, businesses and city councils, in providing more open and inclusive access to private rental properties for young people who are at risk of



Photograph by Shannyn Higgins for Hope Street Youth and Family Services

homelessness, and enabling young people to remain connected to their local communities. Hope Street co-signs the rental agreement with the young person for the first six months, making the lease agreement more attractive to the real estate agent and/or landlord, it also provides young people with a rental history from which to secure future tenancies. Rental subsidies and flexible brokerage are provided for the first four months, with case management and episodic wrap-around support (including an after-hours telephone support response) provided for up to 12 months. Workshops to assist young people acquire tenancy and life skills, and tailored training and employment opportunities from local businesses are also provided.

Hope Street piloted the Hope to Home program in The City of Melton and The City of Whittlesea from January 2016, in partnership with Gandel Philanthropy (Jan 2016–Jul 2018) and The Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation (Jun 2017–Jun 2019). Demonstrated impact and potential for scaling were identified in the 2018 research evaluation report on the program published by Victoria University. With a 0.6 EFT worker and brokerage funds, the pilot housed 72 people, including 45 (from 73 referrals) young people (average age 20 years) and 27 dependent children across 31 tenancies. Most clients were relying on temporary, unsuitable accommodation with friends and family prior to entering the program. Clients were successfully housed in private rental, on average, within five and a half weeks of commencing the program. The tenancies proved sustainable, with 21 tenancies of longer than six months’ duration at the time of data analysis. The range of services provided included assistance finding houses available to rent, assistance with inspections and the application process, liaising with landlords, securing properties (bond and rent), and setting up the house for the occupancy. Many clients benefited from cash brokerage and shopping vouchers, which helped them maintain their tenancies. Overwhelmingly, clients reported that their lack of rental history was a barrier to renting, which the program helped to overcome. Clients reported gaining skills and knowledge



Photograph by Shannyn Higgins for Hope Street Youth and Family Services

that could help them secure and maintain leases in the future. Hope to Home supported clients to pursue employment and education, including assistance with finding opportunities, submitting applications and help with the costs of education.

‘My Hope to Home worker helped me to enrol in a diploma in early childhood care, do a first aid certificate, make a CV and get a job as an assistant with a before and after care program. After a few months of income then she helped me to search for rental properties, know where to look, what budget to look within and all those things. I found a room to rent in a lady’s home and Hope to Home helped me to furnish my room and fill the pantry with food and purchase a fridge cause I have Halal requirements. I felt settled, like I’d finally settled down, my clothes were hung and weren’t in my bags. I could comfortably sleep and wake up and do what I liked whenever I liked. My lifestyle was more organised because I was working and studying — it was my schedule not the schedule of the person whose couch I was crashing on.’

— 20-year old Hope Street client from City of Whittlesea

‘There are a lot of young people out there who don’t have parents who teach them life skills. I never knew how to look for my own house to rent; my mum only ever showed me how to go to SASHS [Salvation Army Social Housing and Support]. That’s what Hope Street gave me. They taught

me how to be a good tenant, to know my rights as a tenant, how to do everything and not to be so worried about everything.’

— 23-year old Hope Street client from City of Melton

The Hope Street Hope to Home model is a proven powerful conduit to transition young people and young families who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness into private rental accommodation and to provide young people with a rental history and one to one tailored support to equip them for future rental tenancies. Hope Street looks to the State Government to fund a scaled up implementation of the Hope to Home program in both the City of Whittlesea and the City of Melton

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. Tually S, Slatter M, Oakley S and Faulkner D 2015, *The role of private rental support programs in housing outcomes for vulnerable Australians*, AHURI Positioning Paper No. 162, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, p. 10.
2. Ibid p. 10.
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services_2018-2019
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011* (ABS 2019).