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## Constantly Evolving

Hope Street Youth and Family Services is proud to co-sponsor the April edition of *Parity*, which explores the changes in the nature and dynamics of youth homelessness, and the sector's response. This edition asks us to reflect on what is and is not working. It implores us to learn from each other within our organisations and across the sector, and to consider what our future innovative approaches might be.

The nature of youth homelessness is never static. It evolves continually in response to societal and economic changes, approaches and priorities. These may include the housing environment (social and private), health and welfare sectors as well as employment and education.

As youth homelessness services, we evolve in response to our changing social, economic and political environments in light of new knowledge and research. Responding to the voices and experiences

of our clients and communities as they identify their needs and/or service gaps is essential to our reflecting, learning and growing as an organisation. We aim to be responsive to the needs of clients and communities. Our driving force is to provide appropriate and relevant services to our client groups and communities by addressing their needs as individuals and within the broader structural environment. Evolution is change; change is improvement; improvement involves providing individuals, groups and communities with what they require to thrive interdependently.

During my 30 years plus as a practitioner, community development worker, manager and CEO in the youth homelessness sector I have observed considerable change. I have also actively participated and contributed many hours of ground work - consultations and planning in collaboration with the wider community to influence change. I have led teams in conceptualising new and improved program models followed by rigorous processes of client and community engagement to secure resources so that the model can come to life and be implemented.

The Hope Street First Response Youth Service Model is a key and most recent example, as is our Boost program operating from our Brunswick West site, and our innovative Hope to Home model in the City of Melton and City of Whittlesea. I feel very privileged to have done this in collaboration with other inspiring people sharing a vision, values and expectations for improved and additional resources to better respond to the needs of young people who do not have a safe place to call home.

Values and expectations are identified through engaging with clients and communities to develop a vision of what is to be achieved. This is done via a process of consultation and research identifying gaps and needs of the client group and communities. These values may be individual, community, organisational or personal and are usually shared. Values are a part of the common thread motivating



people to come together to achieve change. Values such as social justice, empowerment, diversity, equity and respect must be considered.

Values combined with critical thinking and utilising particular approaches guide us in analysing situations and assist in conceptualising other ways of doing. My approaches tend to be feminist, structural and developmental. Youth focused responses to homelessness, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, provide a good example of values and approaches influencing and/or instigating change, as did the creation of services to assist women and children who left violent family relationships.

This form of social action with the community responding to youth homelessness and family violence was then also taken up by

governments. In the early 1980s, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (Commonwealth) was established marking homelessness as a national issue in response to community expectation that resolving homelessness was (and continues to be) the responsibility of government. Hope Street believes that resolving homelessness is the responsibility of all parts of a community: all levels of government; corporate/business; individuals/families; and the philanthropic community.

Starting 40 years ago, Hope Street Youth and Family Services was one of the first to operate youth homelessness services in Victoria. Hope Street's beginnings were from a small group of community members who:

- identified a need (safe supportive accommodation/ places for young people)

- defined their purpose and vision
- collaborated, shared information, knowledge, ideas and strategies
- developed a plan
- took action/implemented the plan
- reflected and reviewed for further changes.

These fundamental steps are a significant part of process for change in order to better provide services aligned to client and community needs. I am proud to have led and shared this journey with Hope Street over the past 20 years and prior to Hope Street with a number of other community based organisations emerging (or born) in response to community need. Listening to, and learning from, the experiences of our clients, communities and each other as participants provides us with valuable information as to what are the strengths, the weaknesses or gaps and solutions to improve and remain relevant in responding effectively within our communities.

The experiences of young people and young families are paramount. The most pressing feedback we receive is that youth homelessness requires a specialist response that is different to that required by the general homeless population. In the absence of youth-specific responses, young people often miss out on resources and fall through the gaps.

Young people must be provided with support when they need it and within their own communities. Hopefully their experience with homelessness can remain short-lived and without long-term consequences. The need for youth-specific and specialist<sup>1</sup> housing and homelessness support services has never been greater; nor has our will to implement positive change for young people.

#### Endnote

1. David MacKenzie, Swinburne University of Technology, Paul Flatau, UWA Centre for Social Impact, Adam Steen, Charles Stuart University, Monica Thielking, *Research Briefing: The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia*, Swinburne University of Technology. April 28, 2016, p. 3.



Photo by Shannyn Higgins for Hope Street Youth and Family Services