

# Chapter 1: The Youth Housing Crisis: Sources and Issues

## The Dual-edged Sword of the 'Homeless in Hotels' Program

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With much relief from the sector, people who were rough sleeping in 2020 were placed into vacant hotels as part of the Victorian Government's response to COVID-19 — the 'Homeless in Hotels' program. More excitingly, in July 2020 the Victorian Government announced an extension of the hotel funding arrangements and the plans to lease large numbers of private rental properties while social housing units were being built.<sup>1</sup> This has, mostly, helped.

The Homeless Youth Dual Diagnosis Initiative (HYDDI) has been written about in *Parity* over a number of years. This past year, the initiative was fortunate to receive news that the program would receive permanent funding instead of the year-to-year funding that had been in place for the previous decade. For those who have not heard of the program, it is a partnership between youth Specialist Homelessness Services and clinical Area Mental Health Services. Our aim is to jointly support the capacity of the

youth Specialist Homelessness Sector to respond to mental health and substance use issues amongst young people, and to provide specialist clinical support to young people who are engaged with the sector.

The housing sector and the Victorian Government's responses to COVID-19 in 2020 provided many young people like Kara the opportunity to experience some housing stability. The simple knowledge that they could remain in one place,

### Kara's Story

'Kara' (not her real name) has had a chequered housing history for most of the two years that she has been engaged with HYDDI. Her complex mental health needs and substance use have precluded her from maintaining placements in refuge settings. She is not eligible for most other housing programs because, as a New Zealand citizen, she is not eligible for unemployment benefits, despite having been living in Australia for more than 10 years and growing up largely in the out-of-home-care sector.

Like many young people experiencing homelessness, her mental health is not 'severe enough' to qualify her for specialist mental health supported accommodation. Her main non-professional 'supports' [and I place that word in quotation marks very deliberately] have been male partners who have been controlling and abusive.

Like others residing in the hotels,<sup>2,3</sup> Kara is terrified of what will happen when the scheme wraps up. Kara herself has noticed an improvement in her mental health which, as much as it may be due to the long-term work she has done with our program, is overwhelmingly attributable to the security she experiences in a stable hotel room.

But this improvement is tempered, because at times the hotels are just as marginal as rooming houses, caravan parks, or squats. Her access to communal cooking facilities and laundry is cut off at a moment's notice. One day, 'the dryers have been set on fire'. Another day, 'the stove is broken'. She is told to use local coin laundries, but without an income, that option seems unlikely. Three people have died in the hotel where she is staying over the past few months. Her neighbour, by suicide. One, by avoidable overdose. The last,

cause unknown. She knew them all. Emergency services are a regular attendee to the hotel to serve warrants, respond to overdoses, or arrest perpetrators. Kara is very articulate about her surroundings: 'This is like rough sleeping, the same people with the same issues, the only difference is that there's a security guard'. Since she is ineligible for income support, Kara has to rely upon casual paid employment. But she cannot safely attend work when her neighbours are knocking on her door all night asking for cigarettes or to use her phone.

Kara is also very articulate about her position: 'I'm not ungrateful for being placed here, I know that it costs money, I'm just scared to be here but I'm scared that if I turn down [an offer] they'll kick me out onto the street'. In two years, this is the most reflective Kara has been — a testament to the improvement she has experienced having been able to stay in one place for months.

because of promised funding arrangements for the hotels, led to improvements in their mental health.

The importance of stable housing in promoting recovery from long-term poor mental health has been recognised by the recent 'Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System'.<sup>4</sup> But this stability has been tempered by the fact that problems that existed on the street have largely moved into the hotels.

We would like to hope that in Kara's case can demonstrate the important role that specialist youth housing

services play being able to provide trauma-informed and immediate connections for people in need. We hope that it can also underlie a call for an expansion of purposefully designed youth refuge accommodation with integrated support options. This would enable people like Kara to move from homelessness into housing while simultaneously addressing trauma-related complex co-occurring mental health and substance use issues.

#### Endnotes

1. Premier of Victoria, 'Homes for Homeless Victorians During Pandemic and Beyond', Premier of Victoria, 2020 <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/homes-homeless-victorians-during-pandemic-and-beyond>>

2. Boseley M, 'Fears for Melbourne's homeless forced out of Covid hotel accommodation', *The Guardian*, 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/02/fears-for-melbournes-homeless-forced-out-of-covid-hotel-accommodation>>
3. Paul, M, 'How do you transition thousands of homeless people out of coronavirus hotel accommodation?', *ABC News*, 2020 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-30/homeless-victorians-in-coronavirus-hotels-told-to-leave/12932650>>
4. State of Victoria 2021, *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Final Report*, State of Victoria, [https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RCVMHS\\_FinalReport\\_Summary\\_PlainLanguage.pdf](https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RCVMHS_FinalReport_Summary_PlainLanguage.pdf)

