

# The Future of Youth Housing: The Need to Integrate a Trauma-Informed Approach

Shelley Karpathakis, Youth Reconciliation Practitioner, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

In 2008 the *PLoS Medicine* editors argued that: '*homelessness is not just a housing problem*'<sup>1</sup> and that there are a variety of factors that contribute to homelessness. At Hope Street Youth and Family Services, our Youth Reconciliation Program works with young people and families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, to prevent young people entering the pathway to long-term or chronic homelessness. Our Youth Reconciliation Program adopts trauma-informed principles as the first step for the prevention step of homelessness and, ultimately, for achieving an exit from homelessness.

This article explores the significance of youth housing and accommodation models incorporating wellbeing as central to the service delivery and practice approaches.

Strengthening a young person's wellbeing is best achieved utilising a trauma-informed approach as a part of the specialist support (integrated with housing and accommodation) to young people. The importance of implementing a trauma-informed approach while focusing on the future of youth housing is crucial to the recovery of young people experiencing homelessness who have also experienced and are

impacted by trauma.<sup>2</sup> When young people enter homelessness, they are likely to have experienced significant trauma, which often leads to situations where they do not have stable, safe, or affordable housing — further impacting their trauma.

Key trauma-informed principles which best support vulnerable young people include:

- **Safety:** has a focus on the clients physical and emotional safety. This is highly critical when young people are entering homelessness. Providing young people with a safe physical



environment and skilled practitioners who provide emotional safety is a key first stage to assisting recovery and engaging with the young person to prevent long-term homelessness.

- **Trustworthiness:**

maximise transparency, make tasks clear, and maintain appropriate boundaries. Once young people feel physically and emotionally safe, they can build trust with those support people and services around them to assist with them considering their next housing goal.

- **Choice:** is integral for clients. It is important for individuals to have their voice heard in the decision making process for their future, along with identifying goals and the steps involved to support their recovery. Young people can share their voice on what they need and what their vision is going forward.

- **Collaboration:** is a partnership where there is open and clear communication, which seeks to strength the young person's self-esteem. Counselling and emotional support provides a space for clients to feel empowered.<sup>3</sup> When people feel empowered, they are more likely to stay motivated to achieve their goals and have the ability to effect positive change in their lives following their negative experiences.

- **Empowerment:** recognise and build upon individual strengths, experiences, and internal personal power. Creating space and opportunity for young people to be able to accept support and use their resilience



while both within and once exiting the housing sector.

In our Youth Reconciliation Program, prevention and exit support is provided in a variety of ways. This includes, without being limited to, supporting young people who are living at home and who are at imminent risk of homelessness; supporting young people to maintain family relationships where they have chosen, or are forced to leave home; assisting young people who have left home to re-establish supportive relationships with family and significant others; providing specialist support and enhancing the capacity of practitioners and agencies in the homelessness service system, to work with young people.

Future housing models targeting young people that incorporate the development of trauma-informed life skills will be a significant step toward preventing chronic homelessness and assisting young people to achieve

their housing, education, employment, social, and wellbeing goals. These include improved communication and emotional management skills; self-management, conflict resolution, and decision-making skills which support young people to have the confidence to manage themselves in various situations and navigate the housing options available for them.

The opportunity to conceptualise, consider, and plan housing and accommodation models of the future specifically for young people and young people with children, is an opportunity for young people to have their wellbeing needs met, which will have life-changing benefits. Prioritisation of wellbeing needs through adoption of trauma-informed principles will enable young people to develop the emotional capacity to exit homelessness

with skills developed, resilience built, connections made, and hopefully to have an empowered approach. Combined with purpose-designed housing that is stable, affordable, sustainable, and safe, young people and young families will be better equipped to continue their developmental progression into the various stages of adulthood as thriving individuals and community participants.

#### Endnotes

1. The PLoS Medicine Editors 2008, 'Homelessness Is Not Just a Housing Problem', *PLoS Medicine*, vol. 5, no. 12: e1000003. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000003> <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000003>
2. Blue Knot <https://www.blueknot.org.au/Workers-Practitioners/For-Health-Professionals/Resources-for-Health-Professionals/Trauma-Informed-Care-and-practice>
3. Unknown, Chapter 7 Empowerment and Change: The Purpose of Counselling, Pearson, [http://www.pearsoned.ca/highered/showcase/shebib/pdf/samplechapter\\_ch07.pdf](http://www.pearsoned.ca/highered/showcase/shebib/pdf/samplechapter_ch07.pdf)