

Life-changing Support Integrated with Stable, Safe, and Low-cost Housing

Hope Street Youth and Family Services

Hope Street in Melton is a specialised program which aims to empower young people through independent living and youth focused case management support for a 12 to 24-month period. The program has key features which allow for young people to progress into positive housing outcomes at the end of their stay:

1. Young people live independently in one of the eight one-bedroom units or two family units (cluster model creating a small youth focused community).
2. Young people are to be engaged in education or employment as one of the key steps along the pathway out of homelessness.
3. Young people are actively engaged with case managers (located on-site, five days a week) utilising strengths based and solutions focused approaches to practice, to holistically assist a young person to achieve their goals while in the program — in-particular securing long-term housing.
4. The living skills team work over the weekend, which includes overnight, providing support and conducting targeted programs with the young tenants.
5. 'The office' is a youth-friendly and welcoming environment, where young people are encouraged to drop by at times suitable to them and

interact with staff, in addition to having one-to-one case management time, getting some grocery items from the pantry, or watching a movie.

The Hope Street in Melton program has been operating for over 10 years. Consistently, these key elements are central to the success of the program and the positive client outcomes achieved; in particular, keeping young people and young families connected in their local community and diverting young people and young families from long-term homelessness.

Models such as the Hope Street in Melton program that are truly youth centred are a must for the planning and provision of future housing for young people. Amy's story below explores the importance of the model and the success when youth centred services are provided.

Amy's Story

Amy was 11 when she first experienced homelessness. Her mother had substance use issues, which resulted in Amy experiencing neglect and living in an unsafe environment. Amy started couchsurfing by staying at her friends' houses before the Department of Health and Human Services organised for Amy to move in with her father at age 14. However, Amy felt unsafe, and living with her father promptly ended.

According to Amy, she felt that the early intervention strategies of Child Protection did not provide safe and supportive accommodation. Due to the instability in Amy's life, most especially surrounding housing — Amy dropped out of school in Year 9. Amy began to use substances and entered

situations that continued to be unsafe due to lack of appropriate guidance, support, and stable and safe housing.

Amy entered a relationship at age 15, becoming pregnant soon thereafter. Her partner was a perpetrator of family violence. Amy said she found the strength to leave the relationship to protect herself and her unborn son. One month before her sixteenth birthday, Amy welcomed her son into the world. During this period, Amy had been living temporarily with her friend and after five months she had to leave this accommodation. Amy and her young son were placed in a hotel by an Anglicare worker.

In November 2018, at the age of 16 and while living in a hotel with her six-month old child, Amy engaged with the Hope Street's First Response in Melton Mobile Outreach Team. The team assisted with a referral to Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP) where Amy stayed for a few nights before she was referred to the Hope Street in Melton Program (a youth 'Foyer-like' model). The following week she was accepted into one of our two-bedroom family units in the Hope Street in Melton program.

Towards the end of Amy's 24 months, she was graduating from year 12. The Hope Street in Melton program was able to provide flexibility and allow Amy and her son to extend their stay so she could focus on her graduation and plans for 2021.

While Amy was assessed as a priority for public housing, there is extremely limited housing stock in the western suburbs. Therefore, upon entry into the

program, the team discussed the option of private rental as an appropriate exit plan for Amy and her son. It is important to provide an honest overview of housing exit options early, so that young people can begin to develop realistic expectations about their housing options; most especially given Office of Housing will not be an outcome for most young people in the area.

The Hope Street in Melton case managers and living skills staff work alongside young adults to draw on their strengths to ensure they develop the skills to live interdependently within their local community. Amy's skills increased significantly over the 24 months however the anxiety of how to afford private rental in the current Melbourne housing market created a lot of fear for Amy. She spent many hours in the program fearing for her future and how she could maintain stable housing for her family.

During Amy's time in the Hope Street in Melton program, the team supported Amy to build her connection to the local community. Amy was linked into parenting support, education, mental health counselling, and a general practitioner. Regular care plan meetings were conducted which Amy was invited to join, As she began to build confidence, Amy took the lead in the meetings. Amy was provided living skills over the weekends and in case management to increase financial literacy, navigate relationships, increase her learners hours, and develop an understanding of her housing options.

It was a challenge for Amy to secure employment that accommodated her schooling and parenting responsibilities. To create additional income, Amy decided to start her own business and provide make up to the local high school students for the debutants and graduations. The team supported Amy to successfully apply for a City of Melton Council grant to assist her to start her business. Unfortunately, before Amy was able to start her business, Australia was struck by COVID-19.

Yet during the pandemic, Amy showed her resilience by quickly adapting to remote learning during year 12. Amy chose to have her child at home and not access care due to safety concerns regarding COVID-19. With the increase in government support payments during the pandemic and the freeze on rents in transition housing, Amy was able to save her additional Centrelink payment.

Amy completed year 12 in 2020 and with her savings felt ready to explore the possibility of Private Rental. In addition to her savings, the case management team were able to apply for Private Rental Brokerage funding and an Office of Housing Bond Loan to support the transition out of the program into independent living. Amy secured a three-bedroom town house in Melton, which was close to public transport and her son's care provider.

The townhouse required cleaning before moving in so Hope Street provided funding to have the carpets cleaned and provided support to clean the property. Amy received furniture from 'Donation Direct' and used her savings to purchase white goods. Amy moved into the property in February and with our support has turned the property into a beautiful home.

Amy has since adopted a kitten.

Amy is proud of her achievements and the home she has been able to create for her son. In 2021, Amy plans to start beauty school and begin her business. To support her education, the team applied for a grant to fund an eyelash extension course. The case management team are also continuing to provide outreach support for up to 12 months. This will aid Amy's transition into private rental and support a successful tenancy. As Amy's confidence and independence grows, the support provided will reduce.

Amy has demonstrated incredible character over the course of her journey prior to and while at Hope Street, displaying her many strengths including resilience.

Amy acknowledges how much she has grown from the 16-year-old that Hope Street met in 2018. Amy thanks the program for the opportunity of safe stable supported housing, she has stated without the opportunity she had at Hope Street, she may have lost care of her son, which would have completely devastated her. Due to Amy's willingness to participate in the various youth-focused opportunities provided by the Hope Street in Melton program, she has been able to thrive and achieve her goals. Amy feels that her and her son have a bright and successful future ahead of them.

Amy's story allows us to understand the importance of specialised models of support for young people who have experienced homelessness. Greater and quicker access to safe, low-cost social housing could have prevented the anxiety and distress experienced by Amy. Anxiety can be extremely debilitating for people, preventing them from being able to make decisions and take action to move forward in their life. Providing stable, long-term housing allows young people to feel less overwhelmed or anxious and instead allows young people to focus on more positive aspects of their life such as education, employment and their children — as Amy has done.

Furthermore, it is always important to remember that key elements that young people seek in private rental, such as being near public transport, shops, medical and childcare are the same features that people needing social housing desire. Location of housing close to social amenities must be a central focus of future housing for young people.

To ensure young people in similar situations to Amy are not consistently re-telling their story in order to obtain grants and funding, future youth housing models should include larger amounts of flexible brokerage. Funding allocated by the homelessness agency will enable responsive access to resources for immediate client outcomes.