

# Donna Bennett

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## The Future of Youth Housing

Hope Street Youth and Family Services (Hope Street) is proud to co-sponsor the April edition of *Parity*. This edition asks the sector to explore the current state of the provision of housing for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It also asks the sector to consider youth housing options, and current and new models designed to meet the housing and support needs of young people. Hope Street articles and client stories included in this edition aim to provide insight into the issues faced by our clients. We are leading the way with best practice, industry-led models that drive our service delivery for young people and young families experiencing homelessness.

My drive and passion for overcoming youth homelessness began in the mid-eighties when I worked in a regional young women's refuge and a statutory residential care centre for children and young people on Child Protection Orders. I was completing my Bachelor of Social Work at the time. My experience has spanned over four decades, with 2021 as the beginning of my fifth decade working

in this area. I have experienced the many changes that have shaped the current youth homelessness sector.

The youth homelessness sector emerged in the late 1970s early 1980s with the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act enshrining the responsibilities of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to this growing social situation. Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Agreements followed, formalising these responsibilities and funding providing the framework for the (wider homelessness) youth homelessness sector.

Over the decades it was a struggle for the youth homelessness sector to adapt to changing federal and state government policies and funding which were woefully inadequate in addressing and preventing youth homelessness. Other areas impacted were the wider homelessness sector, public housing sector, and private housing market. This buffeted the youth homelessness sector significantly. In Victoria, the mandated acquisition of smaller agencies in the 1990s saw many specialist youth refuges and support services merge with community health centres and local governments. Program funding was later handed back when it was understood that youth homelessness services were better aligned in the homelessness sector. The funding environment became extremely competitive. Larger not-for-profit charities achieved considerable growth at the expense of smaller independent agencies. Youth homelessness became a lower priority with reduced funding.

Social and economic factors have also had a profound negative impact resulting in increased

youth homelessness. These factors include: record rates of increased youth homelessness; increasing youth unemployment and under-employment; rapidly growing population; record high private housing costs (purchase and rental); consistent erosion in real terms of Centrelink income and youth wages; significant rises in cost of living; and major underspend in social and affordable housing over the decades. Our program teams and I are constantly challenged with a system in crisis. The private rental market and social housing system are failing our client group. We explore this further in this edition of *Parity*.

In the recent decade, we experienced some investment and change by the Victorian Government and local governments to homelessness. This was an opportunity to begin to address an inadequate and depleted system. Through a local place approach and partnerships, Hope Street has developed innovative models to address systems failing to prevent youth homelessness. In partnership with the Victorian Government, local government, philanthropy, the corporate sector, and local communities, Hope Street developed a number of innovative programs to provide housing and support for young people in crisis. The First Response Youth Service model is our most recent initiative. It incorporates a purpose-designed centre for youth focused supported crisis accommodation and assertive outreach. This is a unique model which was recently opened in the City of Melton. Further detail can be found in this edition of *Parity*.

The First Response Youth Service model is one of a number of Hope Street's truly unique industry-led service delivery models, developed



Photograph taken by Evolution participant Caitlin

over the years. Our *Hope to Home* initiative is another, funded in partnership with philanthropy, Hope Street has continued to operate this evidence-based model that has achieved successful outcomes supporting young people to secure and maintain private rental tenancies, improve their life, and become active citizens within local communities. An important outcome of this initiative is the fact that all clients have sustained their private rental tenancies. With four years of outstanding achievement we continue to look to government to provide recurrent operational funding for this successful model.

Our teams and I have witnessed over many years that when young people are provided with youth-focused support, accommodation and housing at the time they need it and within their own communities, their experience with homelessness can remain just that — short-lived.

Young people's experience does not have to negatively impact on the rest of their lives, instead they can be supported to reach their full potential. We see a future youth homelessness sector supported by a wider community preventative approach to youth homelessness with mandated quotas (percentages) of social housing

that correlate to the percentage of young people statistically recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as homeless.

We see a future in which well-funded specialist support programs are integrated with social housing for sustainable tenancies so young people can thrive. We see a future where government increases their support of evidence-based innovation from smaller-medium specialist youth homelessness organisations such as Hope Street. We see significant strides forward in achieving our vision of a society in which all young people and young families have a safe place to call home.