

Accessing Private Rental Accommodation for Young People Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The private rental market took a big hit during the pandemic. Real estate agents were unable to show people through properties, particularly with the five kilometre travel restriction in place. How could landlords successfully lease or rent properties and young people successfully find somewhere to live? My story sheds an interesting light about how we as a community worked together to forge positive relationships and demonstrate flexibility and agility to continue to assist vulnerable young people and young families reaching out to community and homelessness services desperately needing assistance.

It is a story about the services working even harder together, despite the challenges and obstacles from the pandemic, to continue to gain positive outcomes with clients in an otherwise catastrophic period. The first two years was a period of extended lockdowns, lingering and morphing, as well as restrictions prescribing lifestyles as essential protective measures against COVID-19 were implemented. The young people accessing Hope Street services were not only at significant risk due to being homeless, their risks were exacerbated due to their vulnerability, poverty and social isolation. Hope Street quickly adapted its community collaboration and practice to continue to be responsive to the situations and needs of young people and young families during this unprecedented period.

I am the Community Integration Facilitator in the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program, a specialist youth focused private rental program. I support young people, aged 18 to 25 years old, including young people with children, who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, to secure, sustain and maintain private rental properties in the Whittlesea Local Government Area. Young people must either engage or be willing to engage in education or employment to enter the program. The program model includes: Hope Street co-signing the lease with the young person; providing a financial subsidy for a portion of the young person's rent for four months as the young tenant works toward independently maintaining full rental payments. Each young person identifies key goals and I utilise a youth focused case management framework to support young people to successfully continue in their private rental tenancies, preventing re-entry into homelessness.

Assisting and resourcing young people to secure private rental is always a challenge due to various structural factors. Add an unprecedented pandemic and the challenges escalate. The full brunt of the pandemic on young people was eased with the Victorian Government's swift response providing additional resources to Homelessness Access Points to purchase emergency accommodation. Due to significant shortages of affordable and secure housing and the need to accommodate people immediately, the primary option was to place people in hotels and motels throughout Victoria.

The 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program received a referral for a young woman and her partner who were placed in emergency accommodation in a motel in the Northern Region. The funding allowed for a three-week stay. The young person was informed by the Homelessness Access Point,

that organised and purchased the motel accommodation, that she would be contacted prior to the end of the stay for further assessment.

The young couple were referred to the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program. When conducting the assessment with the couple over the phone, the young woman stated that her and her partner had tested positive to COVID-19. I could hear the young woman's distress on the other end of the phone, 'we don't



have any food or money, we don't have any family or friends that can help us, can you please help? ... we don't know what to do'. The response was 'of course we can assist you'. At that time, everybody seemed to be swimming in uncharted waters as the impact of the pandemic was unfolding, bringing different challenges on top of existing challenges. This required more agile practices to achieve positive solutions, assisting clients to secure private rental and some stability during this turbulent pandemic.

My requests for assistance to community services and groups was met with compassion and people keen to do the best they could to assist. However, repeated responses to my requests were that their services were also stretched with increased demand and lack of volunteers and resources. For example, basic items such as food involved much greater effort to attain. After advocating/pleading with a food aid service, an offer of long-life food with delivery in approximately three days was made. Hours of phone calls later, I received a phone call back from a food aid worker who managed to contact a volunteer who was willing to go to the supermarket and shop for the young family and deliver a package to them that night. I was excited to immediately email a shopping list.

The young family were thrilled to receive the food package within two hours of emailing their shopping list. Without hesitation they rang me and, in between coughs and splutters, said, 'Thank you so much'. They received fresh vegetables, meat and more items than were requested, including Panadol which they forgot to order.

As the days rolled on, the program continued to support each need and request, as young people and young families presented. Together, we navigated the medical services available and organised medication with scripts being sent to pharmacies and payments made over the phone. Each action achieved was like breathing a sigh of relief. Everyone was stretching themselves to help one another in a time of need, even if they never offered the service prior to the pandemic.

Two weeks later, there was another frantic phone call from the young people, distress again resonating down the line, stating *'the manager of the motel just knocked on our door to tell us we had one hour to leave the motel or pay \$150 for the night, we don't have anywhere to go and not enough money, can you help?' Fortunately, Hope Street was able to utilise Housing Establishment Funds to purchase a night's accommodation.*

Fortunately, the homelessness access point was contactable, and the young people were funded for a further 10 days in the motel accommodation.

While supporting these young people in the motel, both my clients and I had been searching through real estate websites and scanning for property rentals. There were plenty advertised but getting in contact with the real estate agents was difficult with phone lines ringing out, voice mail boxes being full, some businesses closed and 'open for inspections' not permitted due to restrictions. A local real estate agent, Ray White, who has always been very supportive of the 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program made contact. After informing him of the young people's situation the agent stated that they might have the perfect property and sent through the video of the inspection walk through. This property became the young family's home, which they still live in today.

Paperwork exchanged hands, Bond Loans approved, documents all signed electronically and before we knew it, the young people had a move in date for the following week. They had been able to save some money to pay their share of the rent for the month, topped up with the subsidies from Hope Street's Hope to Home in Whittlesea program. Hope Street also provided funds for setting up their new house with furniture and household items. Online shopping, click and collect, second-hand stores, donations from other organisations were accessed to furnish a whole house in such a short time, despite the restrictions.

This young family's situation is one example of many I have assisted or know about where communities have joined together stronger than ever to remain client focused and

solution focused in responding to the needs of vulnerable members of our community, in crisis. It highlighted for me the resilience and fortitude of the workers and volunteers in the homelessness and community services sectors and a spirit of goodwill by the real estate agent as well as the high-level commitment and action to social safety by the Victorian Government, during this dangerous and turbulent pandemic.

Unfortunately, not all stories of young people experiencing homelessness end up as successful. This pandemic has highlighted the severe lack of affordable, safe, secure and stable housing as well as youth focused community support options for young people and young families. A significant percentage of young people who present to Hope Street programs do not have a private rental history which means they are pushed aside in the private rental market. It's undeniable that there is stigma attached to anybody experiencing homelessness. In supporting young people to apply for properties in the private rental market, there are so many rejections from real estate agents and landlords.

The 'Hope to Home in Whittlesea' program, now in its fifth year and funded in partnership with philanthropy is a model that works. Most young people maintain their private rental beyond the 12-month period of the program and are able to focus on education, employment, training, parenting, family and community relationships as well as other key areas of their life that will assist them to sustain independent living, preventing further experiences of homelessness. The goodwill and drive of the wider community during the pandemic is a demonstration of compassion, social commitment and drive to support vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. The wider community response to the pandemic has shown that we are capable of making much greater, powerful and socially lasting change — let's apply this social vision, goodwill, drive and action to stemming and preventing youth homelessness and providing young people with a safe place to call home.