

Youth Homelessness Action Plan first stage report

Office of Housing
Department of Human Services

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Foreword

The Victorian Homelessness Strategy is the State Government's major policy to address homelessness across Victoria. Through its implementation, an extensive range of initiatives are under way through collaboration between the homelessness service sector and Government.

The Victorian Government is concerned about youth homelessness. Each year, approximately 11,000 young people access youth homelessness services. Many factors can cause young people to become vulnerable to homelessness, such as mental health and drug and alcohol issues, family violence, and involvement in the child protection and juvenile justice systems. These young people may also have experienced family breakdown and are sometimes parents themselves.

The Victorian Government recognises that to resolve the many issues that contribute to homelessness for people of all ages, considerable work is required. However, early intervention and prevention of homelessness for young people is particularly important, as this is a time when life patterns and responses to opportunities will be established. Young people are at the peak of their formal education and are on the cusp of entering employment.

Without timely and appropriate support to successfully move to adulthood, many of the young people who become homeless may be caught in cycles of economic and social disadvantage. The Victorian Government and the broader community have a social obligation to protect and support young people who face disadvantage and provide them with every opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, living in the community.

Recognising this, in the 2003 State Budget the Victorian Government committed additional funding of \$8.8 million over four years for youth homelessness initiatives. This funding will be used to create better services for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

This *Youth Homelessness Action Plan first stage report* is the culmination of extensive consultation with service providers and young people who have been or are homeless. It provides priorities and actions for immediate implementation. Longer-term priorities for change and strategic directions for the youth homelessness service system will be addressed in the *Youth Homelessness Action Plan final report*.

I thank the members of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan Reference Group who provided invaluable advice and support in the development of this first stage report. I look forward to the continuation of this successful relationship in preparing the final report. I would also like to thank the service providers who participated generously in the consultations for the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Finally, I thank the many young people who have experienced the homelessness service system first hand and contributed to our consultations. It is not always easy to talk to people about very personal experiences. However, the insights they have provided have been very significant in helping us to understand and develop new strategies to address youth homelessness.



Candy Broad MLC
Minister for Housing

Abbreviations

ACP	Adolescent Community Placement
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CHP	Council to Homeless Persons
CWAV	Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria
EFT	Equivalent Full Time
HSSDP	Homelessness Service System Development Project
JPET	Jobs Placement, Employment and Training
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
NSW	New South Wales
RYC	Regional Youth Committee
SAAP	Supported Accommodation Assistance Program
SARS	Support and Accommodation Rights Service
SFYS	School Focused Youth Services
SMR	Southern Metropolitan Region
SSAYP	Same-Sex Attracted Young People
THM	Transitional Housing Management
TILA	Transition to Independent Living Allowance
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
VHS	Victorian Homelessness Strategy
WMR	Western Metropolitan Region
YACVic	Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
YHAP	Youth Homelessness Action Plan

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Executive summary

Context for this plan

The Victorian Homelessness Strategy (VHS) final report *Directions for Change* (2002) identified the need to develop and implement new service models for key client groups including young people. As a key strategic direction from the VHS, the Office of Housing has been undertaking the Youth Homelessness Action Plan (YHAP) with the aim of working towards a more integrated and holistic service response for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Development of the YHAP included consultation with young people who have experienced homelessness, and service providers.

A reference group comprising homelessness service providers and representatives from both Commonwealth and State Government departments met on a regular basis to assist the Office of Housing in this process.

The YHAP will report in two stages, with this first stage report containing actions that can be implemented immediately. The *Youth Homelessness Action Plan final report* will be completed in 2004 and contains longer-term strategies for change to the youth homelessness service system.

Key outcomes from the first stage report

The first stage report identifies 67 actions, which are grouped under one of four key areas for improvement:

- developing preventative approaches
- strengthening pathways to independence
- developing the homelessness service system
- responding effectively to client needs.

The key areas for improvement address different issues or client groups that fall within the respective areas. The actions for implementation are split between what the Office of Housing will do; what Department of Human Services regions will do; what homelessness agencies should do; and what the Council to Homeless Persons, as the peak organisation for homelessness services, will do.

The key outcomes from the first stage report include:

- The roll out of new models to help young people make the move to independence, including an initiative targeted at young people leaving care.
- New approaches to family mediation that will focus on young people who have been out of home for more than six months. (Recent research by Project i, an international study of youth homelessness being undertaken at The University of Melbourne, has highlighted that young people who have been homeless for considerable periods of time often have major unresolved issues with their families, which are a significant barrier to them moving on in their lives, and exacerbates their substance abuse and low self-esteem).
- Targeted responses of housing support and other assistance to enable young people with high needs, in particular those who have been in care, to access employment, education and training as a pathway out of homelessness.

- Setting the scene for a major change in arrangements for crisis and transitional support services funded through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program in 2004-05. This change will move these services to area-based catchments, strengthening the pathways for clients by better matching accommodation and support and improving service accountability. This will strengthen the relationship between Homelessness Assistance and other areas working with young people such as Drug and Alcohol Services and Child Protection.

Funding

In the May 2003 State Budget, the Victorian Government allocated additional funding of \$8.8 million over four years to assist in implementing the YHAP. The funding is attached to nine initiatives and can be categorised in three sections:

- \$4.8 million over four years to develop independent living skills programs for young people at risk of homelessness, especially young people leaving care.
- \$2 million over four years to expand services for families and young people to assist family reconciliation and encourage young people to return home or re-establish positive links with close relatives, and remain in education.
- \$2 million over four years to target employment and training programs to young people with high needs and a long history of difficulties in education, employment or accommodation.

Next steps

The *Youth Homelessness Action Plan final report* will be completed in 2004. The final report will develop longer-term strategies for change to the youth homelessness service system, which can be implemented over three to ten years. Work to be explored for the final report includes:

- mapping crisis service responses to young people, from youth, adult crisis and transitional housing services.
- developing a housing strategy for low income young people.
- developing a strategy to integrate the homelessness service system with the education, employment and training systems so that young people who are homeless can be linked in to opportunities as a pathway out of homelessness.
- developing early intervention approaches that will involve a commitment across Government and within the Department of Human Services to ensure better outcomes for young people when they access the broader community services and education, employment and training systems.

1 Introduction

Young people between 12 and 25 years of age are the single largest group assisted by the homelessness service system in Victoria. The Victorian Homelessness Strategy (VHS) clearly identified that, while the profile of homeless service clients has changed over time, the service system has not kept pace with these changes. The Youth Homelessness Action Plan (YHAP) represents the first step in establishing future directions for youth homelessness services. This first stage report sets out the goals of the VHS, particularly those relating to improving client focus and client outcomes, developing integrated service responses, and working across Government and with the community to prevent homelessness.

Challenges for Government and the homelessness service sector include:

- responding to challenging client groups, including young people with substance abuse issues, mental health issues and dual diagnoses; young parents and families; unattached young people; young people leaving the care of the State from both Child Protection and Juvenile Justice; and first time home leavers.
- developing streamlined models of service delivery and service pathways in a context where crisis and transitional support and accommodation have been historically separated.

1.1 How the YHAP has been developed

The YHAP first stage report is the product of a 12-month consultation process that encouraged stakeholders to identify issues in service provision and potential strategies for future action. This consultation builds on the extensive consultations undertaken for the VHS since 2000. It is consistent with the Victorian Government's *Growing Victoria Together* initiative to listen and lead through consultation with people around the issues that matter to them.

Consultation forms the basis of this report. In addition, some of the initiatives proposed are also supported by growing evidence that has come out of research commissioned to improve the housing and homelessness research base.

Activities undertaken in developing the YHAP included:

- development of an initial discussion paper in August 2002
- a statewide Youth Homelessness Forum in August 2002
- a rural Youth Homelessness Forum in October 2002
- a forum on young people aged 16 and under in March 2003
- development of a second discussion paper in April 2003
- regional consultations in May-June 2003
- consultation with clients through focus groups and interviews
- mapping crisis responses to young people across the State.

A reference group with representatives of the Department of Human Services (including Homelessness Assistance, Juvenile Justice, Child Protection, Mental Health and Drug Treatment Services), the Department for Victorian Communities, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, and the community sector (homelessness and related sector service providers, peak agencies and researchers) assisted the development of the YHAP first stage report. Reference group members participated in developing sector and client consultation processes, reading and commenting on discussion papers and developing this report. Many agencies and individuals have given generously of their time and expertise in this process.

The youth policy project officer at the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) played an important role promoting client and sector consultation and assisting with reporting of these sessions. This youth policy project is jointly auspiced by the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (CWAV) and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic). The project worker contributed to all stages of the development of this report.

1.2 Reporting

Two discussion papers, released in August 2002 and May 2003, analysed a range of issues and were used to prompt discussion at the rural and regional consultations. That discussion has informed this report. Two outcomes are expected from these consultations—this report and the final report of the YHAP, which will be completed during 2004.

This first stage report outlines key issues in youth homelessness service provision and identifies priorities for immediate action during 2004. These priorities are based on preliminary findings from the consumer and sector consultations and the crisis mapping exercise.

The final report will identify medium and long-term strategies for change in relation to each of the key issues outlined in this report. It will also provide final analysis of the crisis mapping exercise, analysis of data from Project i (The University of Melbourne), and the youth homelessness related data from the project *Counting the Homeless 2001*.

2 What young people say about being homeless

A series of focus groups were held for young people to provide input to the YHAP. The young people involved had very clear views about what they expect from agencies and how they want to be assisted. Key themes identified in each of the consultations included:

Access: It is difficult for young people to ask for help and workers need to be sensitive to this and assist them in the most responsive way possible. They need services quickly when they are in crisis.

It's hard to get help in remote areas, kids have nowhere to go. We need more services in the bush.

We need more weekend services—I left home on a Saturday night and I found it almost impossible to get any help.

You can't get into services because you are too young, too old, too fat, too thin.

It's hard to think clearly and get organised when you have depression...it's too much effort. When you are suicidal...you think that (suicide) would be easier than to ask for help. You think everyone will reject you.

The first time I left home I had to walk 18k's into town so I could only take with me what I could carry.

Service quality: Young people expect a high quality service and to be treated with dignity. They know their rights and how they should be treated, and want agencies to be accountable for the services they provide.

There needs to be a change in thinking: there's an idea that 'anything is good enough' for young people.

I called a service 28 times in two weeks and they never once called me back.

Workers: Young people expect workers to be appropriately skilled, to follow up on their commitments to provide assistance, to act consistently with other workers within an agency, and to behave professionally and ethically.

Workers need to listen more. Workers think my issue is just housing but they're wrong. I just got out of prison and I need more support. I need someone who will meet up with me. Just sit there and listen, and talk about an issue.

We need competent workers who know the boundaries of their responsibilities, help you without poking their nose in where it doesn't belong. THM workers are meant to help you fill in forms but they don't always do that.

Some workers treat you like a real person.

The worker is really happy when I have done something...she writes it down and makes a big thing...talks about it.

I like workers who put me on the same level, don't treat me like a child.

Agency practices: Young people are frustrated at having to repeat their history to different workers and expect staff to document their contact with the agency. They expect fair treatment in agencies, and want to be able to negotiate rules and regulations where these seem inappropriate or unfair. There is sometimes a gap between agency requirements and the expectations of young people.

You should be able to speak to a worker who knows your history instead of repeating yourself each time to a new worker.

Lots of places kick you out if you do drugs. Sometimes they call the cops on you. Some places are hell...(in a private hotel) you have to be smacked off your face just to be able to deal with the place.

They tell you to go out if you are going to use drugs...we hid behind bushes in the botanical gardens to do it.

I don't like being locked out of the refuge for seven hours a day...you walk around town all day, there is nothing to do.

Service models: Young people do not like moving and want to access long-term housing as early as possible in their contact with the service system. They don't like shared housing unless they have a choice. Young people worry about being left with bills for utilities or damage caused by other tenants, and do not like being housed with tenants who make them feel unsafe.

There needs to be more options for young people under the age of 16. The only option for them is foster care or being a ward of the state or sometimes long-term housing. There needs to be more in-between options.

I need a house to call my own without anyone checking up on me.

Housing for young mothers needs to have health care nearby, maternity nurses to visit, babysitting vouchers, wide hallways for prams, meals on wheels after the birth and links with other young parents.

With THM properties you have to share, you don't even know the person, they don't pay their bills.

The three-month notice to vacate (from THM) makes me feel very unsettled.

We need longer-term housing straight away. I hate having to move. I can't collect anything because I can't take it with me.

3 Youth homelessness in Victoria

3.1 How youth homelessness fits in the broader homelessness service system

The homelessness service system in Victoria is made up of services that are funded to assist target groups such as young people; women and women with children escaping family violence; and single adults (men and women). Young people represent more than 38 per cent of all assistance provided by homelessness services each year. Further information on Victorian homelessness services can be found at www.homelessness.vic.gov.au

Many of the issues raised in this paper apply to the homelessness sector overall. However, young people have additional issues that relate to their transition to adulthood and life experiences that need to be considered in service provision to break the cycle of homelessness.

3.2 Access to Homelessness Assistance

In 2001-02, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) provided support to an estimated 11,100 young people under the age of 25 in Victoria. This was 38 per cent of the 29,000 clients accessing the homelessness service system. Data also shows that:

- Among the population of young Victorians aged 12-24, one in every 104 young men and one in every 62 young women used homelessness services over the 12-month period. Specifically:
 - 1 in 1,110 of young Victorians aged 12-13
 - 1 in 270 of those aged 14-15
 - 1 in 61 of those aged 16-17
 - 1 in 48 of those aged 18-19
 - 1 in 61 of those aged 20-24.
- Of those young people assisted, 20 per cent presented as couples and/or with children or in other family groupings.

Reasons for seeking assistance

- 18.6 per cent of young people sought assistance due to relationship or family breakdown, 17 per cent due to eviction or previous accommodation ended, and 14.2 per cent of young women sought assistance due to domestic violence.

Duration of support

- 69 per cent of support periods for young males lasted less than four weeks; 31 per cent for more than four weeks.
- 63 per cent of support periods for young women lasted less than four weeks, and 37 per cent more than four weeks.
- Young people from non-English speaking backgrounds had longer support periods on average.
- Indigenous young people had shorter support periods on average.
- Where domestic violence or psychiatric illness was the main reason for seeking assistance, the most common duration of support was 1-3 days.

Transitional accommodation

A May 2003 census of Transitional Housing Management (THM) properties, undertaken by the Office of Housing, identified that young people held 40 per cent of tenancies in THM stock (1,338 out of a total 3,378 tenancies in THM).

3.3 Providing services to homeless young people

Young people access the homelessness service system through 113 youth-targeted agencies funded through SAAP, as well as a number of cross-target agencies, including:

- 18 youth refuges
- seven agencies providing other youth-targeted crisis responses (principally THM-based)
- 83 agencies, with 226 equivalent full time (EFT) positions, providing transitional support to young people
- 20 agencies providing Adolescent Community Placement (ACP) programs
- 13 agencies providing family mediation/reconciliation services.

Through the THM program, the Department of Human Services funds 17 area-based THMs, including a youth-specific THM in Barwon South West and two statewide specialist THM providers. A total of 650 crisis and transitional properties and 38 long-term properties across the state are youth-specific. Young people also have access to general THM stock.

Other youth-specific responses linked to transitional housing include:

- 1.5 EFT housing information referral workers to assist young people leaving juvenile justice facilities
- 47 THM properties and linked support packages (funded by Community Care) for young people leaving juvenile justice facilities
- four THM properties and 16 support packages for a pilot initiative for young people leaving care
- an estimated 50 properties being used by young people as part of drug and alcohol initiatives
- six THM properties being used for refugee minor programs.

3.4 Quantifying youth homelessness

The *Counting the Homeless in 2001* project is a research program focusing on Australia's homelessness population at the time of the 2001 Census. All state and territory governments and The Salvation Army provided funding to this project.

Youth Homelessness 2001, an initial report from the *Counting the Homeless in 2001* project, provides a starting point for considering the extent and nature of youth homelessness in Victoria. The report identified that in Victoria on census night 2001, an estimated 4,663 young people aged 12-18 years of age were homeless.

In comparison with the rest of Australia, Victoria has:

- an estimated rate of homelessness at 10 per 1,000 of young people in the 12-18 years age group at any one time (same as NSW). The rate of youth homelessness nationally is an estimated 14 in every 1,000 of the youth population.

- a significantly higher rate of participation by young homeless people in education (51 per cent) compared with the national average of 41 per cent. However, this still means that half of Victoria's homeless young people were outside the education, training and employment systems.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics released its national report *Counting the Homeless in 2001* in November 2003. The report provides an overview of how many people are homeless nationally. This report has identified that:

- young people aged 12–18 years make up 26 per cent of the homeless population in Australia
- those young people aged 19–24 years account for 10 per cent of the homeless population.

Each state and territory will receive its own report in early 2004, which will provide the most definitive quantitative estimates of youth homelessness to date. Its findings will form a key component of the final report of the YHAP.

4 Key areas for improvement

Consultation with young people experiencing homelessness focused on the issues that have an immediate impact on their lives, such as being able to get assistance. Consultation with service providers across the state and with other Government program areas focused on systemic and structural issues to address youth homelessness. From these two streams of consultation, four key areas for improvement have been identified. These are:

4.1 Developing preventative approaches

The VHS identifies the importance of working across Government and with the community to prevent homelessness. Developing a preventative focus within the service system offers opportunities to break the cycle of homelessness, particularly for homeless children.

4.2 Strengthening pathways to independence

Promoting positive futures for young people depends on the ability of the service system to develop pathways to independence, particularly in the areas of:

- education, employment and training
- young people leaving care
- long-term housing.

4.3 Developing the homelessness service system

The homelessness service system needs to respond to the challenge of delivering more integrated and responsive services to young people. Areas for development include:

- access and service pathways
- early intervention and family reconciliation
- crisis accommodation and support
- transitional accommodation and support
- rural service responses.

4.4 Responding effectively to client needs

Further development of service system responses to client groups is required, including:

- young people with complex needs
- unaccompanied young people
- Indigenous young people
- children and families
- same-sex attracted young people
- culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

5 Developing preventative approaches

Early intervention with families where a young person is at risk of homelessness aims to prevent episodes of homelessness. Genuine preventative approaches need much earlier intervention, in early childhood and primary school, to be effective. This has not historically been the focus of the homelessness service system. However, a greater focus on prevention is possible through the VHS working across Government and through the current joined-up initiatives.

Twenty per cent of young people accessing assistance through SAAP are couples and/or have children. Prevention activities will initially target these children through enhanced responses to young pregnant women and young families. Young mothers who are homeless are reportedly reluctant to access maternal and child health services, and there is capacity for these agencies to more effectively target services to this very vulnerable group. Including homeless children within the scope of early years services will improve their long-term outcomes.

Current activities

The Department of Human Services Community Care Division is providing an additional \$17 million to Maternal and Child Health Centres to improve the delivery of early years services to young families across Victoria and is also funding local government to develop Early Years Plans for vulnerable children and families in their communities.

Auspiced by the Department of Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, and assisted by the Community Support Fund, Best Start aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all children aged 0-8 years across Victoria. Supporting communities, parents, families and service providers to improve universal local early years service systems, will give children the best possible start for their future health, education and social wellbeing.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

1. work with Community Care to address the needs of young mothers who are homeless through Maternal and Child Health Centres and through the development of Early Years Plans
2. promote links between Homelessness Assistance programs and the Best Start initiative.

6 Strengthening pathways to independence

6.1 Education, employment and training

Participating in education, employment and training offers young people a pathway out of homelessness and improves their ability to find and keep long-term housing. However, the homelessness service system does not have strong linkages to education, employment and training. In 2001-02, only seven per cent of unemployed homeless young people gained employment by the time they left SAAP support and only four per cent had commenced study.

Victoria has a comprehensive student support policy (*Framework for student support in Victorian Government schools*) that incorporates student welfare workers and school counsellors in schools. Additionally, the School Focussed Youth Services (SFYS) is funded through the Community Care Division of the Department of Human Services. SFYS assists in developing links between youth services (in schools and the community) to make them more responsive to the needs of young people. Some funding is also available to provide brokerage for services.

The Commonwealth Government-funded Jobs Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) program provides flexible support and services to help young people aged 15-21 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to find secure career paths and sustainable futures.

The Commonwealth Government also funds Reconnect, a program that is designed to connect young people aged 12-18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with their families, work, education, training and the community. Family-focused early intervention strategies help participants achieve family reconciliation, if this is practicable and appropriate. Support is provided through counselling, adolescent mediation and practical support. Reconnect emphasises community development and cohesive and integrated service delivery. The importance of locally-based networks, flexible service provision and collaboration between services within a community are the basis of good practice principles underlying Reconnect.

There is potential for greater integration of education and employment goals in homelessness programs, both at a case planning level and also at a more strategic level. Young people need to be assisted towards these options as early as possible in their contact with the homelessness service system.

The combination of SFYS, Reconnect-funded services and SAAP-funded services is giving Victoria higher school retention rates in comparison to other states. However, there is very limited coordination between departments in allocating these resources. A Commonwealth/State Officers Group, involving the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, the Victorian Office for Youth, Department of Victorian Communities, Department of Education and Training and Department of Human Services has been established to improve coordination in planning.

Current activities

The Office of Housing is working on a number of initiatives to raise the profile of young homeless people within education, employment and training initiatives, and to improve young people's access to these services, including:

- participation by Department of Human Services officers in the Commonwealth/State VHS Labour Market Program Working Party
- development of three VHS Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) projects
- support to the Inner City Youth Transitions Model project
- support to the Young Homeless Job Seekers Trial
- liaison with Crime Prevention Victoria in relation to its initiatives around early school leavers and truancy
- changes to SAAP and THM guidelines for 2003-04 to encourage extended stays in THM, with SAAP providers taking a more proactive role in encouraging tenants' involvement in employment, education and training.

As noted previously, the *Counting the Homeless 2001* project found that approximately half of Victoria's homeless young people were outside the education, training and employment systems. The Office of Housing is liaising closely with the Department of Education and Training regarding its Students At Risk of Complete Disengagement from Education and Training project. This project is designed to better understand the young people disengaging from education and training, and explore a range of responses to improve participation, including joined-up responses. Homeless young people form a considerable proportion of the cohort under review.

The Victorian Government has allocated \$2 million over four years to assist young homeless people with high needs and a long-term history of difficulties in education, employment or accommodation. This initiative will work closely with the Commonwealth Government's JPET Program.

The initiative will allocate brokerage funds to individual young people to help them get involved in education, training or employment. Support providers across Victoria will be able to nominate young people to a panel for assessment and allocation of a package of funds. It is proposed that the panel would be required to ensure that 30 per cent of funding is targeted to non-metropolitan clients. Young people formerly in the care of the State will represent a high priority group.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Department of Human Services will:

3. allocate \$2 million over four years for its new education, employment and training initiative
4. from the \$4.8 million over four years allocated to the development of independent living skills programs, allocate a proportion of this funding for a support worker to the Youth Transitions Model project
5. undertake and evaluate the VHS LLENs-based projects
6. identify potential initiatives under the Department of Education and Training Students at Risk of Complete Disengagement from Education and Training project

7. hold a statewide forum on education, employment and training for homelessness service providers.

Department of Human Services regions will:

8. assist in developing links between employment and training providers, such as Job Network, Centrelink and homelessness agencies
9. contract manage the LLENs pilot projects
10. have Regional Directors present the YHAP to Regional Youth Committees (RYC) and identify how the RYC can play a role in implementation.

Agencies should:

11. identify potential areas for links and cross-referral at a local level with Centrelink and education, employment and training providers
12. identify how their clients might participate in the new education, employment and training initiative
13. engage with the LLEN in their area and link clients, if appropriate, into the education, employment and training opportunities provided through the LLEN.

6.2 Young people leaving care

In 2001-02 in Victoria, 200 young people aged 12-17 using homelessness services had a child protection order either at the beginning or at the end of their support period. This is 21.3 per cent of the national figure for this client group.

Young people leaving the child protection system need coordinated planning to prevent them from becoming homeless and to support the development of independent living skills. Together with Community Care, the Office of Housing will develop pathways for young people in care to avoid them moving from care to homelessness.

The Leaving Care pilot project funded through Community Care is being undertaken in two regions and will be evaluated. Early findings from this project indicate that young people in care do not have adequate basic life skills—such as budgeting, shopping and cooking—which they need to move from care to independence successfully.

Current activities

The Department of Human Services is involved in a number of initiatives to improve its coordination in relation to young people leaving care and to improve pathways for young people moving from the protective system to independence. These initiatives include:

- a pilot Leaving Care project established under the VHS in 2002-03 as a joint initiative between Community Care and the Office of Housing
- the allocation of \$4.8 million over four years to develop independent living skills programs for young people at risk of homelessness (especially young people leaving care)
- from this funding, the Government has allocated \$775,000 per annum over four years to projects across Victoria that will improve the transition from care to independence. These projects will provide housing and support that builds young people's life skills and links them to employment, education and training. One of these projects will be specifically for Indigenous young people leaving care.

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services is currently administering the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA). TILA is a one-off Commonwealth allowance, up to the value of \$1,000, provided to, or on behalf of, young people leaving State-supported care to assist them to make the move to independent living. TILA is delivered through non-government organisations. For more information, visit the TILA information sheet on the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services website – www.facs.gov.au

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

14. allocate \$775,000 per annum over four years to a series of initiatives across Victoria targeting young people leaving care, to improve their move to independent living
15. evaluate the current VHS Leaving Care pilots
16. initiate a project between Community Care and Office of Housing to improve the development of living skills for young people while they are in care
17. contribute to the review of the *Victorian Children and Young Person's Act 1989*
18. encourage homelessness service providers to participate in the review of the *Victorian Children and Young Person's Act 1989*
19. liaise with the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services regarding the distribution of TILA funding to young people leaving state care.

Department of Human Services regions will:

20. implement the Leaving Care initiative.

Agencies should:

21. participate in the review of the *Victorian Children and Young Person's Act 1989*.

6.3 Long-term housing

Long-term affordable housing is extremely limited for young people. Without access to long-term housing, young people are unable to move from crisis to transitional housing and then out of transitional housing.

Most young people (40 per cent) leaving SAAP services go to private rental accommodation, including private board. It is difficult however, for young people to overcome some of the barriers that prevent them from entering and staying in the private rental market. The final report of the VHS, *Directions for Change*, notes that in relation to private rental affordability:

‘Centrelink incomes of young people, singles and single parents make the cost of renting at or above median prices unaffordable, given a 30 per cent of income affordability benchmark. This is after the full benefit of Centrelink rent assistance is taken into account.’

Many people participating in the VHS consumer consultations believe that young people and single parents find it particularly difficult to secure private rental because some real estate agents and landlords have preconceived ideas that people who are homeless are unreliable tenants. A lack of rental history is also a barrier for young people trying to access private rental.

While public housing may be considered appropriate and affordable for some young parents and families providing long-term stability, public housing stock for single young people is very limited. Of the 62,500 public housing tenancies across Victoria, there are only 3,200 tenancies where the head of the household is under the age of 25. This figure includes young parents and families. There are also high rates of tenancy breakdown for young people living in public housing. At 30 June 2003, the average length of all public housing tenancies was 7.2 years. For young people under the age of 25 however, the average length of tenancy was 1.7 years.

Public housing tenancy termination data for 2002-03 supports the tenuous nature of young people’s tenancies when living in public housing, for example:

- 12.9 per cent of tenancies where the head of the household was under the age of 25 were terminated due to rental arrears, as opposed to 4.9 per cent of all public housing tenancies
- Young people living in public housing were quite mobile, with 3.4 per cent moving interstate, and 24.3 per cent moving to a private rental property
- 12.1 per cent of tenancies broke down when young people vacated their property without giving a reason, whereas only 7.6 per cent of all public housing tenancies broke down with properties vacated without a reason given
- 7.6 per cent of young people’s tenancy breakdowns occurred with the property being found abandoned.

There is a small component of long-term housing managed within the THM program. Community-managed, long-term housing may offer some benefits to young people as tenants but this requires further discussion and debate within the homelessness and long-term community housing sectors.

For some young people, support to maintain their public or private rental tenancy is critical to them finding long-term housing and achieving personal stability.

Existing program and policy frameworks need to be examined to identify barriers to the provision of longer-term support.

Arrangements to access long-term housing for young people will be a key focus of the YHAP final report.

Current activities

- Extended stays in THMs for young people are provided through revised THM guidelines from 1 July 2003
- 38 additional long-term youth specific stock have been provided since 2001-02.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

22. conduct a forum on developing appropriate long-term housing options for young people
23. undertake further work to explore the capacity of public housing and other forms of housing assistance to provide more sustainable housing options for young people
24. explore the option of creating fixed-term leases in THMs, linked to support. This would help young people achieve a rental history and develop life skills, which will improve their ability to access and keep private rental accommodation.

7 Developing the homelessness service system

Difficulty accessing services – Support and Accommodation Rights Service (SARS)

Data provided by SARS, based on 33 complaints from young people, included nine complaints from young people who had been unable to access a service, including three young people being refused accommodation due to self-harming, one occasion where a young person was told their level of need was too high, and a further two cases in which vacancies were withdrawn once a young person gave their name.

In one scenario reported by SARS, a young woman applied for a vacancy in a refuge and was refused on the basis that the agency did not support 'refuge hopping'.

7.1 Access and service pathways

Through the VHS, the Office of Housing is examining the current arrangement of services for homeless people (including young people) to identify ways to configure models of service delivery to most effectively meet the needs of young people.

Given that 50 per cent of assistance provided to young people is provided by non-youth specific services, it is important that the needs of these young people are integrated into this broader service system change.

Young people often find it difficult to access services:

A young man tells his school counsellor that he is homeless. His counsellor rings a central youth service where a worker asks the young man about his situation. He is advised to ring a refuge where there is a male vacancy, and the rostered worker speaks to him briefly about his situation before arranging transport that evening. On arrival a short intake is conducted, and a more thorough assessment occurs a few days later with a worker who will be his caseworker. The young man is provided with a list of transitional support providers and he rings several, each time explaining why he is homeless. During the week he is required to be out of the refuge during the day, so he goes to another youth service where he makes more phone calls from his list. He makes two appointments with services, where he is assessed prior to being offered an interview time for a vacancy in shared housing. By this time he has told his story to more than 10 different people, and visited at least four agencies. He still may need to meet with an existing tenant to see if they can share a transitional property.

The process of seeking assistance can be difficult for young homeless people and much more so for those with complex needs. Young people receive quite variable service responses, depending on how and where they access services. Some young people fall through the gaps if the services offered at a point in time are not a good match for what they need.

As with the broader homelessness service system, areas for future service system development include:

- clear and consistent entry points
- reduced numbers of assessments for young people
- dedicated pathways between service components, such as referral points and crisis accommodation, and between crisis and transitional accommodation
- capacity within agencies to tailor service responses to the needs of individual clients.

Current activities

The Homelessness Service System Development Projects (HSSDPs) in the Southern Metropolitan, Eastern Metropolitan and Hume regions, and the inner metropolitan area will focus on issues of access, assessment and referral within regional catchments. A common assessment tool for the state, bed vacancy registers and an integrated data collection will be piloted in these locations.

Analysis of National Data Collection Agency data is being undertaken to obtain clearer information about young people's pathways through the service system.

Immediate actions (1-12 Months)

The Office of Housing will:

25. promote the inclusion of youth-specific responses in HSSDP and broader service system change activities to improve outcomes for young people
26. present the YHAP first stage report to each of the four HSSDPs and encourage discussion
27. inform the sector of homelessness service system developments
28. undertake a detailed analysis of young people's access to assistance to more clearly identify areas in which pathways are blocked.

CHP in partnership with the Office of Housing will:

29. brief the sector on the HSSDPs.

7.2 Early intervention and family reconciliation

Young people who are newly homeless or at risk of homelessness require early intervention responses to prevent them from entering the homelessness service system, and to keep them within their communities, if appropriate. Current service configurations and waiting times mean that some young people do not receive an appropriate early intervention response in the critical first few weeks out of home.

The homelessness service system requires a clearer and stronger model of practice in providing early intervention services. Elements could include:

- working with schools to identify and engage young people
- timing of interventions
- risk assessment in relation to the safety of a young person returning home or moving to other family options
- connections to parenting services for parents of adolescents
- working with communities around respite options
- protecting young people from becoming more estranged from home or community, or engaging in escalating behaviours during the initial intervention period
- addressing behavioural factors where these have contributed to the young person being homeless.

Where young people who are newly homeless still have a connection to family, school or community, reconciliation and mediation programs can assist in re-establishing relationships that may allow the young person to return home or go to extended family. Young people who have been out of home for longer periods of time and have become estranged from family, can also benefit from support to assist them to re-establish family connections. However, as current models are primarily focussed on young people who have just left home, new models may be required to address the needs of those young people who have been out of home for longer periods.

The Office of Housing funds 13 agencies to provide family reconciliation programs. These programs are mostly located in youth refuges and operate independently of each other. There is a need to establish clearer program guidelines, including their relationships with other early intervention programs such as Reconnect.

Current activities

The Government has provided \$2 million over four years to establish a statewide family reconciliation and mediation program. This will expand services for families and young people to assist family reconciliation and encourage young people to return to the home where appropriate, or to re-establish positive links with close relatives and stay at school. The program will:

- provide a developmental role in strengthening the capacity of the current service system
- develop new practice models and tools to work with young people who have been homeless for extended periods of time
- provide a front-end family mediation and reconciliation response in geographic areas where this does not currently exist.

This program will be equally targeted to young people who are newly homeless and those who have been homeless for some time.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

30. allocate \$2 million over four years for a statewide family reconciliation and mediation service, which includes the development of new models
31. ensure the Homelessness Assistance Standards project includes family reconciliation
32. liaise with the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services on family reconciliation and early intervention issues and the development of referral protocols between homelessness services and relevant Commonwealth Government-funded youth services such as Reconnect.

CHP will:

33. map the range of early intervention responses and identify gaps and enhancements required in partnership with CWAV and YACVic.

Evicted from refuge - Support and Accommodation Rights Service (SARS)

A young woman self-harmed in a refuge, requiring hospitalisation twice in a week. After being discharged the second time, she returned to her accommodation and was told that she would be evicted from the refuge that day.

7.3 Crisis accommodation and support

Crisis accommodation for young people in Victoria is provided in a range of models, including communal-style refuges, congregate models, cluster refuges and lead tenant models. In 2001-02, young people received more than 2,400 episodes of crisis accommodation of which half were in youth services. Other crisis responses include 18 crisis properties managed by THMs.

The Crisis Accommodation and Support Mapping exercise being undertaken for the YHAP will provide detailed information about access to crisis accommodation across the system. The information gained through this exercise will enable regions to assess the crisis capacity and more effectively plan to meet the needs of clients.

Preliminary findings of the Crisis Mapping exercise include that:

- There is significant variation in the bed capacity, staffing and annual service targets across the refuge system.
- The operational practice (entry criteria, services provided, target groups) varies greatly. Many agencies have developed a specialised target group, which contributes to a lack of options for some groups, notably young men over 18 and young parents.
- The capacity of the crisis service system has decreased as a result of individual agencies reducing their bed capacity. Agencies say that this has happened in response to young people with complex needs and to manage household dynamics.
- Relationships between crisis accommodation, THM and transitional support providers vary across regions and better integration between these systems is required to achieve improved outcomes for young people and help create pathways out of homelessness.

It is important that agencies providing crisis responses to young people are able to adapt their models of service provision to meet the changing needs of young people.

Potential strategies to develop a more responsive service sector include:

- improving regional planning for crisis responses to ensure a better match between the services offered and those seeking assistance
- support for early identification of needs and coordination of responses when young people first enter the service system
- identifying young people who are connected to family and community and diverting them from the homelessness system where possible
- enhancing capacity within the service system to accommodate young people with complex issues.

Current activities

The Office of Housing is:

- upgrading all Department of Human Services owned facilities to meet fire and safety regulations
- initiating new models of THM-based crisis accommodation with linked support
- ensuring homelessness support is provided to people who are linked to a range of crisis accommodation options including the identified crisis THM properties
- evaluating the THM/crisis model in the Department of Human Services Western Metropolitan Region (WMR)

- initiating new major crisis accommodation responses in Ringwood/Croydon, Dandenong, WMR and Geelong, which would include young people aged 20 and over in their catchments
- developing the youth refuge Fusion into a purpose-built model for crisis accommodation assistance
- replacing Morwell youth refuge
- undertaking a crisis mapping exercise across Victoria.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office Of Housing will:

34. examine findings of the THM crisis evaluation in WMR to identify implications for young people
35. extend the crisis mapping project to include young people who are accommodated in major inner city crisis services and in THM/crisis models, in order to inform the development of medium-term strategies to optimise crisis responses
36. test new approaches to crisis accommodation and support for young women, specifically young parents and Koori young women in Northern Metropolitan Region.

CHP will:

37. resource the refuge providers network to examine existing practice and identify how crisis accommodation services might enhance integration into the homelessness service system.

Tenancy problems - Support and Accommodation Rights Service (SARS)

In one scenario reported by SARS, a young woman who was a victim of crime asked that she not be housed in transitional housing with someone with a criminal history. After moving in, the new tenant revealed she was on a number of criminal charges. The young woman believed the agency had screened the tenancy applicants, however was told that she had already had the opportunity to ask questions of the prospective tenant at an interview. The young person was unable to obtain contents insurance as she was sharing with someone with a criminal history. Her belongings were subsequently stolen and property was damaged.

7.4 Transitional housing and support

Accommodation provided through the THM program, linked to support provided through SAAP-funded agencies, is the largest single component of the Office of Housing response to young homeless people. A number of issues have been identified in relation to this model and require further work.

Young people usually share accommodation with people who are not related to them, with the exception of young families. The shared model is not always appropriate, particularly for young people with complex needs. Both agencies and young people indicate that issues related to sharing contribute to the breakdown of many tenancies.

Support provided to young people in transitional accommodation is usually based on a caseload of 1:12; however agencies report that many young people need more intensive support than this. In particular, young people with complex needs, and those aged 16 and under, are thought to require a greater level of support than this program allows.

Relationships between THMs and transitional support providers vary considerably and clearer alignment between these systems is required to improve outcomes for young people through stable tenancies. Young people report that they are routinely provided with a three-month notice to vacate at the time of signing the initial lease, although this is not required under THM guidelines which provide for tenancies of up to 18 months. Negotiations around length of tenure, capacity for single young people to live alone in two-bedroom housing, and time taken to complete maintenance are all issues that require a coordinated approach between THM providers and support agencies.

Current activities

The Office of Housing is currently involved in:

- data analysis in relation to young people's THM tenancies.
- revising THM and SAAP guidelines extending stays for young people in THMs to include participation in education, employment and training as an appropriate reason for young people having an extended tenancy. This will improve the sustainability of outcomes for young people and lessen the likelihood of a young person returning to crisis and THM services.
- reviewing current nomination rights in WMR.
- developing new service system flow models which link forms of accommodation, for example exit from crisis accommodation into THM, and match support and accommodation capacity to improve outcomes for young people.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

38. review outcomes of the WMR nomination rights project in terms of access for young people to THMs
39. explore models for shared tenancies, identifying factors that can contribute to successful shared tenancy
40. identify issues related to shared tenancy that may potentially be addressed within the *Victorian Residential Tenancies Act 1997*

41. ensure that service flows for young people are a key consideration in the HSSDPs
 42. identify and analyse the factors that impact on THM occupancy levels and vacancy rates for young people, including support, property maintenance and tenancy management approaches.
- CHP, in partnership with the Office of Housing, will:
43. progress work on multiple tenancy models and rules.

7.5 Rural service responses

While many large regional centres are well serviced by welfare and homelessness providers, some still lack access to important service components such as crisis accommodation or alcohol and drug services. Smaller towns may have a single homelessness response and be intermittently serviced by visiting specialist providers, while young people in remote areas generally have to travel to receive a service. In many areas, youth responses are provided by cross-target services.

Lack of short and long-term accommodation options is a critical issue in many rural areas. Changing demographics and tourist demands have led to a decline in emergency and private rental accommodation. Rural providers report that there are no accommodation options in some areas for young people requiring adult supervision. Rural regions also report difficulty in recruiting and maintaining Adolescent Community Placement (ACP) carers.

Employment in rural regions is limited for young people and is often a cause of young people relocating to regional centres or Melbourne. Young people who move from rural and remote areas to Melbourne often face dislocation from their support and peer networks. Involving young people in local education, training and employment options is a key strategy to keep young people within their communities.

Agencies respond to these demands through a range of strategies, including formal service collaboration or co-location, and arrangements with visiting specialist agencies. The close networks in rural communities often promote the development of innovative and flexible service responses. At the same time, agencies identify that homelessness is particularly stigmatising for young rural people and that greater community awareness of this issue is required.

Current activities

The Office of Housing activities include:

- the new education, employment and training initiative that has a target to allocate 30 per cent of packages to young people in rural regions. This initiative will provide flexible packages that can assist in creating local education, training and employment opportunities around the specific needs of rural young people.
- the statewide family reconciliation and mediation initiative that will assist rural young people by providing a front-end response in areas where this is not currently available and by building service system capacity around early intervention.
- expanding the Leaving Care initiative to operate in each of the five departmental rural regions, providing new accommodation options and reducing demand on homelessness services by young people leaving care.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

44. conduct a skills audit of cross-target services in rural areas to identify the capacity of agencies to respond to young homeless people and to strengthen these responses
45. encourage the development of quality models in rural areas and promote these among the sector.

Support issues - Support and Accommodation Rights Service (SARS)

Data provided by SARS included: five complaints in which self-harming was indicated as the reason for a young person being either refused a service, evicted or threatened with eviction if self-harming.

In one scenario:

A young woman reported that her worker withdrew support after being told that the young person had recently been in hospital for mental health issues, telling her that she needed specialist mental health support. The young woman contacted SARS after the agency did not offer her support to find alternative housing.

8 Responding effectively to client needs

8.1 Young people with complex needs

Within the youth homelessness population, there are a growing number of young people who have particular, significant and complex needs that can only be met through a well-planned and coordinated cross-program service response.

These needs can arise from serious mental health disorders, alcohol or other drug issues or both; a history of abuse or sexual assault and involvement in Child Protection; experiences as a refugee or asylum seeker; involvement with Juvenile Justice; being a young parent and/or where children are involved with Child Protection.

At least six youth SAAP clients have been assessed as potentially eligible for the Department of Human Services' complex needs initiative. The *Responding to people with multiple and complex needs project* was established in January 2002 in response to continuing poor service outcomes for a group of people in Victoria whose multiple and complex needs challenge existing legislative frameworks and service systems.

The target group for the complex needs initiative consists of people who experience various combinations of mental illness, intellectual disability, cognitive impairment, behavioural difficulties and substance abuse. A new service model has been proposed to target improved service delivery to those persons at the extreme end of the continuum of complexity who have exceptional needs and require a cross-program service response that is unable to be met or sustained by existing services.

Research data from Project i indicates that 73 per cent of young people reported issues with alcohol or other drugs, 26 per cent reported a mental illness and of those young people, 22 per cent experienced both alcohol or drug and mental health issues. These two issues have a significant impact on the ability of young people to access and maintain accommodation and support within the current service system.

These young people present challenges for service delivery, including:

- better management of episodes of violence or aggression in accommodation
- improved management and support of young people involved in risk-taking or self-harming behaviours
- improved access to therapeutic residential responses, particularly where young people do not have a clear mental health diagnosis
- improved access to appropriate mental health responses
- better coordinated approaches between homelessness and clinical mental health and/or alcohol and drug services
- appropriate shared THM accommodation for many young people
- compatibility between funded models and the needs of the client groups
- addressing practices of exclusion of complex clients from agencies, on the grounds of occupational health and safety issues.

Agencies are attempting to engage and support clients with enduring complex needs as well as those who may be homeless for the first time. Providing services for both these populations in one setting may work against achieving positive outcomes for either group. Separate responses to the newly and experienced homeless populations may be more effective.

The need for more strategic and collaborative approaches to service provision between homelessness, primary and specialist service providers, and between Homelessness Assistance, the Mental Health Branch and Drug Treatment Services within the Department of Human Services has been identified.

Current activities

Through the May 2003 Budget, the Victorian Government has provided funding of \$4.8 million over four years to develop independent living skills programs for young people at risk of homelessness. Of this, \$775,000 each year will be dedicated to young people leaving care. The remaining funding will be distributed among a number of smaller projects to assist sub-groups of young people who are vulnerable, homeless or at risk of homelessness and for whom the existing service system response requires further development. Young people with complex needs will be one of these sub-groups, and a project on young people with complex needs, particularly those who self-harm, will be conducted. This best practice project will be undertaken in one location and will have the capacity to be integrated into the broader homelessness service system response at no additional cost.

The Department of Human Services is currently involved in:

- mapping models of crisis accommodation and analysing how these can be more responsive to young people with complex needs.
- supporting participation of the inner city intensive youth support services in the development of the Department of Human Services complex needs initiative, including successful nominations in the client survey.
- the national SAAP Complex Needs project which will develop a better response to clients with the most complex level of need, including young people, and will contribute to learning about managing complex issues within the service system.
- the Homelessness and Drug Dependency Trial, which is providing valuable information about service provision to clients with alcohol and drug issues.
- developing a range of specialist mental health service initiatives that will have an impact on homeless young people by expanding youth dual diagnosis positions, first onset psychosis programs and innovative psychiatric disability support programs, and will further develop suicide prevention initiatives aimed at improving access to mental health services for young people, particularly those in rural and remote communities.
- planning a three-year training program to build worker skills to improve assistance to people who are homeless (running July 2003-June 2006).
- providing an assertive, mobile and proactive outreach service to young people and their families on the streets of the central business district and St Kilda through an expansion of Streetworks.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

46. from the \$4.8 million over four years allocated to the development of independent living skills programs, allocate a proportion to improve access to assistance and improve outcomes for young people with complex needs, particularly those who self-harm

47. analyse crisis mapping project information and broader data to strengthen understanding of how complex needs are being addressed
48. work with inner city intensive youth support services to review caseloads and arrangements as part of the Department of Human Services' complex needs initiative
49. initiate the development of an appropriate harm minimisation policy applicable to homelessness service system clients seeking access to crisis accommodation.

8.2 Unsupported young people

Young people under 16 are a particularly vulnerable group that the homelessness service system struggles to effectively support. The *Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994* precludes the duplication of other Government responsibilities by SAAP, and specifies that services be directed towards independent young people above the school leaving age (15 in Victoria). Unsupported young people under 16 who are at risk are considered the responsibility of Community Care. However SAAP data indicates that each year in Victoria:

- 460 young people under the age of 16 access homelessness services
- 56 per cent are not living with parents at the beginning of their support period
- at least 31 per cent of those not living with parents have no income
- 79 per cent of young people 12-17 are not on Child Protection orders.

Agencies have consistently identified that existing models of accommodation and support are inadequate for these young people who require some level of adult supervision in long-term housing. For some of these young people, models such as ACP are more appropriate, however this option represents a very small component of homelessness funding. Some agencies are engaged in developing a range of more supported models within existing homelessness responses.

The issue of guardianship and responsibility for these young people requires further work between the Office of Housing and Community Care. Young people living out of home without an income are unable to meet basic costs of health, education, transport and living expenses. Agencies providing responses to this group identify that they are often covering these costs, although they are not funded to do so. Where these young people are engaging in risk-taking behaviour, agencies have indicated that it can be difficult to access Child Protection responses, particularly if the young person is nearing 16 years of age.

Furthermore, young people under the age of 16 do not have the independent living skills to sustain independent living, and have a limited legal capacity to enter a lease, both of which are key requirements of the majority of housing models provided through SAAP and related programs.

Agencies that have designed services and programs for young people 16 and over focus on assisting the young person towards independence. They often lack expertise or experience in engaging families around younger clients. There is potential to develop approaches that engage families and encourage parents to maintain a guardianship role while the young person lives away from home.

Current activities

The Department of Human Services is involved in developing revised protocols between the Commonwealth and State for young people under 16 who are out of home and unsupported. These protocols will refine the processes between Centrelink, Child Protection and homelessness agencies.

Community Care has initiated a review of the *Victorian Children and Young Person's Act 1989*, and Office of Housing participation in this process will identify issues relating to unsupported young people within the homelessness service system.

In the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR), the Department of Human Services has developed protocols between homelessness agencies and Child Protection. These protocols establish clear guidelines for support agencies around notification to Child Protection, clarify roles and responsibilities of each of the sectors particularly in relation to joint clients, and aim to improve communication.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Department of Human Services will:

50. continue to participate in developing the revised Youth Protocol between the Commonwealth and the states
51. work on the development of service arrangements for young people under 16 for whom SAAP is not an appropriate response
52. monitor implementation of the protocol between Child Protection and SAAP services in the SMR, and identify opportunities whereby similar protocols may be implemented in other regions
53. within the development of service standards, explore the development of a code of conduct for homelessness agencies working with under 16 year olds, including guidelines around engaging families.

8.3 Indigenous young people

Indigenous young people were represented in five per cent of all periods of support assistance for 12-24 year-olds in 2001-02. Although Indigenous young people are over-represented within the homelessness population, these communities have not been well served by the homelessness service system. While many young people prefer to rely on extended family to meet their needs for housing and support, research indicates that extended families are often unable to cope with the extent of Indigenous homelessness in many communities.

Mainstream homelessness agencies are often inaccessible to Indigenous young people due to factors including: complex service systems; rigid eligibility criteria; culturally inappropriate policies and practices; and the lack of recognition of the role of extended family. Many agencies are not confident in working with Indigenous young people and their extended families and networks. Further development of culturally appropriate responses among mainstream services is required to ensure that young Indigenous people can have equitable access to services.

Many young people prefer to access services within the Indigenous community. There are limited numbers of Indigenous-specific homelessness services and in some regions there are none. Private rental, common to young people in general, is largely inaccessible to Indigenous young people due to barriers including socio-economic factors and discrimination. Data indicates that young Indigenous people are poorly represented in public housing and their tenancies are more likely to be at risk.

Current activities

The Victorian Government has provided \$775,000 per annum over four years to develop independent living skills programs for young people leaving care who are at risk of homelessness. One project will focus on Indigenous young people leaving the care of the State.

The Department of Human Services is mapping Indigenous service activity to determine the extent to which non-Indigenous and Indigenous organisations offer, or could offer, housing advice and support services to homeless Indigenous people. The study will identify the needs of Indigenous homeless people in Victoria and, where required, will propose initiatives to provide more effective services to this target group.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

54. allocate funding to a project for Indigenous young people leaving the care of the State
55. from the \$4.8 million allocated over four years to the development of independent living skills programs, allocate a proportion of this funding to an initiative between an Indigenous service provider and a THM to develop better housing models for Indigenous young people in transitional housing
56. use regional planning processes to better target homelessness services to Indigenous young people
57. enhance cultural awareness training to enable the general service system to be more responsive to the needs of Indigenous young people.

8.4 Children and families

Young people with children, in couples or other groupings, represented 20 per cent of periods of support assistance for young people in Victoria. Of these support periods, an estimated 25 per cent occurred in youth-specific agencies. The crisis accommodation mapping exercise will identify the availability of crisis responses to this target group. The increasing prevalence of young women in family violence services indicates the need for improved coordination between the youth and family violence sectors.

Young people with children often need longer-term support and accommodation than programs permit. Agency targets for youth-specific services are generally based on individual client numbers and do not reflect families in the caseload.

Consultation has identified areas to improve service provision to children and families, including:

- improving access to youth-targeted crisis accommodation for families with children
- developing skills and expertise among support workers in assessing and supporting families in relation to issues such as the developmental needs of children, parenting supports and risk assessment
- developing training around homelessness issues for a range of early years service providers, including maternal and child health nurses, family support and preschool field officers, and special education program workers
- developing appropriate agency policies in relation to providing services to children
- developing pathways for young pregnant women to remain in a single housing option during their pregnancy and when parenting
- improving use of children's support workers.

Most support periods (73 per cent) for young people in couples or with children occurred in non-youth specific agencies. This raises issues for both the under-representation of youth-specific services in supporting and accommodating couples and families, and for the role of generalist agencies in ensuring young people receive an appropriate service within a cross-age program. It is important that any agency providing support to young people is able to provide an appropriate youth-specific response within its suite of programs, incorporating links to youth services such as education, employment and training, early intervention, drug and alcohol, mental health and sexual abuse.

Young parents indicate high levels of fear and avoidance of Child Protection involvement. The development of the Child Protection and SAAP Protocol in SMR may offer some guidelines for developing more collaborative relationships.

Current activities

A best practice initiative is being established to identify ways in which parenting and family violence information and support can be developed and extended to young women in homelessness services who are pregnant or parenting. The aim is to assist them to re-establish their lives free of violence and with improved parenting skills. This initiative will be undertaken in one location and will have the capacity to be integrated into the broader homelessness service system response at no additional cost.

The initiative for young pregnant and parenting women will be allocated through the SMR, being the region with the highest proportion of young people and the lowest levels of service provision, and forms part of the Women's Health and Wellbeing Strategy for 2003-04.

The Office of Housing is also revising the policy framework and guidelines for working with homeless children. These issues will be addressed in the development of the Homelessness Assistance Standards project.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

58. from the \$4.8 million over four years allocated to the development of independent living skills programs, allocate a proportion to establish a best practice project to develop and extend parenting and family violence information, and support young women in homelessness services who are pregnant or parenting
59. implement additional training in working with young parents within youth services
60. implement training on homelessness issues for early years service providers, for example, maternal and child health nurses, family support and preschool field officers and special education program workers
61. address the needs of families and children within the development of the Homelessness Assistance Standards project
62. in implementing new arrangements for the Children in Homeless Services project, ensure young people with children are included in the scope of the project, regardless of the type of agency assisting them.

8.5 Same-sex attracted young people

Consultation with same-sex attracted young people (SSAYP) has indicated that young people require a supportive environment in which to disclose issues about their sexuality. Young people perceive some youth services to be discriminatory towards them, including being refused access to services on the basis of the accommodation being unsafe for them. Young people also report that workers have at times asked them to behave discreetly in relation to their sexuality in order not to attract negative attention from other residents. Agencies providing shared accommodation may have difficulty providing a safe environment for SSAYP where other residents/tenants may not accept their sexuality. The requirement to provide a safe environment for all young people means that further practice development is needed to ensure that SSAYP can be safely and appropriately accommodated in the service system.

Issues around accommodation of transgender young people in single sex accommodation or in services where bedrooms are segregated by gender are complex, and agencies have indicated that they need support to resolve some of the issues raised.

Current activities

A best practice initiative for SSAYP will promote non-discriminatory housing and support options within the homelessness service system, and improve understanding of sexuality issues through further practice development. This will improve access to services and enhance service delivery. This initiative will be undertaken in one location and will have the capacity to be integrated into the broader homelessness service system response at no additional cost.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

63. from the \$4.8 million over four years allocated to the development of independent living skills programs, allocate a proportion to a project to improve access to services and to enhance service delivery to SSAYP.

8.6 Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities experience a range of challenges in accessing homelessness assistance. Cultural issues relating to the appropriateness of young people seeking help outside the family means that, in some instances, services may be trusted by young people but not by their families who feel that it is inappropriate to involve external agencies when resolving family issues. Cultural appropriateness of physical dwellings is also a concern for young CALD people.

Agencies report a high level of discrimination against CALD young people by real estate agents. Agencies report a range of practices including young people being incorrectly told that vacancies have been taken.

Asylum seekers and Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders experiencing housing crisis may access the homelessness service system, which, although not designed as a refugee program, acts as a safety net. The needs of this group require a different response as young people are unable to access income support and other services during the eligibility period. Agencies report covering costs for these young people, but that this expenditure is not reported to funding agencies and the costs are hidden.

Some agencies have developed sustainable responses to this group, for example allocating a proportion of their accommodation and support to these young people. Long-term prospects for many asylum seekers and TPV holders are uncertain with their futures dependent on the decisions of the Commonwealth Government. Their residency status therefore makes it difficult to stabilise their housing and support needs. For example, members of this client group may move to detention rather than to stable, long-term housing.

The use of interpreter services by homelessness agencies is low and agencies may require additional support and training in effective and appropriate use of interpreters. Promotion of interpreter services among agencies may be required.

Current activities

In 2001-02, the Office of Housing provided \$200,000 per annum to enable homelessness services to access telephone interpreter services.

In 2002-03, the Office of Housing funded the Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service to undertake a needs analysis of rural women experiencing family violence. This project will include young CALD women in rural areas, and report during 2004.

Immediate actions (1-12 months)

The Office of Housing will:

64. include cultural appropriateness and cultural sensitivity in the development of the Homelessness Assistance Standards project
65. promote and monitor the use of interpreter services by youth homelessness providers
66. monitor demand for homelessness assistance from TPV holders and asylum seekers.

Agencies should:

67. review the level of access of CALD young people to their programs and optimise their use of funded interpreter services to assist these young people.

Appendix 1: Membership of Youth Homelessness Action Plan Reference Group

Current members

Mr Adrian Scholtes	Coordinator, Baywest Youth Housing and Victorian Delegate to the National Youth Coalition for Housing	Ms Yvette Solomon	Program Advisor, Child Protection and Juvenile Justice, Community Care, Department of Human Services
Ms Claire Nyblom	Manager, Youth Homelessness, Melbourne Citymission	Mr Tony Newman	A/Manager, Community Programs, Office of Housing, Department of Human Services
Mr Anthony McEvoy	Manager, St Kilda Crisis Accommodation Service, The Salvation Army Statewide Crisis Services	Ms Prue Walker	Youth Homelessness Action Plan Project Officer, Homeless Support, Office of Housing, Department of Human Services
Ms Cora Campbell	Manager, Crisis Services, WAYSS Ltd.	Ms Allegra Walsh	A/Youth Project Officer, Homeless Support, Office of Housing, Department of Human Services
Ms Maureen Buck	Director, Waverley Emergency Adolescent Care	Ms Maree Tehan	Senior Project Officer, Drugs Policy and Services Branch, Department of Human Services
Mr John Bonnice	Program Manager, Youth Support Services, St Luke's Youth Services	Ms Susan Parsons	Executive Officer, Youth Services, Victorian Office of Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services
Ms Stephanie Blake	Youth Outreach Worker, Northern CASA		
Mr Stephen Wilson	Training Officer, Youth Substance Abuse Service		
Ms Deborah Handley	Western Homelessness Assistance Network Coordinator		
Dr Shelley Mallett	Research Director, Project i, The University of Melbourne		
Ms Deborah Tsorbaris	Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons		
Ms Meg Mundell	Youth Policy Project Officer, Council to Homeless Persons		
Mr Mal Douglas	Manager, Barwon and South West Youth Accommodation		
Ms Sarah Alexander	Senior Project Officer, Juvenile Justice, Community Care, Department of Human Services		
Mr Bill MacDonald	Project Manager, Mental Health Branch, Department of Human Services		
Ms Diane Godfrey	Manager, Homeless Support, Office of Housing, Department of Human Services		
Ms Jill Macqueen	A/Manager, Capital Responses, Office of Housing, Department of Human Services		

Previous members

Ms Netty Horton	Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons
Mr Eugene Bogнар	Senior Project Officer, Drugs Policy and Services Branch, Department of Human Services
Mr Sean Ling	Senior Policy Advisor, Office for Youth, Department of Victorian Communities
Ms Nadine Liddy	Programs Coordinator, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues
Mr Pat O'Leary	Mental Health Branch, Department of Human Services
Ms Deb Absler	Mental Health Branch, Department of Human Services
Ms Fran Collison	Senior Project Officer, Victorian Office of Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services
Mr Richard Bull	Senior Program Advisor, Child Protection, Community Care, Department of Human Services

