

Experiences of Homelessness for Young Care Leavers

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Recent publicity of the affordable housing shortage in WA has raised renewed concerns of the vulnerability of children and families. The increasing numbers of people struggling to afford housing is a national trend. It is not isolated to WA. However, as the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (2011) report states, housing prices are outstripping disposable income and this means that rental returns need to be higher to cover mortgages. The Committee (2011) also reports that public housing funding and availability has reduced. This is not good news for young people who are leaving statutory care.

As at June 2012 there were over 3,750 children and young people in care in WA, with 480 of these young people aged between 15 and 18 (Government of Western Australia, 2012). For many young people in care, turning 18 means moving out or 'ageing out' of care. It means that the State no longer has legal guardianship, carers typically cease to receive funding and often young people no longer have a place to stay. Many young people leave their final placement before the age of 18 and therefore don't 'age out', but they are none-the-less vulnerable to homelessness.

The WA housing crisis is a barrier for many young people attempting to access secure, affordable housing. In 2010, the rate of youth homelessness in WA was the second highest in the country (Shelter WA, 2011; Western Australian Council of Social Services, 2010). A recent survey of 158 people experiencing homelessness in Western Australia found that 23 per cent of the respondents were under the age of 25, and that half of the young people had a care experience (Ruah Community Services, n.d.). Importantly, this project does not appear to cover the entire homeless population – it identified mainly those experiencing primary homelessness and located in public places (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Homelessness Australia, n.d.).

A national study conducted in 2009 found that 50 per cent of young people in care had to leave their placement when they turned 18, with 40 per cent of these young people not knowing where they would be living after this time (McDowall, 2009).

Most young people face barriers and difficulties accessing housing, however these issues are often compounded for young care leavers because of reduced educational outcomes, reduced

employment options and income, a general lack of independent living skills, few having the option to remain in their current living arrangement past the age of 18, a lack of familial support and not having a 'safety net' to fall back on once they have left their carers (Hall, 2012; Natalier and Mendes, 2012; National Youth Commission, 2008; Johnson, et al, 2010; Greenen and Powers, 2007; Moslehuddin and Mendes, n.d.).

One young man, who we will call Liam (in order to protect his identity), left his final placement at age 17. He reported to CREATE Foundation that the struggle was 'more or less finding people willing to support you, and carers can sometimes shut the door on you.' Liam describes spending five months 'moving from place to place....once or twice a week I could stay with a mate' after he left his final placement.

It is essential that care planning occurs well before the young person leaves their final placement as it gives stakeholders more time to develop and implement properly thought out plans that equip young people leaving care for adult life (Government of Western Australia, n.d.). However, there needs to be a strong commitment from government, workers and other key stakeholders to actively involve young people in the development and implementation of their leaving care plan, because without this, it becomes less of a plan, and more of a reflection of bureaucratic process (Hall, 2012).

Many young people, including Liam believe that transition plans need to 'be more one-on-one with the young person, it needs to reflect their needs for their living situation, and look at what kind of income they have or will need to support it....and try to set up a back-up if it all doesn't go well.' Liam also feels that the government needs to 'help young people look for a place, rather than saying, 'you're 18 now, see ya.'

Young people in care and those leaving care need to have the living skills required by young adults in our society. Far too many young people leave care without knowing how to cook, how to budget and how to



apply for rental accommodation and many of them do not have reliable adults they can turn to for support.

The CREATE Your Future independent living skills program, aims to provide young people with some of the basic living skills they will need upon leaving care. There are other services that provide direct case management and support to care leavers, however there is little doubt that learning basic living skills should form a part of the care regime whilst in care.

CREATE encourages the WA government to invest more significant resources into ensuring that all young people in WA transition from care with the benefit of an individualised leaving care plan and through continued commitment to those services supporting care leavers. After all, it is the post care outcomes that are the true measure of the effectiveness of the care and protection system. ■

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