



Believing In Children,  
Young People, Families  
& Their Future.

Berry Street submission to the  
National Housing & Homelessness Plan  
(Issues Paper)

October 2023

## Acknowledgement of Country

Berry Street acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, skies, and waterways across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to Elders resting in the dreaming, to the Elders of today, and to the Elders to come, who will continue to care, protect, and nurture Traditional Lands. Berry Street acknowledges Elders as the holders, educators and protectors of cultural knowledge and wisdom. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures date back 65,000 years and that sovereignty has never been ceded. Berry Street has learnt that connection to countries, cultures and communities facilitates pride in identity, resilience, and healing. We are committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in our care, our school, and other services to connect to their heritages, languages, storytelling, dreaming and songlines.

## Introduction

Berry Street welcomes this opportunity to respond to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper. Berry Street is one of Australia's largest independent child and family services organisations; for over 145 years we have worked with children, young people and families. We provide a diverse range of programs to around 35,000 people in Victoria each year, including youth homelessness supports, parenting and family services, family violence programs, education services, youth crime prevention and our statewide trauma therapeutic service, Take Two. Of particular significance to this submission is that Berry Street delivers one of Victoria's largest out-of-home care (OoHC) programs, including home-based, kinship and residential care, leaving care and post-care supports.

This paper proposes key issues for consideration by the Commonwealth Government to inform development of the 10-year National Housing and Homelessness Plan (The Plan), with a focus on the needs of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, who also experience the impacts of trauma. There is no public system more aware of the consequences of developmental trauma than the child protection and OoHC system. Children and young people involved with this system experience high rates of chaos, threat, loss, isolation, and cultural disconnection. These are additional burdens along with the physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and family violence experiences that led to their entry into the system. Then, as they transition out of the system, all too frequently these young people also face housing insecurity. The experience of trauma is a known risk factor for homelessness and it is well established that young people who have spent many of their childhood years in statutory care face significant challenges when making the transition to independent living.

Research shows young people leaving OoHC are at greater risk of becoming homeless than other young people. Berry Street is calling on the Commonwealth Government to address the unique challenges faced by this priority cohort of young people in the development of the Plan, along with

the needs of other young people we support who also have high rates of exposure to trauma but are ineligible for existing post care supports. For example, there are many young people who come in and out of OoHC or who are on the edges of the Child Protection and OoHC systems and who therefore do not have access to post care supports.

We highlight the critical need for governments at every level to understand the intersect between trauma and youth homelessness. It is imperative to develop policy solutions that create – and strengthen – opportunities for these young people to heal. Berry Street’s experience in delivering all forms of OoHC, as well as a range of programs and services designed to prevent youth homelessness, leaves us well-positioned to comment on the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper.

### What Berry Street delivers

Across all of its regions Berry Street provides a spectrum of supports designed to prevent and address homelessness for young people. Some of our key programs include:

**Transitional Youth Support Services:** offers outreach support to young single people or young families aged 16 to 25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program incorporates:

- Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (HIP) aimed at young people who are at risk of homelessness or newly homeless due to family breakdown and have not yet entered the homelessness service system, and;
- Transition to Independence (TTI): offering accommodation to young people aged 16 to 25 who have become homeless and are completing their education.

**Reconnect:** community-based prevention and early intervention for young people aged 12-18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness (funded by the Commonwealth Government)

**Education First Youth Foyer:** supports young people aged 16 to 25 who are unable to live at home or do not have a stable place to live to achieve their education goals. Young people receive safe, secure accommodation while they study, as well as other support and skills to become independent adults.

**Better Futures/Home Stretch:** a Victorian Government initiative providing support for young people in OoHC to transition to independent living, up to the age of 21 years. For young people leaving OoHC, including residential care, Home Stretch helps them transition to other housing options, supported through an allowance, case work and flexible funding.

**Lead Tenant:** provides a safe, stable, and supportive living environment for young people aged 16 to 18 years old while they transition from OoHC. This program helps young people develop independent living skills through accommodation and support from a live-in mentor. Funded through Victoria’s Department of Fairness, Families and Housing (DFFH).

**Intensive Case Management Service:** Provides intensive, long-term support to young people involved with Child Protection who have complex needs. Most ICMS work occurs through outreach to the young person in their OoHC placement, with their families, or elsewhere in the community.

Case managers use a range of skills to build a relationship with, advocate for and provide the right support for the young person. Also funded through DFFH.

**Going Out and Living Successfully (GOALS):** support and accommodation for young people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or about to leave out-of-home care. Helps young people, 16 to 25 years old (referrals accepted up to 23 years of age), who have experienced disadvantage to develop the skills they need to live independently. Philanthropically funded.

**Keys2Independence (K2I):** supports young people aged 16 to 21 years - who are in OoHC or who have left care - and their care team, to start early planning to increase young people's living skills and identify housing pathways as they prepare for independent living. Uses the Everyday Life Skills tool to identify any gaps in young people's knowledge and capacity.

**Targeted Care Packages (TCP):** support young people involved with Child Protection to live in an alternative living arrangement other than residential care or to prevent their entry into residential care. Packages are tailored to the individual needs of the young person and include both psychosocial and financial supports to help the young person live safely outside of residential care.

**Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST):** a family and community-based model of treatment that aims to keep young people aged 10-17 years, living safely at home, in school and out of the OoHC and justice system. MST is an evidence-based, early intervention program that helps keep families safely together.

## Key recommendations

Berry Street's submission responds to the following question from the *National Housing and Homelessness Plan – Issues Paper – Summary*:

*How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?*

Berry Street advocates for a youth specific lens within the National Housing and Homelessness Plan to ensure there are youth-specific strategies nationwide, focused on prevention, early intervention, and affordable, secure housing tailored to the needs of this priority group. We support the advocacy efforts of other leading community support organisations and peak bodies who also propose youth-specific strategies to disrupt the pathway from youth homelessness into adult homelessness. We believe this approach aligns with key commitments in *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, including strengthening the interface between children and family services and housing so we can work together to help children, young people and families in need of support reach their full potential by growing up safe and supported, free from harm and neglect. A youth-specific lens within the Plan should be underpinned by trauma-informed principles. These principles should also be more broadly integrated into homelessness systems and service delivery to support the recovery of young people. The most effective strategies for minimising long-term consequences for young people are trauma informed.

This submission brings attention to the challenges facing young people supported by Berry Street, whose needs are unmet within current structures, and offers recommendations for change. Berry Street calls for a reorientation of the housing and homelessness service systems to prioritise specialist, intensive supports for vulnerable young people who are preparing to transition into – and are in the early phases of - independent living. Youth-specific homelessness programs are scarce and under-resourced, leading to limited access to appropriate housing options for many young people. Berry Street urges the Commonwealth Government to detail, within the forthcoming Plan, strategies for supporting the expansion of early intervention approaches to prevent youth homelessness. We recognise that youth homelessness is not exclusively a housing concern for services to address, but rather an outcome that can be prevented through early interventions, such as strengthening family functioning and supporting mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. While Berry Street appreciates the Commonwealth Government's support for the Reconnect Program, we see opportunity to accomplish much more in this space. Berry Street supports young people who are being retraumatised within existing systems.

We propose the following key measures as part of a youth-specific approach to addressing this harm:

- Revise social housing rent models and increase government allowances
- Create and expand youth-specific supported accommodation options
- Expand Youth Foyer model
- Earmark social housing to support family reunification
- Embed trauma-informed intensive case management approaches for priority cohorts transitioning to independent living
- Expand early intervention and prevention programs and initiatives

## The challenges

Berry Street staff are witnessing a significant increase in the challenges that young people in our programs, who are either at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness, are facing. There is a critical shortage of affordable, secure and suitable accommodation that is essential for achieving positive outcomes with this vulnerable group. The young people we support are intensely disadvantaged in today's competitive rental market – they are competing against peers with much higher levels of social capital, they have lower incomes relative to older adults, they have no rental history, and frequently encounter discrimination. While social and community housing stock should be provided to people who are next in line for support, irrespective of income, Berry Street believes there is a need for increased government regulation around the way relevant wait lists are managed. Accessing utilities can also prove difficult, with many providers unwilling to enter agreements with these young people as they transition to independence.

Furthermore, while head leasing can offer a viable route to independent rental accommodation for young people transitioning out of OoHC or unsafe home environments, Berry Street staff observe an increased reluctance among community and government agencies to enter into head leasing agreements. This challenge poses specific barriers for young people under 18 who are exiting residential care - they are unable to independently sign a lease, and their families are usually unable to act on their behalf. Amongst other impacts, we have seen young people being driven to live in unsafe situations as the only viable alternative, such as young women under 18 years of age relying on living with perpetrators of past violence due to lack of other options.

The young people Berry Street support have experienced family conflict, violence or abuse in the family home and are often transitioning to independent living at a younger age than their peers. They have limited social support networks and frequently contend with complex mental health challenges, which impacts their ability to manage independent living, including shared housing arrangements. They typically require support to maintain a tenancy and can find it more challenging than most to access and navigate the Centrelink system without assistance. Engaging in employment and education is also difficult without wraparound supports.

A significant number of the young people Berry Street support are also living with various disabilities, the most prevalent being cognitive disability, psychosocial disability, neurodiversity, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Most do not qualify for post-care transition to NDIS Supported Independent Living (SIL) which offers a high level of supervision and assistance with daily tasks to foster independence and skills development. This underscores the necessity for alternative forms of supported housing and enhanced outreach support for young people during critical transition stages.

As is well-known to all in the fields of child protection, OoHC, poverty and homelessness, the over-representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people on all the concerning data points is a National shame and requires multi-level, multi-responses led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. An increasing number of Aboriginal children in the Victorian OoHC system are now cared for by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) which is a major positive step. However, whilst the numbers of Aboriginal children coming into care are increasing exponentially the long-term implications, including the impacts on homelessness, will equally grow.

For the young people transitioning from OoHC who are likely to meet eligibility requirements for NDIS support, obtaining the necessary assessments for SIL can be a lengthy and demanding process often taking 12 months or more. In these circumstances, the potential lapse in service provision between the conclusion of Child Protection intervention at 18 years and the shift to SIL is causing distress for young people and workers alike. Addressing this issue requires a commitment from governments to provide ongoing support for young people during this interim period.

Berry Street believes many of the challenges outlined could be mitigated through redesigned social housing models supported by policies focused specifically on young people with acute needs as described through the following recommendations.

### **Revise social housing rent models and increase allowances.**

The national Plan should encourage state governments to reconsider social housing rent structures for young people with specific needs. The standard practice of setting social housing rent at 25% of income poses an impossible burden for young people, especially those without access to supplementary allowances available through programs such as Home Stretch in Victoria - and even for many who do. The existing rental market remains beyond the means of most young people supported by Berry Street despite Commonwealth allowances. Existing provisions are insufficient for making young people financially viable to housing providers, compared with other community cohorts, and do not adequately account for the needs of especially vulnerable young people who require additional support transitioning to adulthood.

Berry Street believes current percentage levels of income-based rent that young people are expected to pay should be reduced and that provisos around rent in advance and bond should be adjusted or removed. We support Melbourne City Mission's (MCM) advocacy efforts that propose an adjustment of the social housing subsidy model so that the gap between the young person's contribution and the rent being required is covered by a youth homelessness or housing subsidy paid by the state or territory government.

In its submission to the Victorian Government's 10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy (Strategy) Discussion Paper 'Reimagining Social Housing for Young People' (2021), MCM also called for consideration of a fully funded rental model to support young people with complex needs to access and sustain social housing. This model would remove the requirement for the most vulnerable young people to contribute rent, in order to support sustainable housing outcomes, including pathways to independence and transition to the private rental market. Berry Street recognises significant value in this proposal for the young people we support.

### **Create and expand youth-specific supported accommodation options.**

Berry Street applauds the range of recent announcements as part of the Commonwealth Government's Housing Australia Future Fund, including additional funds to address homelessness and build more social housing via a range of programs and initiatives. Within the broader scope of ongoing Commonwealth efforts, such as the Housing Australia Fund and the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement with states and territories, as well as the central focus of this submission—the National Housing and Homelessness Plan—Berry Street strongly advocates for targeted focus on allocating and expanding social housing specifically for diverse models of supported youth accommodations to address a wide spectrum of needs.

Berry Street endorses a campaign by the Council to Homeless Persons in Victoria to see a range of housing models provided, as some young people will thrive in independent units with minimal support, while others will achieve greater stability in shared living arrangements with more intensive support, and staff available onsite or via outreach. Levels of support can vary from moderate to intensive, encompassing case management, therapeutic support, independent living skills and facilitated engaged with education, employment and community.

Medium-term, staffed, congregate accommodation models with case management for young people hold real promise for enhancing outcomes. They offer opportunity for young people to build important skills in a nurturing setting, where they can learn from mistakes without dire consequences and continue to live safely in their home, rather than experiencing punitive responses from landlords who may be quick to resort to eviction. Berry Street's Going Out and Living Successfully (GOALS) program, in Gippsland, serves as an example of a positive way forward. This philanthropically funded initiative models the essential components needed to appropriately support young people who would otherwise be at significant risk of homelessness. It also provides an example of how to implement these types of services in regional and rural areas.

## GOALS

GOALS is specifically targeted at the identified gap where many services relied upon by young people are withdrawn when they reach 18 - often referred to as 'aging out' of the system. Young people transitioning from OoHC need gradual and flexible departures. Other young people who have not been in OoHC recently, but nevertheless cannot live safely at home, also experience gaps in the service system and are ineligible for programs such as Home Stretch.

GOALS operates across two sites in Victoria's Gippsland region. In total there are 11 two-bedroom units as well as additional units for communal space/group sessions and a live in-mentor on one site. At the other site three young families with babies and toddlers reside. Although staff are not onsite at this property, regular intensive outreach is provided. Overall, there is potential to support up to 22 young people (and their children). Currently, all are at capacity.

The layout of units enables proximity to staff, so support is always accessible, along with privacy so young people can build autonomy. Sites were selected according to accessibility to key support services and public transport, especially for young families. Each young person has access to strengths-based, trauma-informed individualised supports and guidance. They work alongside case managers to develop a plan for their future.

GOALS staff undertake additional training in evidence-based approaches in areas such as early childhood development to better support young parents in the program. In addition to individual case management, there are group meetings designed to increase social participation where young



people prepare budget-friendly meals for the group. Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) short courses are provided to support young residents in getting their drivers licence and staff are trained as supervising drivers. Career-focused courses are provided to build employability skills and financial literacy programs are introduced.

Highlights from the past 12 months include six young people securing full-time employment, three securing part-time employment and two maintaining engagement in education; four young people getting their drivers licences and buying their first cars; three young people no longer requiring government benefits; five young people successfully transitioning out of the program into independent living; others acquiring their learners driver's license and/or participating in Berry Street's learn to drive mentoring program.

Private rental prices in the Gippsland region where GOALS operates increased by around 15% in the past year. The most recent Rental Affordability Index shows regional areas have been hardest hit by rising rents, with rental affordability worsening across regions in every state and territory. Without stable accommodation it is difficult for any young person to maintain education, training and/or employment; without education, training and/or employment it is almost impossible to remove the social and economic barriers to obtaining stable housing. This creates a vicious cycle that is hard to break. GOALS is addressing this unmet need. ██████ story provides one such example:

#### *Case Study – GOALS*

*Transitioning to independent living poses unique challenges, particularly for young people facing adverse circumstances such as family violence. ██████ grew up in a household troubled with alcohol abuse and family violence. This created a hostile living environment that impeded ██████ personal growth and wellbeing. Recognising the need for change, ██████ mustered the courage to leave his home and seek a better life. ██████ experienced deep emotional turmoil due to the traumatic circumstances surrounding his family life. Overcoming the emotional scars and building resilience was essential for ██████ personal growth.*

*As ██████ severed ties with ██████ family, ██████ faced the urgent need to support ██████ financially. Despite the numerous challenges faced in his personal life, ██████ was also determined to pursue ██████ education. Juggling schoolwork and part-time employment in these circumstances poses intense challenges. ██████ reached out to local services, including shelters, advocacy groups, and counselling services. Recognising the importance of education, ██████ worked closely with ██████ school's guidance counsellor and teachers. They provided flexibility when necessary and connected ██████ with resources for academic support. ██████ prioritised part-time work with flexible hours that aligned with ██████ school schedule. This was especially challenging as ██████ was initially deemed ineligible for government assistance, first needing to prove he was unable to live at home.*

*Since being accepted into the GOALS Program, ██████ has achieved some significant milestones. With the support of GOALS staff ██████ has been approved for Youth Allowance. ██████ is maintaining his part-time job*

*but has been able to reduce ■ hours to make more time for study. Through ■ Youth Allowance, part time employment and careful budgeting, ■ is successfully supporting himself financially, covering ■ own living expenses. Despite all of the challenges, ■ is maintaining ■ dedication to education and academic achievement. The continuous support from GOALS is helping ■ to heal from past traumas and improve ■ overall emotional wellbeing.*

*Through persistence and determination, ■ will be ready to successfully transition to independent living within the next 12 months. ■ is now in a safe and nurturing environment providing a stable foundation for future growth and despite the many setbacks, ■ is thriving. ■ serves as an inspiration to others at GOALS and those navigating the path to independence.*

While there is an urgent need for governments to fund medium term, supported accommodation models such as GOALS, Berry Street also calls for the Plan to outline strategies to increase access to crisis accommodation services and youth refuges in all areas. We particularly emphasise a critical need for refuges that are equipped to accommodate and support young people with highly complex needs, including those with youth justice involvement.

### **Expand Youth Foyer model.**

Berry Street supports calls from across child and family services and the homelessness sector to see the Youth Foyer model expanded in Australia. This model is a leading example of an integrated support service – a tailored transitional housing model for young people at-risk of homelessness, providing a supportive setting where they can develop the practical and emotional skills necessary for independent living (Borlagdan & Keys, 2015; Coddou, Borlagdan & Mallett, 2019). Since 2016 Berry Street has operated an Education First Youth Foyer in the Victorian regional area of Goulburn, in partnership with Beyond Housing Network and GOTAFE.

At any one time we support up to 40 young people aged 16-25 years – almost 20 percent of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander - with a safe, secure, and affordable place to live for up to two years, while they commit to engaging with education and/or employment. Young people are connected to education, training and employment opportunities, have 24-hour on-site support from staff and have the chance to build social connections with other young people and community members and participate in community activities. They are also supported to find housing when it's time to live independently. Berry Street's Youth Foyer is an accredited Youth Foyer, along with 11 others across the country. A further nine Foyers have commenced accreditation this year and will join the growing network.

According to the Foyer Foundation – which supports the growth of the Australian Foyer Movement - the development of the movement in Australia has been more gradual than in the UK and the rest of Europe. Berry Street forms part of the current scaled-up national effort to expand the model, supporting the Foyer Foundation's vision of 50 accredited Foyers by 2030. The primary focus of this

campaign is to reduce the numbers of young people cycling through the housing and homelessness system. Further information on the broader advocacy to expand Youth Foyers can be found at <https://foyer.org.au/>

More than 250 young people been supported through the Berry Street Education First Youth Foyer since it opened its doors. Most young people thrive in this environment and achieve important milestones as they prepare to transition to independent living, with seven students having purchased their own homes after being through the Foyer program. ■■■ story, below, typifies the kinds of goals young people achieve when they are given the opportunity.

#### *Case study – Foyer*

■■■ came to the Berry Street Youth Foyer when ■■■ was struggling at school with Year 12 and had nowhere to live. ■■■ readily accepted the Foyer’s requirements and was committed to engaging with education. ■■■ was provided with her own furnished studio accommodation and shared laundry and kitchen facilities and a communal study area with 40 other young people. Study-friendly housing and supports have allowed ■■■ to undertake a degree in ■■■ and a Master of ■■■ at ■■■. ■■■ now supports ■■■ and no longer requires Centrelink assistance – ■■■ has even saved up and bought ■■■ own car. More than 150 students just like ■■■ have successfully Completed the ■■■ through GOTAFE since the program commenced in ■■■ in 2016 and are now studying a broad array of courses and subjects.

*“I get emotional about this place – it has helped me so much. Without the Youth Foyer I wouldn’t be where I am today and I would like to thank everyone for what they have done. I hope every other student who comes through these doors is impacted by what everyone does for them.”*

■■■

Around the world, the Foyer model has demonstrated positive outcomes for young people who are capable of engaging with education and employment. However, as this submission has outlined, Berry Street also supports a large cohort of young people whose current circumstances and levels of complexity require intensive support before they can effectively engage with employment and educational opportunities. For these young people, alternative models of medium-term supported housing are essential.

#### **Earmark social housing to support family reunification.**

Homelessness poses a significant barrier to the reunification of young people in OoHC with their families. Social housing waitlists, even for families deemed a priority, can stretch for several years. This severely impedes some families' capacity to address identified risk factors preventing the return of their children into their care. In turn, when young people are ‘ageing out’ of care, they face

housing insecurity and at imminent risk of homelessness when they may otherwise have been able to live in social housing with their family. We have seen examples of young people having to remain in OoHC, including residential care, whilst their parents struggle to find appropriate accommodation that would make reunification possible. The emotional, relational, and financial cost of such delays is incalculable.

Berry Street proposes that innovative partnership models could be employed to address these specific circumstances. For instance, social housing could be earmarked, through collaborative efforts between relevant state government departments such as child protection, housing, and youth justice, and in collaboration with community service organisations such as Berry Street, be allocated to support reunification planning in suitable situations.

### **Embed trauma-informed intensive case management approaches for priority cohorts transitioning to independent living.**

Berry Street welcomed – and had long advocated - for the Victorian Government initiative of Home Stretch, to provide young people in OoHC with support to transition to adulthood until the age of 21 years. Nonetheless, the program faces overwhelming demand. This demand, combined with a chronic shortage of appropriate housing options means there is an urgent need for a comprehensive suite of supports for vulnerable young people as they prepare for – and transition to - independent living.

Berry Street advocates for expanded trauma-informed intensive case management supports to young people who are in the process of transitioning from care to independent living – and when they are in the early phases of independent living. Key supports and programs, such as the Intensive Case Management Service (ICMS) and the Lead Tenant program, funded through Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) in Victoria, are often withdrawn for young people when they turn 18; this has a detrimental impact on the ability of providers to deliver continuous care. Further, programs such as Better Futures/Home Stretch rely on young people’s capacity and willingness to voluntarily engage with the service system. When overwhelmed by demand, program capacity can be reduced to case coordination rather than tailored one-on-one case management and direct support. The onus is placed on young people to actively engage.

Trauma significantly impacts the ways young people perceive and interact with services. Extensive evidence shows that traumatic experiences can disrupt and interfere with emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development. Young people who have borderline cognitive disabilities, along with other psychosocial challenges, and who have also experienced trauma, are likely to be functioning below their potential. In the case of the young people Berry Street support, their presentation is often much lower than their chronological age *because of* their trauma and neglect experience. For example, if their focus is on immediate survival or they are reliving the memories of

trauma that threatened their survival in the past, they may be less able to problem solve, negotiate with others, and present well in interviews, compared to their peers.

All of this is to say that young people who have experienced trauma may have compromised capacity to engage with services in the ways expected of them when they are just 18, or not yet 18. They are also likely to struggle with navigating the service system. This is exacerbated for young people who are exiting residential care and living with disability. These young people represent a sizeable cohort of Berry Street's care leavers. Our case management and residential services teams make the following observation:

*“When a young person is asked to engage with specialist homelessness services and programs at a young age, they often do not have the capacity to meet the requirements of the service, which can be arduous. The demand for daily presentation to services, when the young person may also be experiencing frequent placement changes and instability, can be very challenging. Young people in these situations also have limited capacity to access services as they do not have an independent vehicle, employment, adult Centrelink payments and independent living skills. Improved processes for young people under 18 years would involve removing the obligation on young people to ‘present’ to services and instead provide capacity for professionals in the young person’s support network to take the lead as required.”*

While the link between trauma experiences and subsequent homelessness is widely recognised, the systems surrounding young people are often not functioning in trauma-informed ways. There is a big gap between recognising trauma prevalence and implementing trauma-informed service delivery. Youth-specific strategies could strengthen and extend case management models that address the unique needs of young people transitioning from OoHC, and who are in the early phases of independent living, as an important approach to trauma-informed homelessness prevention. The case study below provides an example of the pervasive challenges impacting many young people who require more support than systems currently provide in order to transition successfully to independent living. It also demonstrates the positive impact that timely and intensive case management can have on a young person's trajectory:

#### *Case study - ICMS*

*Berry Street’s Intensive Case Management Service (ICMS) in its South Eastern region had been case managing ██████ since ██████ was ██████ years old. During this time, ██████ experienced multiple OoHC placement breakdowns, substantial AOD struggles and sexual exploitation. When ██████ was ██████ years old case management supports began focusing on upskilling ██████ to transition to independent living, and after many attempts to secure suitable living arrangements for her, at ██████ years she was accepted into an Enhanced Lead Tenant (ELT) program. ELT provides an additional level of support in the Lead Tenant program, which places young people aged 15-19 with live-in youth mentors to help build their independence skills before leaving care.*

While ██████ made steady progress within this arrangement, ██████ high-risk situation continued which compromised efforts to support ██████ independent living skills. At the age of ██████, the ELT provider advised they could not provide care to ██████ past the age of ██████, due to an impending reduction in DFFH supports. Urgent efforts were made to obtain longer-term housing for ██████, with the prospect of many other supports being withdrawn as ██████ turned ██████, including case management.

Family was not a safe option for ██████ and it looked as though her care team would have to transport ██████ to a homeless shelter on ██████ birthday. However, after many presentations at panels, another agency offered housing on the proviso that a plan with intensive levels of support could be implemented to help ██████ obtain longer-term accommodation. As part of this plan Berry Street's ICMS team and senior management advocated to DFFH for funded support workers to work with ██████ post ██████ turning ██████. While this would not usually be approved, an exception was made due to ██████ lack of independent skills and significant trauma history. The ICMS case manager and support workers continued to work tirelessly to support ██████ to acquire crucial life skills so ██████ could progress to longer term housing.

ICMS arranged for referrals to services to support ██████ after ██████ turned ██████ including to Occupational Therapy, the Living and Life Skills program, the Better Futures/Home Stretch program and Monash Health for AOD supports. ICMS was able to provide an appropriate handover to these professionals, who formed part of an enhanced care team for ██████ as ██████ worked toward independence. Over the following months ██████ made significant progress, with the appropriate wrap around supports in place. Eventually ██████ was offered longer-term supported accommodation – ██████ is now doing well and is no longer using substances.

If not for the leadership and advocacy of ICMS ██████ faced the very real risk of homelessness from the moment ██████ turned ██████. Too often, however, system shortcomings mean that highly complex young people with significant trauma are not receiving the intensive support necessary for a successful transition into independence and beyond.

### **Expand early intervention and prevention programs and initiatives.**

Berry Street strongly recommends that the Plan provide a blueprint for expanding early intervention programs across all locations to reduce the risks of youth homelessness. Supporting families to ensure young people can remain living safely at home not only prevents the need for young people to enter OoHC but also reduces their subsequent risk of homelessness. A specific youth focus in the national Plan could focus on additional support for these efforts, in addition to the ongoing commitment of the Commonwealth to the Reconnect program, which Berry Street delivers in the Central Highlands region of Victoria.

Multisystemic Therapy (MST), delivered by Berry Street as part of the Victorian Government's Family Preservation and Reunification (FPR) Response, is an evidence-based family therapy program with demonstrated effectiveness in strengthening family function and keeping young people out of the care system; this is anticipated to be an important factor in reducing homelessness in the long-term. MST works with families intensively and therapeutically to establish and support goals based on their strengths and needs. Evidence demonstrates that parents supported by MST improve their capacity to cope with current and future problems and increase their social supports. Therapists collaborate with families to ensure the young person remains at home, engaged in education, and avoids further involvement in criminal activities.

Evaluations of the model demonstrate: reduction in family and placement breakdown; decreased arrests, offences, and detention of young people; improved family relations and functioning; increased school/vocational attendance by young people, and effectiveness in treating adolescent substance abuse problems (Dopp et al., 2014; Keles et al., 2021; Schaeffer et al., 2021; Swenson et al., 2010; Van Der Stouwe et al., 2014; Zajac et al., 2015). There is a need for governments to significantly increase investment in evidence-based interventions that keep families together, as a key approach to preventing youth homelessness. This is well supported by recent evaluation data from the FPR Response which showed 229 fewer children had entered care than the total expected for all children connected to the program over 2 years. The reduction in care services use was attributed to improvements in family functioning (FPR Response, Impact and Evaluation Outcomes Review, October 2023).

While strengthening families is a well-evidenced approach to reducing youth homelessness, service system constraints limit the provision of relevant supports. In light of this deficit it is critical that preventive efforts are scaled up to support transitions to independent living for young people who are leaving OoHC or who cannot live safely at home. Berry Street delivers a range of programs designed to address this need however additional resources are required to provide sustained, recovery focused pathways for young people. While this submission has already outlined the case for intensive case management, there is also a need to continue and expand programs that provide early assessment of young people's independent living skills, help to build their capacity for independent living, provide advocacy in the transition phase and oversee any tenancy-related issues that may arise, in order to address issues quickly. Keys2Independence (K2I), delivered by Berry Street in the northern region of Melbourne, provides these supports.

K2I assesses young people's everyday living skills, identifies their strengths and areas they can work on with their care teams. These assessments help workers and care teams to understand what kind of accommodation will be best suited for the young person, from supported accommodation to congregate, transitional (medium-term) accommodation through to head lease arrangements, depending on where a young person is at. K2I can also monitor young people who are in accommodation to identify tenancy issues quickly and work with programs such as Better

Futures/Home Stretch to ensure rental obligations are being met. Early intervention of this nature helps to avoid evictions and the need for crisis interventions.

The Transitional Youth Support Service (TYSS), also delivered in Berry Street's Northern metropolitan region, supports young people aged 16 to 25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness by offering assertive outreach, triage and assessment, family violence support, referrals for emergency, medium and long-term housing and assistance to transition into independent living. TYSS supports young people to re-engage or maintain education, training and employment and provides referrals to specialist services including legal, mental health and AOD. Many of the young people supported by TYSS are at risk of falling through service gaps – most are ineligible for support through Home Stretch as they are not transitioning from OoHC, although they often have a history of Child Protection involvement and previous care experiences, and they are unable to live safely at home. Both K2I and TYSS struggle to meet current demand and are grappling with the repercussions for young people of a critically constrained youth homelessness sector and significant lack of social housing available for them. The following case TYSS case study highlights all of these concerns:

#### *Case study – TYSS*

██████ has a long history of trauma and unstable housing due to family violence – █████ first started working with TYSS when █████ was █████ years-old as █████ was couch-surfing with friends and required safe, stable housing. At this time █████ was in a relationship with █████ now ex-partner, who was perpetrating significant family violence towards █████. █████ has been extremely transient due to the ongoing effects of violence, including in █████ family home. TYSS initially supported █████ with some urgent housing needs including liaising with tenancy workers and removal and storage of █████ belongings from the family home.

Amongst many housing options explored at this time, TYSS facilitated █████ move to a youth accommodation program offered by an external youth homelessness service, with █████ case-management transferred the new service. Soon after, █████ former partner tracked █████ down and assaulted █████, leading to serious injury, while also causing significant property damage. This incident impacted █████ tenancy and █████ later moved from █████ to escape further violence. █████ spent the remainder of that year couch-surfing and sleeping rough across █████, with no other housing options available to █████.

When █████ learned █████ perpetrator had been incarcerated, █████ returned to █████ and presented to a Youth Access Point, requesting crisis accommodation. █████ was referred to a family violence refuge for █████ where █████ remained for some weeks. At this point █████ again self-referred to TYSS, requesting housing and family violence support. TYSS supported █████ to be placed on the prioritisation list across several housing access points, requesting transitional housing (medium-term supported accommodation) as an urgent priority. Due to █████ complex needs and the lack of support available within the homelessness service system, █████ was exited from all youth



refuges █████ was eligible for. TYSS advocated strongly for █████ to secure transitional housing due to █████ extended period of homelessness and █████ need for intensive case-management support to address the impacts of significant family violence – the lethality of this risk increased when █████ former partner was released from prison.

Following months of advocacy, multiple refuge placements including episodes of rough sleeping, █████ was eventually successful in obtaining transitional housing – although it was outside of the region serviced by TYSS. TYSS provided support to establish this tenancy and linked █████ in with local services in █████ new region. Throughout █████ time in this accommodation, █████ required ongoing intensive case-management, advocacy and family violence risk assessment/safety planning. █████ is a young person with extremely complex needs who has a lack of trust in the service system owing to many years of trauma, disadvantage and system intervention - this impacts on her capacity to engage. █████ ongoing relationship with TYSS staff has allowed █████ to steadily build trust - this has been a protective factor for █████. █████ continued to contact TYSS for additional support throughout █████ tenancy in transitional housing. TYSS agreed to provide consult and advocacy during this period, including resubmitting █████ long-term housing application and advocating on █████ behalf. █████ has required a youth-specific, tailored response to address █████ needs.

TYSS' flexible referral pathway and support criteria has allowed █████ to engage with a service whenever █████ required. This flexibility was instrumental to █████ obtaining medium-term supported accommodation and ultimately long-term housing, diverting █████ from a pathway of chronic homelessness. Multiple interventions were required throughout █████ service engagement to ensure █████ remained safe, housed and able to access essential services. Six years after █████ first presentation to TYSS, █████ is finally housed in long-term, safe, stable accommodation. Secure long-term housing provides the foundation for █████ to work towards healing and living a life free of the violence that defined █████ adolescence and early adulthood.

## Conclusion

As the 10-year National Housing and Homelessness Plan is being developed, Berry Street calls on the Commonwealth Government to carefully consider the needs of young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness who are also impacted by trauma. Recommendations in this paper are informed by a synthesis of young people's experiences and the perspectives of our staff. The escalating challenges currently facing young people are retraumatising them in significant ways. Berry Street believes a trauma-informed, youth-specific lens within the Plan would provide an important framework for national youth-specific strategies to focus on the needs of our most vulnerable young people.

We call on all levels of government to work together to transform models of social housing – including through the provision of new and expanded medium-term, youth-specific supported models of accommodation. This would provide a specific priority cohort of young people with the

appropriate interventions they require to successfully transition to independent living. An increase in Commonwealth allowances is also critical to ensuring that young people who cannot live safely at home have the opportunity to live independently in rental market with unprecedented low vacancy rates and high rental prices.

Trauma-informed intensive case management has demonstrated effectiveness in providing the wrap around supports necessary for young people's sustainable transition to independence. There is clear scope to expand eligibility and funding for these supports. Finally, Berry Street believes the most effective way to address youth homelessness is through early intervention and prevention - supporting family functioning to ensure young people can remain living safely at home. Significant potential benefits can be achieved through the expansion of evidence-based programs and practices to this effect across the child and family services sector.

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