



# National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper

Submission

**Submission to  
Australian Government  
Department of Social Services**

**20 October 2023**

Submitted by:

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Youth Off The Streets

ABN: 29 100 388 412

[Redacted]

## Contents

Contents.....	2
Youth Off The Streets: Background.....	5
1. <i>Executive summary and recommendations</i> .....	5
Recommendation 1:.....	7
Recommendation 2:.....	7
Recommendation 3:.....	7
Recommendation 4:.....	7
Recommendation 5:.....	7
Recommendation 6:.....	8
2. <i>Issues paper responses</i> .....	9
2.1. <i>A standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan</i> .....	9
Recommendation 1:.....	9
2.2 <i>Resourcing the child and youth homelessness and housing sector</i> .....	11
Recommendation 2:.....	11
Recommendation 3:.....	12
2.3 <i>Targeted youth-specific housing investment to support access and equity</i> .....	14
Recommendation 4:.....	14
2.4 <i>Reducing the poverty related drivers of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness</i> .....	14
Recommendation 5:.....	14
2.5 <i>Primary prevention and early intervention reduces experiences of homelessness crisis for unaccompanied children and young people</i> .....	15
Recommendation 6:.....	15
3. <i>Conclusion</i> .....	18

### Case study – Marley\*

Marley grew up in a challenging family environment. Significant violence between her parents occurred on a regular basis, with Marley and her younger sister often experiencing direct violence during these incidents. Marley's father [REDACTED] and her mother had significant mental health issues [REDACTED].

When she was [REDACTED] Marley's father left the family home, resulting in Marley and her sister being left in the care of their mother.

During the following two years, Marley experienced violence by her mother, resulting in numerous injuries and absences from school while she healed. Medical attention was never sought for Marley's injuries at the time, and her mother explained her school absences with references to Marley being a 'sickly' child. These claims were never investigated.

When Marley was [REDACTED] her mother beat her so badly that she was admitted to hospital [REDACTED]. At this stage, a mandatory report was made to the statutory body and a child protection assessment was completed.

Investigation by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) assessed that Marley was not at risk of significant harm – the incident was seen as a one-off event and her mother was referred to a family support service. Marley was discharged from hospital into her mother's care.

[REDACTED] later, Marley was again taken to hospital by ambulance after her neighbours heard screams and contacted police. [REDACTED]

Marley's mother was charged with assault and Marley was placed in [REDACTED] temporary care. Child protection investigations again stated that Marley was not at risk of significant harm and did not require a statutory child protection response as she could reside with her [REDACTED]. However, due to her experience of trauma, Marley's pain-based behaviours escalated during this placement.

[REDACTED] later, Marley was living with her father. DCJ supported the placement, despite the extensive history of violence perpetrated by her father and his history of substance abuse.

During this period, Marley's father left her unsupervised in the property [REDACTED] and she was sexually assaulted [REDACTED].

Marley was then referred to a Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP) provider, which was also a youth Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS). Marley was placed into crisis accommodation

while the service advocated with DCJ for appropriate child protection support. However, DCJ identified that the HYAP service was an appropriate placement for Marley and closed her DCJ case plan.

**With no youth-specific housing stock available due to her age and given the prioritisation of adults by general community housing providers, Marley remained in youth crisis accommodation [REDACTED] with other young people experiencing homelessness and trauma.**

Marley self-placed with friends' families over a period [REDACTED], moving frequently because her escalating mental ill-health and trauma-based behaviours eventually resulted in her being asked to leave. Marley was also expelled from school. With no other options, she self-placed back with her mother, against advice of the youth SHS. This began a new cycle of family violence and substance misuse by Marley.

Marley cycled in and out of the homelessness system [REDACTED], often self-placing back with her mother only to leave again after incidents of violence. Marley began a relationship and soon started experiencing violence by her partner, which escalated over a period [REDACTED]

After another hospitalisation, Marley [REDACTED] returned to the youth SHS service and was placed in transitional housing.

Marley's housing stability allowed her to receive the support she needed to address her trauma history. She re-engaged with education, enrolling in a [REDACTED] TAFE course. Ongoing threats of violence from her ex-boyfriend forced her to re-locate [REDACTED], and with the assistance of the SHS she was transferred into transitional housing there.

Marley successfully completed her TAFE course and enrolled in university to study a Bachelor [REDACTED]

\*Name changed to protect the privacy of the young person

# National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper: Submission

## Youth Off The Streets: Background

Youth Off The Streets welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Federal Government's National Housing and Homelessness Plan ('National Plan') Issues Paper.

Youth Off The Streets is a non-denominational organisation with a focus on prevention, early intervention, crisis and post-crisis support services that empower children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to achieve their personal goals and thrive in the community.

Since being founded by Father Chris Riley in 1991, Youth Off The Streets has grown to deliver a range of wraparound supports for children and young people across NSW and Queensland. Our service responses include crisis accommodation and housing services, independent high schools, alcohol and other drugs counselling, youth justice support, life skills and employment programs, cultural support and community engagement, among other place-based interventions.

We are privileged to work with the children and young people we support and recognise the structural and societal challenges they face in their lives. The voice and lived experiences of our children and young people sit at the centre of all Youth Off The Streets advocacy campaigns, championing their experiences and stories and ensuring genuine co-design of solutions to the barriers they face.

### 1. Executive summary and recommendations

The issue of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness has not been positioned as a priority for our Federal or State Governments over many years, and the current crisis is a direct result of intergenerational system failures.

The structural drivers of child and youth homelessness and the challenges and barriers unaccompanied children and young people face are largely ignored in a system that is built on adult experiences of homelessness and adults' capacity to navigate complex and disconnected systems.

Youth Off The Streets recognises that there has been limited national focus on responding to homelessness across Australia, with the previous national plan – *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* (commonly referred to as 'The White Paper') – being developed in 2008/2009.

The White Paper set the national target to halve homelessness by 2020. However, this target was never met and, with the change in Federal Government in 2013, the responsibility for strategic homelessness agendas was returned fully to the states, with only limited investment or interest at the Federal level.

The siloed jurisdictional approach over the last 10 years has seen state-based homelessness and housing strategies:

- focus purely on adult populations, ignoring the growing numbers of unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness;
- invest significant capital in housing models and policy settings that discriminate against unaccompanied children and young people and First Nations communities;
- respond to structural drivers of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness from a punitive lens, viewing young people as perpetrators of violence, setting child protection policies that position First Nations culture purely as a risk factor, and criminalising experiences of homelessness for young people connected to the juvenile justice system;
- invest in youth responses that only target statutory care systems, leaving those who have fallen through the gaps of the child protection system flailing, with no access to appropriately designed or funded service responses;
- omit targets for unaccompanied young people as primary tenants in social and community housing products, resulting in young people in NSW holding less than 2% of primary tenancy across the system. This is despite the fact that unaccompanied children and young people make up over a quarter of all people experiencing homelessness in NSW<sup>1</sup>.
- set rent policies that make unaccompanied young people unattractive to generalist community housing providers (CHP), as their Commonwealth income support does not provide a rental amount that supports CHP viability or leverage for growth; and, most significantly,
- set a one-size-fits-all adult response that does not identify, reflect or invest in the age- and developmentally-appropriate services that unaccompanied children and young people need to respond effectively to their experiences of homelessness and trauma.

Marley's\* story above highlights multiple areas of system failure for unaccompanied children and young people. It also exposes the disconnection between our government and community-based service systems, and the lack of investment in unaccompanied child and youth early intervention, prevention and post-crisis interventions and solutions.

Marley's story – and thousands of others like hers across our organisation during the past three decades – highlights the structural drivers of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness, as well as the need for solutions based on an aligned system response, clear national leadership, robust governance, accountability and impact targets – all of which must hold the lived experiences and needs of unaccompanied children and young people at the centre.

While we recognise that any National Plan should not be operationally based, it should and must set clear and measurable targets for reducing and responding to unaccompanied child and youth homelessness, now and into the future.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2020 Census Data, Australian Bureau of Statistics online 2023

#### **Recommendation 1:**

***The Federal Government develop a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan and recognise safe and affordable housing as a basic human right.***

The Federal Government must recognise unaccompanied children and young people as a primary cohort that requires responses to homelessness and housing as a basic human right. These responses must be uniquely designed to ensure that they are age-, developmentally- and culturally-appropriate to meet the needs of unaccompanied children and young people.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

***The Federal Government must commit to the full 50% share of future indexation costs for the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system.***

The SHS system cannot continue to respond to the depth of need from the community without appropriate investment, capacity and security into the future. Inconsistency in the Federal Government's commitment to applying their full 50% share of indexation costs puts further pressure on a sector attempting to respond to our country's most vulnerable children and young people.

#### **Recommendation 3:**

***Capital and operational investment in age- and developmentally-appropriate, evidenced-based homelessness and housing models for unaccompanied children and young people must take priority in all states and territories. These models include Youth Foyers, medium-term supported accommodation and Transitional Housing Plus.***

Unaccompanied children and young people require a suite of responses to address homelessness and affordable housing insecurity. The evidence base and lived experience of unaccompanied youth should be central to designing appropriate 'bricks and mortar' responses with appropriate operational investment embedded.

#### **Recommendation 4:**

***New and future capital housing investment must have a minimum of 15% quarantined for youth-specific housing companies, increasing initial capacity and leveraging assets for growth of youth-specific social and community housing stock.***

Tier 2 and Tier 3 youth-specific housing providers are locked out of capital investment opportunities due to their economies of scale compared to Tier 1 and Tier 2 generalist community housing providers. This negatively impacts and limits the development and growth of youth-specific housing stock and keeps the youth housing sector trapped in a no-growth cycle.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

***The Federal Government must increase the rate of independent Youth Allowance and Job Seeker support to bring unaccompanied young people above the poverty line.***

Poverty and the lack of affordable housing arising from current levels of income support are key drivers of unaccompanied youth homelessness. 'Unreasonable to Live at Home' (UTLAH) Commonwealth income support payments must be increased by a minimum of \$290 per fortnight to lift unaccompanied young people above the Australian poverty line.

## **Recommendation 6:**

***The Federal and State Governments must provide additional investment in early intervention and prevention, recognising the intersections and structural drivers of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness, including domestic, family and sexual violence, substance misuse, youth justice involvement and cultural discrimination.***

Investment in early intervention and prevention programs for children and young people must be implemented across systems to reduce children and young people experiencing homelessness.

"We see many young people coming into our refugees to escape domestic and family violence. They can be impacted by a parent's alcohol and drug use, or sibling conflict that turns into a dangerous situation. The pandemic also caused a lot of stress for families and made the circumstances more challenging.

"Our job is to provide safe and secure housing and access to education, find employment, help them rebuild their sense of identity and self-worth, and form trust and healthy relationships with adults.

"The best way we can support young people is by getting to know them and understanding what they want and need. Of course, we aim to get them into long-term housing or reconnect with their family where possible, but it's essential that young people in our services feel heard.

"We're passionate about involving young people and giving them a voice to show how we can improve our service and make it a more inclusive, safe and happy environment to live in. We work *with* young people rather than working *for* them and guide them to make the right decisions about their lives."

***Team Leader – Crisis Accommodation, Youth Off The Streets***



## 2. Issues paper responses

### 2.1. A standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan

#### Recommendation 1:

***The Federal Government develop a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan and recognise safe and affordable housing as a basic human right.***

The focus areas within the National Plan issues paper are broad and do not provide a priority focus on unaccompanied children and young people, nor the targeted responses they require to ensure child and youth homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring in the future.

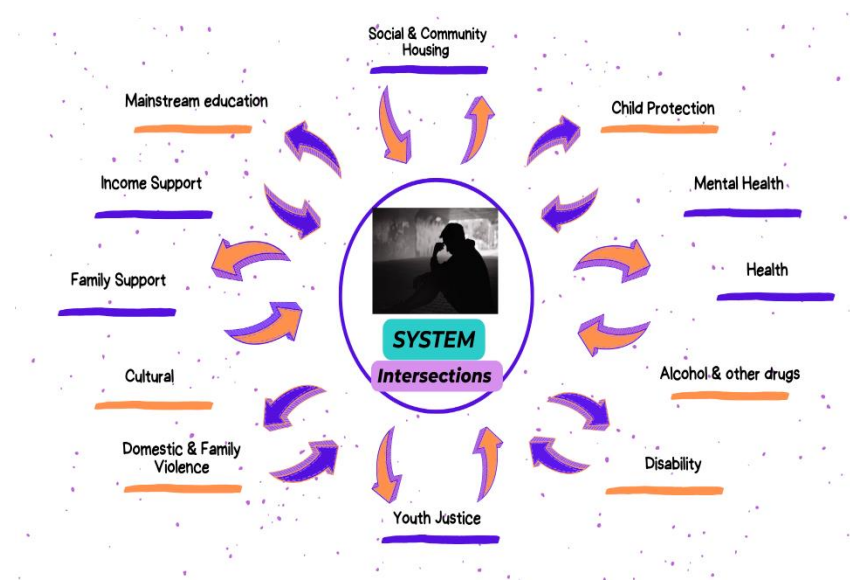
An adult-conceptualised response to housing and homelessness will never provide the essential frameworks required for addressing unaccompanied child and youth homelessness. The foundation of the current system is built to reflect adults' capabilities, life experiences, access to resources and social capital, and their capacity to understand and manipulate the system to meet their needs.

Unaccompanied children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness do not have the cognitive or developmental capacity to understand or navigate an adults' system. Coupled with their experiences of trauma and the negative impact this has on neurological development, unaccompanied children and young people experience the highest level of vulnerability in the homelessness system and deserve a targeted and standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan. This plan should be built on lived experience and evidence from the international and national youth sector.

We recognise that unaccompanied children and young people experience complex intersections with complex government systems and the systemic barriers these intersections create.

The design of the current homelessness and housing system leaves little opportunity to ensure unaccompanied children and young people are at the centre of decision making or policy design.

Lived experience has been highlighted over recent years as a critical success factor for system design and interventions across several areas within the community-based service system. Yet unaccompanied children and young people have not been provided the same opportunities as adults to inform the design of systems that impact their lives.



While homelessness responses are positioned as a state function, the intersections across State and Federal Governments through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement must be reviewed and re-designed to address system failings and align a national response.

How the Service System fails children & young people to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place, to respond in ways so they don't become entrenched, and providing supports when it does happen and exists to ensure it doesn't happen again		
Homelessness doesn't happen in the first place	When it does, it's a once in a lifetime event	System to catch the CYP that provides support and a pathway out of homelessness
Inadequate Out of Home Care & Child Protection Services	Severely underfunded Crisis Services available for C&YP - particularly in regional areas	Severely underfunded Crisis Services available for C&YP - particularly in regional areas
Social housing is rarely targeted to young people	Limited best practice family mediation & reunification services available	Inadequate funding for Medium Term Housing (support component only)
Child & Family Services fail to identify those in high need & vulnerable to homelessness	Poor work conditions prevents SHS to retain case workers to remain with client	Inadequate funding for Transitional Housing & Transitional Housing Plus (support component only)
Education institutions fail to identify C&YP at risk or experiencing homelessness	Increase in Foyer Models	No targets for housing to use for Transitional Housing & THP Bricks & Mortar Only
No specialised DFSV services for unaccompanied C&YP	No specialised DFSV services for unaccompanied C&YP	Young people not considered a priority for social housing
Lack of access to mainstream health services puts C&YP at risk of homelessness	Limited funding and urgency for C&YP exiting OOHC	No social housing quarantined for young people
Lack of access to Mental Health Services puts C&YP at risk of homelessness	Limited funding and urgency for C&YP exiting from Youth Justice	No specialised DFSV services for unaccompanied C&YP
Youth Justice & OOHC exiting C&YP into homelessness		
Inadequate Social Security payments placing people in poverty and risk of homelessness		
Limited programs to identify C&YP at risk of homelessness in schools		
Limited best practice Family Mediation & Reunification Services available		
	Outside Youth Specialist Homelessness Service System	Youth Specialist Homelessness Service System

Source: YFoundations National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper submission, 2023.

A standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan would provide the framework to drive the targeted and sustainable systemic reform and prioritisation needed to respond to unaccompanied child and youth homelessness.

We recognise that clear, firm and decisive national leadership is required to align state and territory actions, alongside governance and monitoring frameworks that invest and leverage resources to respond to the systemic failures impacting unaccompanied children and young people.

**Principles and actions that must be embedded in a standalone National Child and Youth Homelessness and Housing Plan include:**

- an understanding that replicating adult responses will not achieve age- and developmentally-appropriate responses or outcomes for children and young people;
- child, youth and human rights lenses must be embedded across all aspects of the plan's development, targets and strategies;
- recognition of and targeted responses to the structural drivers of child and youth homelessness, with realistic targets and government investment. This must include child-

- and youth-specific responses to domestic, family and sexual violence, youth unemployment and a poverty reduction framework;
- dismantling the current siloed approach and making a commitment to universal alignment across systems;
  - investment that is dual focused to ensure that 'upstream' early intervention and prevention strategies and 'downstream' post-crisis responses are embedded in the strategy, alongside targets to improve accountability;
  - youth-specific housing supply commitments and targets, recognising the suite of products required to meet the diverse needs of unaccompanied young people. Housing supply development must be multilateral, with outcomes measured from both economic and social value frameworks;
  - housing design must include significant consultation with children and young people and meet environmental obligations;
  - commitment to First Nations children, young people and communities through culturally competent strategies across the system and First Nations control over responses;
  - agility to support local and place-based innovation and scale-up high performing evidence-based models;
  - local governments and developers must be valued as key partners and recognised for their expertise and potential investment scope;
  - investment in research to build the evidence base and support model design;
  - transparent and robust governance and monitoring frameworks for accountability.

We recognise that we have reached a watershed moment in Australia for building a homelessness and housing system that positions safe and affordable housing as a basic human right for all, while recognising the additional vulnerabilities experienced by unaccompanied children and young people.

Ending child and youth homelessness will not be quick-fix endeavour, and the multisystem intersections of any strategy need to be fully recognised and addressed. However, with the appropriate infrastructure, investment and a common goal, we can achieve a more efficient and focused system in which child and youth homelessness in Australia is rare, brief and non-recurring.

## 2.2 Resourcing the child and youth homelessness and housing sector

### **Recommendation 2:**

***The Federal Government must commit to the full 50% share of future indexation costs for the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system.***

The Federal Government has always jointly held responsibility with states for funding responses across several key systems, including the homelessness and housing sectors. The SHS system is the frontline defence for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and it must be appropriately resourced to meet the demand and need for service responses.

The sector has endured under-resourcing over many years, and the ongoing instability and inconsistency in the Federal Government's commitment to applying their full 50% share of indexation costs puts further pressure on a sector attempting to respond to our country's most vulnerable children and young people.

The demand on the sector for homelessness supports far exceeds the resources and capacity available, and the current housing crisis is applying further pressure to a buckling system.

Any reduction in funding from the Federal Government through indexation payments will result in a further reduction of resources in the sector, leading to significant negative impacts on direct service delivery capacity, including a reduction of frontline staff to implement crucial homelessness supports to unaccompanied children and young people.

The uncertainty for the sector also creates significant challenges in attracting appropriately qualified staff, and increases the risk of highly experienced staff leaving the sector to obtain job security elsewhere.

In 2020 and 2023, the homelessness sector was forced to advocate to the Federal Government to commit to their share of indexation funding, adding unnecessary pressure and insecurity to the system and diverting focus from grassroots service provision.

The Federal Government must commit to the full indexation costs for all Specialist Homelessness Services for the term of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan, ensuring security across the service system and prioritising homelessness responses in the future national agenda.

### **Recommendation 3:**

***Capital and operational investment in age- and developmentally-appropriate, evidenced-based homelessness and housing models for unaccompanied children and young people must take priority in all states and territories. These models include Youth Foyers, medium-term supported accommodation and Transitional Housing Plus.***

There is a clear and defined evidence base that identifies the suite of housing and support models required to respond to the unique age and developmental needs of unaccompanied children and young people. The sector recognises and acknowledges that a one-size-fits all approach does not work for unaccompanied children or young people and risks the 'adultification' and discrimination of this cohort.

The youth homelessness sector has for many years called for investment in a number of evidenced-based models to meet the needs of unaccompanied children and young people within their individual context. Currently the youth SHS system only has the capacity to accept 50% of referrals for supported crisis accommodation, meaning that 1 in 2 unaccompanied children or young people are being forced to seek alternative, and generally high-risk, options.

Additionally, due to limited safe and affordable exit options from crisis accommodation, unaccompanied children and young people are remaining in crisis environments for longer periods of time. This results in limited vacancies and reduced access for other children and young people experiencing homelessness.

The consequences of these capacity and exit barrier issues include:

- children and young people remaining in or returning to family or domestic violence situations;
- unaccompanied children and young people sleeping rough or in high-risk environments, with potential experiences of and exposure to sexual assault, violence, substance misuse and/or connection with the police;
- negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing;
- disengagement from education and/or employment due to housing insecurity;
- couch surfing and moving from place to place without any security, and the risk of needing to engage in unwanted sexual encounters to secure a roof for the night;
- engagement in criminal activity to survive, particularly stealing food and personal essentials including sanitary hygiene items;
- long-term and cyclic experiences of homelessness; and
- costs being shifted to alternative service systems, including health and mental health, child protection and youth justice.

While the sector is committed to reducing the number of unaccompanied children and young people from experiencing homelessness, we recognise that experiences of crisis will always occur. The system must be designed to respond quickly to these experiences and reduce the length of time unaccompanied children and young people spend in crisis.

Providing a suite of diverse housing and support models will ensure unaccompanied children and young people have opportunities to engage with responses that meet their individual needs. The Federal Government must provide capital and operational investment in the existing SHS system as well as increasing investment in evidence-based responses, including:

- Youth Foyers: a transitional housing model with a two-year tenure length, providing security to engage in education and/or employment and build independent living skills to support exits into the private housing market. Youth Foyers are targeted at young people who have lower complexity and support needs and are ready to engage in education as a pathway to employment and economic security;
- medium-term supported accommodation: 24/7 supported accommodation for unaccompanied children and young people with a higher level of complexity and support needs. A tenure length of two years provides the security and stability to engage in education and/or employment, build independent living skills and address underlying trauma;
- Transitional Housing Plus (THP): a transitional housing product with a tenure length of up to five years, providing the security and stability for young people to engage in education and/or employment, develop independent living skills and build the capacity to exit into the private housing market. Transitional Housing Plus uses a sliding subsidised rent model, with rent amounts increasing per annum to a maximum of 75% of the median rental price. This model provides young people with a more realistic experience of private market rental costs and better prepares exit into the private market. As the rent-setting in THP is not linked to income like standard social and community housing products, it incentivises young people to obtain employment and increase their wage to support independence.

## 2.3 Targeted youth-specific housing investment to support access and equity

### Recommendation 4:

***New and future capital housing investment must have a minimum of 15% quarantined for youth-specific housing companies, increasing initial capacity and leveraging assets for growth of youth-specific social and community housing stock.***

Given the recognition in the National Plan issues paper of the significant needs of unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness, a dedicated stream of funding must be committed from the foreshadowed Federal Government investment in social housing and affordable housing.

Both the National Housing Accord and the Housing Australia Future Fund need to commit dedicated funding to youth-specific housing companies for the development of housing designed and targeted to young people, including:

- supported housing to provide more options for rapid housing in the face of unaccompanied children and young people presenting as homeless;
- social housing and affordable housing to provide increased exit options for young people to sustainably transition to independent living and reduce the likelihood of homelessness into adulthood.

To tackle the issue, we are advocating for a minimum 15% of the Federal Government's total housing investment funds dedicated to a diverse range of housing options for unaccompanied children and young people who experience homelessness.

Fifteen per cent would equate to \$300 million of the \$2 billion commitment and could provide close to 850 homes at a cost of \$350,000 per unit (land and build cost dependant). If this percentage were also applied to the Housing Australia Future Fund, a potential 4,500 homes/units of accommodation could be provided to young people, reducing the current crisis and providing security for young people and youth-specific community housing providers.

Further, this investment would provide an opportunity for youth-specific housing providers to build their economies of scale and leverage the highest level of equity or debt finance to continue development of additional youth-specific housing stock<sup>2</sup>

## 2.4 Reducing the poverty related drivers of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness.

### Recommendation 5:

***The Federal Government must increase the rate of independent Youth Allowance and Job Seeker support to bring unaccompanied young people above the poverty line.***

Poverty is a leading structural driver of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness. Poverty disproportionately effects unaccompanied children and young people, women and First Nations

---

<sup>2</sup> Yfoundations National Housing and Homelessness Plan Issues Paper submission 2023

communities. Poverty in a wealthy country like Australia is a political choice that negatively impacts the life trajectory of children and young people, compounding their experiences of trauma, social disconnection and isolation. Poverty can and must be solved.

The 2023 Budget increase of the Independent Youth Allowance and Job Seeker rates by \$40 per fortnight was a step in the right direction. However, it also demonstrated a lack of understanding by the Federal Government of the devastating impact poverty has for unaccompanied children and young people relying on Commonwealth income support to survive.

Unaccompanied children and young people experiencing homelessness are pushed into independence at an earlier age than their peers, with the same cost-of-living pressures as adults but without the financial capacity to meet these costs. Currently, young people receiving Independent Youth Allowance – Unreasonable to Live at Home (UTLAH) are forced to feed, clothe, house, educate, transport, access employment opportunities and meet other living expenses on \$43 per day. The dollar figure for the Australian poverty line equates to \$489 per week (\$69.86 per day), clearly demonstrating our most vulnerable young people are forced to exist in 'absolute poverty'<sup>3</sup>, with the expectation that they will solve their experience of homelessness with their limited existing resources.

The current rate of income support locks young people out of the rental market, excludes young people from accessing housing products like rental bonds as their income is assessed as too low for private market rental options, and ultimately places additional pressure on social and community housing waitlists.

Under the social and community housing sector's rent policy lens (currently set at 25% of income), young people's income sits under the threshold for Commonwealth Rent Assistance, resulting in rent payments being capped at a level that is unviable for generalist community housing providers to cover actual costs and liabilities. This again results in young people being locked out of this system.

The National Plan is an opportunity for the Federal Government to correct these failings and set a new political choice – one that ends the reality of poverty for unaccompanied children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. To achieve this human rights-based goal, the rate of Independent Youth Allowance must be increased immediately by a minimum of \$290 per fortnight, with Job Seeker payments aligned to this amount.

## **2.5 Primary prevention and early intervention reduces experiences of homelessness crisis for unaccompanied children and young people.**

### **Recommendation 6:**

***The Federal and State Governments must provide additional investment in early intervention and prevention, recognising the intersections and structural drivers of unaccompanied child and***

---

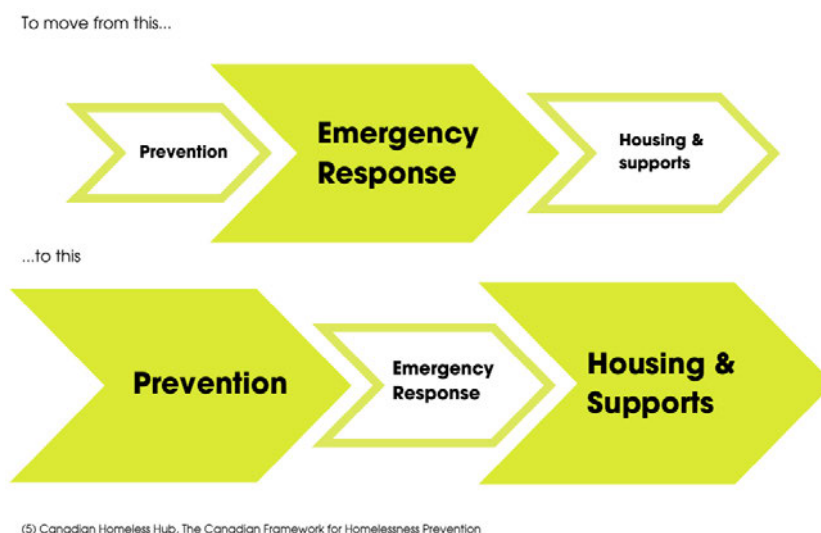
<sup>3</sup> United Nations definition of 'absolute poverty': a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information.

***youth homelessness, including domestic, family and sexual violence, substance misuse, youth justice involvement and cultural discrimination.***

Over 90% of the children and young people supported by Youth Off The Streets have grown up in dysfunctional families, and many have been devoid of all familial attention and positive role models. Their ‘normal’ is a chaotic environment shaped by intergenerational trauma, violence and abuse, poverty, racism, discrimination and chronic neglect.

Domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) is the leading cause of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness in Australia. Children and young people leaving violence invariably end up in the youth homelessness system, requiring complex support for complex experiences of trauma. Yet the national discourse, policy environment and investment in support services around DFSV remains largely focused on women and their accompanying children in the National Plan. Unaccompanied children and young people’s experience of violence and resulting homelessness is significantly different to those in the care of a parent or guardian.

Our existing SHS systems are forced to focus on crisis presentations, due to the level of demand being experienced in the crisis space. The diagram below represents the shift in system response required to achieve the goal of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness being rare, brief and non-recurring. This shift must include service system realignment and a targeted investment strategy to ensure primary prevention and early intervention responses are available to stop homelessness crisis before it occurs, and housing and support access to move unaccompanied children and young people out of homelessness quickly when it occurs.



Systemic screening initiatives would increase risk identification and ensure early implementation of interventions, increase collaboration between systems, reduce information sharing barriers, and contribute to the collection of robust data to inform responses.

Furthermore, recognising First Nations culture as a protective factor and re-shaping child protection systems from a culturally competent foundation will reduce child removal rates in the short term, and the impact the out-of-home-care system has on the SHS system in the long term.



Development of an early intervention framework would standardise evidence-based responses, reduce crisis presentation, reduce long-term health and wellbeing impacts, increase cost savings in health and justice responses, and improve unaccompanied children and young people's development of protective factors.

Early intervention into unaccompanied child and youth homelessness *must* be viewed as an early intervention approach to adult homelessness, as a wealth of evidence points to early experiences of homelessness leading to chronic experiences of homelessness and long-term impacts on health and wellbeing.

Systems-based initiatives required to make homelessness for unaccompanied children and young people rare, brief and non-recurring include:

### **Prevention**

- Address structural discrimination within our institutions for First Nations people, ensuring systems are developed from an appropriate cultural lens and not a Westernised child protection, health and wellbeing model.
- Provide funding for prevention and health promotion programs targeted to unaccompanied children and young people experiencing DFSV as survivors in their own right.
- Ensure that all programs follow a genuine co-design approach, elevating unaccompanied children and young people's voices and lived experiences and co-creating solutions.
- Develop a national Youth Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence peak body to ensure unaccompanied children and young people are kept at the centre of a national agenda for reducing risk and long-term impacts of DFSV.
- Address the Commonwealth income support disadvantage of young people under the Independent Youth Allowance – Unreasonable to Live at Home (UTLAH). \$43 per day places unaccompanied young people under the poverty line and creates further barriers to securing appropriate and safe tenancies, education and employment opportunities.
- Review of the criminalisation of children and the age of criminal responsibility across jurisdictions. This needs a national direction to increase the age to a minimum of 14 years and for more robust assessment of the drivers of child and youth crime and its intersections with DFSV and homelessness experiences.
- Review of the youth justice legislation across all jurisdictions, specifically in relation to remand and bail and unaccompanied children and young people being detained due to experiences of homelessness and insecure housing environments. This is particularly relevant for unaccompanied children and young people who use violence in the home or community as a result of trauma and pain-based behaviours.

### **Early intervention**

- Implement effective screening mechanisms for children and young people for early intervention targets, utilising key first-to-know agencies (e.g., schools, health, justice).

- Streamline information systems to ensure the right services receive screening information and can facilitate timely interventions.
- Housing intervention assessments in the DFSV sector must identify the needs of young people separate to the non-violent parent. All youth SHS, HYAP and youth justice services should be funded to have a DFSV Specialist Youth Work workforce to implement targeted intervention at the point of crisis and reduce further experience of trauma and system failure for children and young people.
- Disaster-first response teams should have specialist youth workers to ensure young people are appropriately assessed and supported.
- The intersectionality between mental health presentations, trauma and homelessness experience for unaccompanied children and young people must be examined. Young people routinely experience exclusion from appropriate therapeutic and trauma-informed responses from health departments when they present with mental health issues.
- Streamline income support for young people accessing UTLAH so that their application is fast tracked if they are being referred from the youth homelessness service system. This should be the same for unaccompanied children aged 15 years who are accessing special benefits payments when they are referred from an SHS or HYAP service.
- Investment in a range of housing models for unaccompanied children and young people (e.g. Youth Foyers and medium-term supported accommodation) is imperative to open access pathways to safe and affordable housing, and reduce experiences of homelessness crisis.

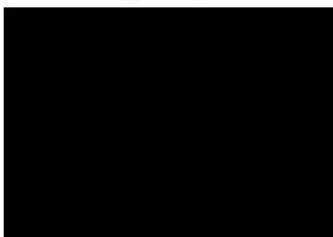
### 3. Conclusion

The issue of unaccompanied child and youth homelessness is currently experiencing unprecedented recognition and acknowledgement from the broader Australian public, with this exposure and community groundswell elevating calls to the Federal Government to respond to child and youth homelessness and housing access as a priority and from a basic human rights lens.

The solutions, recommendations and initiatives outlined in this submission set the course for unaccompanied child and youth homelessness to be rare, brief and non-recurring and are imperatives for the Federal and State Governments.

We would value to the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these matters further.

Kind regards,



## Case study – Luke\*

Growing up, Luke\* had everything he needed for a comfortable and happy life – a nice house, a good school, a fridge that was always stocked with food. He had everything except for stability.

Luke's mother struggled with mental health issues. His father struggled to cope with the demands of raising █████ children. Home was a stressful and frightening place to be.

As he grew older, Luke avoided being at home whenever he could. By the age of █████ he had turned to drugs to dull the pain and trauma of his upbringing. When he was █████ Luke's father told him to leave.

"He kicked me out and changed all the locks on the doors," he says. "He told me that I wasn't legally allowed on his property anymore and if I was caught, he'd charge me with breaking and entering."

Luke packed as much as he could fit into a single duffel bag. For the next two years, he moved from couch to couch – often staying with people who, he says, weren't a good influence on him.

His drug abuse grew worse. With no certainty from day to day, he had no idea how to fix his situation – how to find stable housing and continue his education or find a job.

"I was in a bad state," he continues. "Sometimes, I'd sneak in through the window of my dad's house and sleep in my bed. It was a volatile time in my life. It didn't feel good – bouncing around other people's houses. I was grateful to have places to stay. But when you're at someone else's house – and in the condition I was in – every waking moment is painful."

Luke's mental health deteriorated, and he was hospitalised █████.

A friend reached out and offered him a place to stay at his █████ property. Luke eventually took the step to enter rehab and he continues to work on his recovery.

He stayed with his older sister for a couple of weeks after rehab, and she helped him find a more permanent place to stay.

Although Luke's couch surfing years are behind him, he still feels the effects of being without a secure home for such a long time.

"Living that way hurt my mental health," he explains. "I still suffer from anxiety, depression and a sleep disorder."

Luke says that he wishes society was more aware of youth homelessness, and how young people can find themselves couch surfing not just for days and weeks, but for years on end.

"So many people have said to me, 'But you never see young people living on the streets'," he says

"Teenagers aren't the demographic that comes to mind when people think 'homeless'. I was always on someone else's couch. I would never be out in the open."

"Taking children and young people as the individuals they are, and not forcing them to conform to unrealistic standards, will help us provide support that actually fits their needs.

"You're asking young people who've come from traumatic backgrounds, who might feel huge distrust for the system, to obey firm rules about how they must live. Imagine that you have to engage in a day program for 20 hours a week and report to a caseworker and your employment provider once a week – all while you're trying to work night shifts, overcome trauma, reconnect with family or go to school.

"Plus, you're expected to understand bureaucratic processes that are like a full-time job to navigate. The regulations in many accommodation services can be impossible for people to meet without help – especially children and young people."

*Caseworker, [REDACTED] Youth Off The Streets*