

Submission to the
ACT Budget 2020-2021
Preventing Child and Youth
Homelessness in the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

This submission was prepared by Youth Coalition staff members Erin Barry and Dr Justin Barker. Designed by Thomas Stevens.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in the Australian Capital Territory. The Youth Coalition's vision is for an ACT community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people.

The Youth Coalition receives funding for peak activity (policy development, sector development, advocacy and representation) from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

The ACT Budget 2020-2021: Preventing Child and Youth Homelessness in the ACT

If a child or young person under the age of 16 is homeless in the ACT they are highly vulnerable and at risk of harm, because there are no dedicated accommodation services in the ACT for these children who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Following concerted advocacy from the ACT youth and homelessness sectors and the development of an [Action Plan to Prevent Child Homelessness](#), in 2019 the ACT Government committed initial funding to the Safe and Connected Youth Project. This project aims to begin addressing the gap in services and support for these children and young people under the age of 16.

The 'Safe and Connected Youth Project' is demonstrating promising early outcomes in supporting young people to remain connected to their families and out of homelessness. This work is illustrating the potential positive outcomes that can be achieved when community and government work together using evidence-based approaches to keep children and young people safe, supported and connected. It also delivers on the ACT Government's commitment to reduce pressure on tertiary service systems and invest in earlier supports.

As funding has been provided for only the early stages of the project, continued and increased funding from the ACT Government is essential to work towards a longer-term, sustainable service model that meets the needs of children and young people at risk of homelessness, and their families.

The Youth Coalition recommends that the ACT Budget 2020-21 invests in new funding towards the continuation and expansion of the Safe and Connected Youth Project, which aims to prevent child and youth homelessness and improve family functioning.

With continued and increased funding, the Project will expand early intervention supports that are currently being piloted to prevent children and young people from becoming homeless and to keep families safe. In doing so, the Project will seek to prevent further adverse outcomes, including changing life trajectories away from involvement with the youth justice and statutory child protection systems, disengagement from education, problematic alcohol and other drug use, and health / mental health concerns.

It will also work towards establishing a suitable accommodation service for young people under the age of 16 who cannot stay at home, drawing upon best practice models implemented in other Australian jurisdictions. This model must be funded by the ACT Government and may be delivered as a partnership between the government, community and philanthropic sectors; supported by the Safe and Connected Youth Project.

About the Safe and Connected Youth Project

The Safe and Connected Youth Project (the Project) aims to provide an interim solution to address the gaps in services and support for children and young people under the age of 16 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, while concurrently developing a longer-term service model.

The Project was established in 2019 following initial one-off funding from the ACT Government, provided to the following community organisations:

- Youth Coalition of the ACT, to provide project coordination and leadership, and to undertake research and development for the longer-term service model, including the accommodation component;
- Conflict Resolution Service, to provide mediation to families where young people are at risk of homelessness due to family conflict;
- Northside Community Service, to provide one therapeutic caseworker;
- Woden Community Service, to provide one therapeutic caseworker;
- Funding was also allocated towards an interim accommodation model, which is being provided by Marymead.

Two 'streams' of young people under the age of 16 experiencing or at risk of homelessness have been identified through the Project:

- **Stream 1:** Children and young people who are experiencing family conflict, who may still be at home (at risk of homelessness), or moving in and out of homelessness
- **Stream 2:** Children and young people experiencing frequent or continued homelessness, who may have limited or no contact with their families

At present, the five organisations work closely together to provide support to young people within Stream 1; to trial service pathways and supports to enable young people to remain at home and to improve family functioning.

Young people within Stream 2 require a different service response, including the provision of ongoing accommodation support. The Project does not have the capacity to trial and provide this response within existing funding. Additional funding is necessary to work with both cohorts of young people.

Early intervention support for children and young people

Within the existing temporary funding, a service model has been established between the community partner organisations to provide therapeutic outreach support to children, young people and their families; where there is a risk of youth homelessness. Two therapeutic caseworkers work with family mediators to keep children and young people safe and connected to families, and to improve family functioning. These services work closely with Marymead, which provides temporary supported accommodation when young people need a break from the family home.

Funding is necessary to upscale this work to better meet demand. A sustainable workforce model for the Project would include:

- Funding for four full-time equivalent therapeutic caseworkers; and adequate brokerage to support the outreach component of this work;
- The Conflict Resolution Service requires an adequate level of funding to enable family mediators to provide a timely response to families on their waiting list;
- Marymead needs to be appropriately resourced to continue to provide supported interim accommodation for young people.

There have been promising early outcomes for young people and families involved in the Project, such as in the case study outlined below.

Case Study

Ryan* is 14 and experiencing conflict with his parents and step-parents, leading him to move in and out of homelessness with his girlfriend, Lucy. A Safe and Connected Youth Project therapeutic caseworker (TCW) is providing support to Ryan, his parents and step-parents, and his 11 year old younger sister.

As family conflict escalated with an increasing possibility of domestic and family violence occurring, the TCW engaged Marymead to provide temporary accommodation to Ryan and Lucy for two nights. This safe and supported respite from the family home was critical to de-escalating the situation for Ryan and his family members. With active support from Marymead staff and the TCW during this time, this break provided an opportunity for Ryan and his family members to individually reflect on the impact of their family conflict, while not under the pressure of the home environment.

With the support of staff during his time with Marymead, Ryan was able to identify mental health concerns he was experiencing, and accessed support for this through ACT Health mental health services. This prompted Ryan to reduce his current drug use.

Following the combination of active support and respite accommodation, Ryan and his family are open to participating in family mediation. Ryan and Lucy both returned home to their families. Upon Ryan's return home, the TCW engaged with the parents and step-parents to provide brief interventions aimed at reducing instances of family conflict until they can access formal mediation through the Conflict Resolution Service.

**Names have been changed.*

Establishing a dedicated accommodation service

Marymead is currently providing a temporary accommodation option for young people who are engaged with the Safe and Connected Youth Project, who may need a break from the family home during the week. This is provided through their existing accommodation services for children and young people with disability.

Our [Action Plan to Prevent Child Homelessness](#) calls for an accommodation service that provides temporary accommodation to young people while supporting them to rebuild their relationships with family. This provides a flexible, safe, home-like environment and reliable alternative for young people when they are unable or unwilling to stay at home. Ruby's Reunification Program in South Australia is an example of such a service and has been highly successful in engaging with families to help resolve conflict and improve relationships through family counselling.

This model must be funded by the ACT Government; as part of a governance structure supported by the broader Safe and Connected Youth Project. It may be delivered as a partnership between the government, community and philanthropic sectors.

Until such a service has been established, ongoing funding is required to ensure Marymead can continue to provide accommodation services.

More information

For more information about the Safe and Connected Youth Project, contact:

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