

REPORT FROM STATEWIDE MULTICULTURAL YOUTH ISSUES NETWORK MEETING

***A New Way Home: Experiences of
homelessness for young people from refugee
and migrant backgrounds***

9:30am to 12:30pm, Wednesday 28th April 2010

The Abbotsford Covent, Community Room

The Commonwealth and Victorian governments have committed to reducing homelessness as a priority, and also to providing greater support to re-engage at risk or homeless youth with family, school or work. Young people are at particular risk of homelessness; young people aged 12 to 25 years are the single largest group assisted by the homelessness service system in Victoria¹. Young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds are **six to ten times more likely** than other groups of young people to be at risk of homelessness². Despite this, there is no mention about the specific challenges facing culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) young people in the National Homelessness Framework, or in the Victorian *Homelessness 2020 Strategy discussion paper*. Given their vulnerability to social exclusion and homelessness, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) believes it is vital that young people from a refugee or migrant background are explicitly recognised and responded to in the development and implementation of any policies or programs under the *Homelessness 2020 strategy*.

CMY has recently published a briefing paper outlining this issue which can be accessed from the CMY website: www.cmy.net.au/statewideNetwork

Overview

CMY's first Statewide Multicultural Youth Issues Network meeting of 2010 focused on homelessness for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Despite recent attention to youth homelessness at both Federal and State levels, there is limited evidence regarding effective responses to homelessness amongst young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

This forum provided an opportunity to consult with the homelessness sector as well as refugee advocates to gather an informed picture of what homelessness looks like for this cohort of young people within the current service system.

¹ Understanding Youth Homelessness, Office of Housing – Department of Human Services website. www.housing.vic.gov.au

² While accurate information is lacking, this is the most widely used figure, aggregating data from a range of sources, including Coventry, L., Guerra, C., Mackenzie, D. and Pinkney, S. (2002) *Wealth of All Nations: Identification of strategies to assist refugee young people in transition to independence* (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies: Tasmania).

30 people from a range of services participated in the consultation. Guest speakers and discussion groups explored a number of issues including:

- The political context and history of homelessness in Australia
- An update of the Victorian Government's response to homelessness
- The specific challenges that young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds face
- The challenges for the service system in responding to the needs of these young people
- What needs to change

This report summarises the proceedings of the forum including guest speakers' presentations, the panel discussion and the small group discussion, as well as follow-up actions to be explored and developed by CMY.

Speakers

David Mackenzie

Associate Professor, RMIT

David MacKenzie is an Associate Professor at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University and honorary Executive-Director of the not-for-profit organization Youth Development Australia (YDA).

*David has a strong record of research and development on issues associated with youth policy, and is internationally recognized for his work on homelessness. He co-authored **Youth Homelessness: Early Intervention and Prevention** (1998), which outlines an early intervention policy perspective for a deeply coordinated community infrastructure of services and schools, and was one of the four Commissioners responsible for the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness.*

David opened this forum by outlining the history of homelessness in Australia. Points made included:

- History of homelessness and immigration in Australia intersect.
- Mass Immigration to Australia began after the Second World War: housing shortage was not a severe problem and the social conditions were quite favourable to immigration.
- In the 50's and 60's there was a massive investment in public housing from the Menzies' Government.
- Homelessness in its contemporary form is a by-product of the 70's: the end of full employment for casual and part-time labour, a move to a service economy, and cultural changes in family life. The level and nature of homelessness in Australia today (about 100,000 people) is a repercussion of these changes.
- Youth homelessness appeared in the late 70's (first Senate Inquiry in 1982), followed by a decade of advocacy, culminating in the Australian Human Rights Commission Inquiry in 1988-89 (the Burdekin Report), which brought youth homelessness to the attention of the broader community.

- The current Government has made a contribution to the homelessness debate by prioritising the White Paper (*The Road Home*), with the key objective of halving all homelessness by 2020. It also allocated new money - very much needed after a long period of neglect.
- Current context: the most extraordinary housing crisis ever known in this country; rental increases, decades of underinvestment in public housing; neo-liberal approach from both sides of politics.
- Very difficult to get data on refugee young people, we know that they are vulnerable but we don't really have evidence. Horn of Africa young people often live in very crowded situations or 'float' around households, which has a major impact on their capacity to attend and do well at school.
- To move forward, evidence needs to be collected to support the agreement, conduct consultation and field work through CMY's networks, and consult with young people affected to involve them in solutions. The policy environment is better than it used to be and it is likely that the government would welcome the information.

Jac Nancarrow

Homeless Support Services, DHS

Jac Nancarrow outlined the current Victorian homelessness policy and explained what stage it is currently at. Her main points included:

The Victorian strategy is coming out in August however consultation hasn't taken place yet. Following *The Road Home* Report, Victoria received \$154 million for homelessness, including \$20 million over the next four years for youth. This includes:

- Upgrading half the youth refuges (9 out of 19 by 2013)
- Trialling a new model called the youth foyer model.
- The youth cohort has not been broken down in the forthcoming strategy so there is no focus on specific groups, including CALD. However creating strong evidence is still important.
- Other key vehicles for advocacy are the Vulnerable Youth Framework, the Youth Interdepartmental Committee and the DPCD.

Heather Stewart

South East region Coordinator, Centre for Multicultural Youth

Heather outlined the factors that impact on young people's housing that are more specific to refugee and migrant young people. Heather summarised the key reasons why refugee and migrant young people are at a higher risk of homelessness than other young people. The nine key factors were:

1. Many of our Reconnect program clients people have already been made homeless before coming to Australia, due to their refugee or refugee like experiences
2. Our clients do not have substantive knowledge of our housing system
3. Importance of location, access, education and employment
4. Lack of income

5. Significance of family
6. Racism
7. Size and composition of family groups
8. Young people living without support of adult family members
9. Young people supporting families

Heather Stewart's PowerPoint presentation can be accessed at:

www.cmy.net.au/statewideNetwork

Jess Duffy,

SAAP and EET case worker, Springvale Community Aid & Advice Bureau (SCAAB)

Jess's presentation focused on the challenges that workers face working with this group of young people. Jess discussed the specific issues for homeless young people from CALD backgrounds, and provided a housing worker's perspective regarding how to respond to these issues. Jess used case studies to illustrate her perspective and finished with some suggestions to move forward with.

Jess Duffy's PowerPoint presentation can be accessed at:

www.cmy.net.au/statewideNetwork

Consultation

A key focus of the forum was to gather information from the homelessness sector to paint a more informed picture of what homelessness looks for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds within the current service system and develop recommendations.

The CEO of the Council to Homeless Persons, Michelle Burrell, facilitated this consultation. Participants broke into five small groups to discuss the following three questions:

- 1. Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds experiencing homelessness: who are you seeing and what issues do they present with?**
- 2. How do you work with this group of clients?**
- 3. What needs to change?**

This is a summary of what was said:

- 1. Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds experiencing homelessness: who are you seeing and what issues do the present with?**

Each group reported seeing a range of different young people including:

- Unaccompanied minors
- State wards
- International students
- Young people with many different visas types: 202, 204, 206, SHP, some referred by ASAS at the Red Cross.
- Both onshore and offshore refugees

- Family groups
- Single men (notoriously difficult to house)
- Young women
- Young single mothers
- Young people who are inexperienced/experienced within the system
- Young people with strong cultural identities
- 12-25 year olds
- Either very newly arrived or up to 5 years in Australia
- Young people with refugee or refugee like experience
- Young people who have spent time in refugee camps, detention and transit countries

The most commonly reported situations that young people were presenting to housing services were family breakdown and pregnancy. Other common issues young people presented with included:

- grief and loss
- mental health
- safety fears
- drug and alcohol issues
- no rental history
- facing racism and discrimination

Most participants also reported that young people felt a stigma associated with being homeless

2. How do you work with this group of clients?

When discussing how people work with this group of young people, each group highlighted methods they have previously found to be successful. These included:

- Involving young people in their decisions
- Using a strengths-based approach
- Where possible, building trust and working with the young person's family and community
- Working in partnership with other organisations
- Always being culturally sensitive
- Using outreach to access the young people
- Being flexible
- Providing housing support and casework support together

AMES outlined a successful project they are running which involves organising information sessions targeted at single people trying to accessing private housing. The project focuses on providing realistic information about the housing market, helping people to learn about how the rental system works and providing them with the opportunity to meet others who may like to apply for private rental together. For more information about this project contact Phillip Lysaught at phillip.lysaught@centrelink.gov.au

People also described some of the challenges they face working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. The challenges broadly fell into four categories:

- Cultural competence

Many people noted that because housing staff are time and resource poor, they find it hard to access training around cultural competence to learn about the specific issues each cultural group is facing.

- Not being able to meet young people's needs

Often young people's housing needs cannot be met because of a lack of housing stock and a lack of transition services for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

- Lack of resources

Because many young people have no income, access to appropriate resources is essential to finding a positive outcome. As one worker said '*there is no such thing as free accommodation*'. Currently many agencies are relying on community members or church groups to provide housing, but this can only be a temporary measure.

- Racism

Different groups reported blatant racism as a serious barrier to young people finding housing. On different occasions services have been told not to refer refugee young people to a boarding house because they will not be accepted.

3. What needs to change?

The last question focused on what needs to change to improve the situation for homeless young people.

All participants agreed that the lack of housing stock was a major issue - albeit one they had little control over. The point was also made that housing workers' caseloads are too heavy and have unrealistic targets. Participants noted that there was a lack of communication within the housing sector among relevant stakeholders and this needed to be addressed. In particular it was noted that there are no clear communication lines between DHS and the multicultural sector.

Encouragingly, participants explained that using existing housing models and schemes that housing workers are familiar with would make a positive impact on their work. The particular models that could be expanded or adapted to target the needs of refugee and migrant young people included:

- Common Ground in Elizabeth St.
- Foyer model housing for specific CALD groups and pregnant young women.
- Sandridge House in Clifton Hill with transition planning built in.
- National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) which targets low income earners.

Each group also nominated opportunities ahead for effective advocacy around homelessness and refugee and migrant young people. These opportunities included:

- Holding the government accountable to the targets set in *The Road Home*.
- Advocating for an expansion of *Reconnect* as part of the early intervention goals outlined in the White Paper.
- Advocating for changes through the *Vulnerable Youth Strategy*

- Advocating for changes to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 to make tenancy more secure

Finally the participants provided recommendations to improve outcomes for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds facing homelessness. The following is a list of recommendation made:

- Acknowledging the evidence that is currently available and providing appropriate resources, funding and time to collect and collate it.
- The settlement of families needs to take into account the risk of family breakdown and not set the circumstances for it. A positive settlement experience will reduce the risk of homelessness.
- Advocate for a government commitment to create labour market opportunities for migrants and refugees.
- Increasing the wages of housing workers to attract more qualified professionals and increase staff retention rates.
- If internal advocacy doesn't work, we may need to do some 'shaming' (like the 'Call it a Home' campaign)
- More information needs to be provided to young people to promote more realistic expectations of housing.
- Community and emergency housing both need to be increased.
- Services in rural and regional areas need to be increased.
- The creation of a meaningful pathway for data and evidence to go from workers to government

Where to from here?

CMY is committed to this forum being the first step, not the only step. Following on from this we have planned three key actions.

1. Working Group

A working group will be formed with relevant housing and multicultural services providers to look at future advocacy strategies. Numerous participants from the forum indicated their willingness to join the working group. If you or someone from your agency is able to join, please contact us.

2. Policy Paper

A policy paper will be published later in the year. The paper will include information from this forum's consultation as well as information from a consultation directly with young people.

3. Research

CMY is currently investigating further research opportunities in this area.

For more information

For more information about this Statewide Multicultural Youth Issues Network meeting, visit CMY's website www.cmy.net.au/StatewideNetwork

Or contact:

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