



~~No~~ Vacancy

Melbourne City Mission's best practice framework for youth refuge, including opportunities to improve youth refuges in Victoria

Foreword

From the CEO

Since 1854 Melbourne City Mission has been working to help people and communities develop pathways away from disadvantage. Our experience has shown us that safe accommodation is a core component of achieving this goal.

Some young people come to us facing incredible challenges. We are continually moved by the way they are able to turn their lives around with some practical support, along with assistance to identify their strengths and pursue their interests.

I am proud of what we have been able to achieve through our homelessness services, in particular the role our youth refuges play in assisting these young people into a safer and more positive vision for their future.

We are committed to providing a positive future for young people experiencing disadvantage and I hope in understanding our approach, you will be interested in taking this journey with us.



Ric Holland (Rev)

Chief Executive Officer
Melbourne City Mission

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Introduction

Homelessness is a persistent and growing problem in Victoria. It affects people from different age groups, backgrounds and circumstances including families with children, young people, adults and older people. The Victorian Government, through the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)*, seeks to implement a 'new service approach to break the cycle of homelessness in Victoria' and to establish a service system which is responsive to the needs of all, including:

- People at risk of homelessness or who are experiencing homelessness for the first time
- People who have a history of housing instability and/or multiple episodes of short term homelessness
- People who have experienced long-term homelessness.¹

Since 1854, Melbourne City Mission has been supporting and advocating for people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. Young people have been an important focus within Melbourne City Mission's homelessness work.

In line with Melbourne City Mission's philosophy of focusing on the most severely disadvantaged in our community, our youth refuges prioritise the provision of crisis accommodation. They do not exclude young people on the basis of challenging behaviours or screen referrals to maintain a particular house dynamic.

Over the years, we have built significant expertise and knowledge in the area of youth homelessness. The crisis accommodation and support provided by our three youth refuges (Stopover Youth Refuge, Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP) and Vicky's Place Refuge) is highly regarded and underpinned by a best practice framework.

While the value of youth refuge is undeniable and the system largely works

well within existing funding and program constraints, evidence suggests that at times some of the most severely disadvantaged and complex young people are excluded from youth refuge. Exclusion happens when a refuge screens out young people with challenging behaviours and complex needs in an attempt to balance house dynamics and/or to prioritise the needs of young people already in the refuge above those waiting at an Access Point for a service. Through the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)*, the Victorian Government provides the youth refuge sector with a framework to address this issue, through specialisation, which will enable youth refuges to more effectively match risk, need and response.



Residents chat in the kitchen at Stopover Youth Refuge

¹ Victorian Government, *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)*, (2011) p.1.

² Melbourne Citymission, *Melbourne Citymission Strategic Plan (2010–2015)*, (2010), p.11–12.

No Vacancy: Melbourne City Mission's best practice framework for youth refuge is in three parts:

Part 1. Context for youth homelessness provides a brief overview of youth homelessness and the role of youth refuges in Victoria's homelessness service system.

Part 2. Melbourne City Mission's best practice framework sets out Melbourne

City Mission's vision and best practice approach to the delivery of youth refuge.

Part 3. Opportunity to improve youth refuge in Victoria examines how the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)* can be used to guide innovation and improvement in the youth refuge system, and to break the cycle of homelessness for young people.



Kitchen facilities at Stopover Youth Refuge, North Fitzroy

Part 1. Context for youth homelessness

What is homelessness?

The Australian Human Rights Commission's *Housing as a human right* states that people experiencing homelessness face violations of a wide range of human rights, including one of the most basic human rights: access to safe and secure housing.

The right to housing is more than simply a right to shelter. It is a right to have somewhere to live that is adequate. Whether housing is adequate depends on a range of factors including:

- Legal security of tenure
- Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure
- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Habitability
- Location
- Cultural adequacy.³

However, homelessness is not just about housing.

A person who is homeless may be facing violations of the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, the right to liberty and security of the person, the right to privacy, the right to social security, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to vote and many more.

Youth homelessness

The Youth Affairs Coalition report *Housing and homelessness* notes that young people aged 12–24 have the highest rate of homelessness of any group in Australia, with 43% of the Australian homeless population under the age of 25. While some are rough sleepers, youth homelessness is largely invisible with young people 'couch surfing' or living in boarding houses or emergency accommodation.

When it comes to accessing housing generally, young people face barriers and discrimination. High rental costs, low incomes, insecure share housing, and the low availability of affordable housing and public housing all make independent living a challenge for many young people.⁴

These issues may be further complicated for some young people by family conflict, violence, mental illness, substance abuse and financial stress, all of which are common contributors to youth homelessness. The highest rates of youth homelessness exist among Indigenous and refugee populations.

³ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Housing as a Human Right*, (1996).

⁴ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, *Housing and Homelessness*, (2012).

Why focus on preventing youth homelessness?

Homelessness has a severe impact on children and young people, and may be the first step on a path to lifelong disadvantage.⁵ Addressing homelessness in youth has the potential to have a fundamental positive impact for the rest of a person's life.

Prepared for the Commonwealth National Housing Strategy, *Counting the Cost of Homelessness* found:

- Providing stable housing for people experiencing homelessness generated cost savings in a range of support service areas
- Housing the homeless also significantly increases the likelihood of employment and hence increased income. Individuals and society benefit through increased income and reduced government expenditure on unemployment benefits.
- People experiencing homelessness with complex health needs, especially in the mental health area, impose greater cost burdens on support services, compared to housed clients with similar needs.⁶

The Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness, *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*, also explores the impact of homelessness on children and young people. The paper notes that:

Homelessness prevention services and services which work with clients to end their homelessness are good investments of public money. Recent research confirms that homelessness programs produce positive outcomes for their clients at relatively low cost and deliver whole-of-government savings in avoidable health, justice and police outlays. Addressing homelessness will boost rates of participation in the economy and community. People who are homeless will be able to join the workforce and share in the prosperity of the nation.⁷

The social argument for investment in youth homelessness services is just as compelling. The link between social isolation and homelessness is clearly proven:

Homeless children and young people often suffer from extreme levels of distress, low self-esteem, depression, mental health problems and behavioural problems because they are victims of, or witnesses to, abuse. They are also at high risk of exploitation and further exposure to violence, and often have difficulty participating in school education.⁸

With this evidence at hand, it is critical that a continued focus is placed on young people experiencing homelessness, and the services that are proven to prevent and resolve homelessness issues.

⁵ Chamberlain and MacKenzie, *Youth homelessness: early intervention and prevention*, (1998).

⁶ RMIT–NATSEM Research Centre, *Counting the cost of homelessness: a systemic review of cost effectiveness and cost benefit studies of homelessness*, (2003).

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness* (White Paper) (2008) p. 10.

⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Homelessness is a human rights issue*, (2008) p. 5.

Where does youth refuge fit in this approach?

Youth refuge has cemented its place in the framework of services provided in Australia to combat youth homelessness. Over its evolution, the refuge model has become more sophisticated and connected, but at the heart it remains the main purpose of youth refuges to provide the most basic of needs: shelter.

Melbourne City Mission understands that homelessness is usually a temporary situation, and that providing supported crisis accommodation is an effective way of building resilience and establishing a pathway out of homelessness and disadvantage.

Across Victoria and Australia the refuge model is fairly standard: a large house, five to ten young people, a team of dedicated youth workers, 24/7 staffing and sleep over staffing arrangements.⁹

There are significantly diverse groups within the youth homelessness population.^{10 11}

They broadly include young people experiencing temporary homelessness, long term homelessness and chronic or ongoing homelessness. Except for Indigenous and gender specific services,¹² youth refuges in Victoria are funded to work with any young person 16–24 experiencing homelessness, and therefore are required to provide a service response which caters for the three main categories of homelessness. As a consequence, on any one day a refuge may be providing crisis accommodation and support to a group of young people from different age groups, backgrounds and circumstances.

Youth refuges in Victoria tend to fall into two distinctly different categories of operation and philosophy: *screening* and *non-screening*.

Screening

Refuges which screen young people on referral for 'best fit' into the house dynamics are attempting to provide a place which is safe and controlled where balance will provide the space to undertake high quality case work and reach high quality outcomes for residents, outcomes such as stable housing and engagement in allied services (school, health etc.). Screening may include consideration of the needs of current residents and how the potential new resident will affect the others. A common example is drug use, where a refuge may choose to screen out current drug users while they have a young person in the refuge that is de-toxing from drugs. Screening in this context is used as a tool in an attempt to create a safe and predictable refuge for all.

Non-screening

This approach puts crisis accommodation at the front and centre of the refuge. The provision of a bed for anyone referred is prioritised over any potential risk to the house dynamic or that of individual young people living in the refuge. Using the drug use example above, this approach prioritises the current drug user's need for housing, over the de-toxing resident's need of an environment which is free from drug users. Non-screening does not exclude, but it may be more likely to present a refuge which is dynamically challenging. This means it is likely that more worker time is spent on managing a more unpredictable refuge, than focussing on one-on-one case work and assisting the residents in seeking suitable post-refuge housing.

In isolation, both methodologies are justifiable and effective in reaching their own intended ends. Each methodology has its own ethical stand point, and in comparison these ethical stand points are competing.

⁹ Sam Barret 'Youth refuge: towards diversity and specialisation', *Parity*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, (June 2012).

¹⁰ HREOC, *Our homeless children: the report of the National Inquiry into Homeless Children*, (1989), p.43–44.

¹¹ Chamberlain and Mackenzie, *Youth Homelessness*, (1998) p. 51.

¹² There are a small number of exceptions in Victoria; Vicky's Place and Counterpoint refuges are for young women only, Bert Williams and Marg Tucker youth refuges are for Indigenous young people only (male and female specific, respectively.)

‘Opening Doors’ framework

Under the Victorian Homelessness Services framework ‘Opening Doors’, young people experiencing homelessness access youth refuges via Access Points. When a vacancy in a refuge is available, the Access Point makes an assessment on which presenting young person is most suitable for the vacancy. This framework attempts to improve transparency and equity of access to people seeking assistance and implicit in the framework is a limited ability for individual youth refuges to screen referrals. Despite this framework specifying the different roles of Access Points and refuges, screening continues to be practiced by individual refuges (including, until recently, Melbourne City Mission’s refuges).



A new arrival to Melbourne City Mission’s Stopover Youth Refuge, North Fitzroy

Melbourne City Mission’s position on youth refuge

As a refuge provider, Melbourne City Mission views its role as primarily to provide crisis accommodation. Providing a refuge bed for someone who has nowhere to go tonight is a profound and intrinsic part of what we do. If this approach presents complexity and difficulty in the refuge, then it is incumbent on us to work with this and to apply all of our depth of skills and knowledge to manage this.

Melbourne City Mission believes that to reach this end, screening should be used only where a clear and present danger exists and as sparingly as possible.

This policy position provides for two important things:

- The avoidance of exclusion, wherever possible
- It allows the state-wide Opening Doors framework to operate as intended, leading to a more equitable and efficient system over all. This in turn leads to better services and outcomes for young people experiencing homelessness.

‘I know I get angry; I can’t help it. But every time it happens, I get kicked out of places – school and stuff. I need help.’

Refuge resident, aged 16.

Part 2. Melbourne City Mission's best practice framework

Melbourne City Mission's approach to youth refuge

In all its youth refuge work, Melbourne City Mission strives for a balance between inclusiveness of all young people experiencing homelessness and managing a safe environment for residents and staff. *The Vacancy* aims to outline the practices that help Melbourne City Mission work towards this balance.

Our target group

Melbourne City Mission supports any young person aged 16–24 experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

These young people face a range of multiple and complex challenges. A key focus of Melbourne City Mission is to build the resilience of young people at risk.¹³ This includes young people who are experiencing homelessness for the first time, young people who have a history of housing instability and/or multiple episodes of short term homelessness, and young people who have experienced long-term homelessness.

Melbourne City Mission recognises that young people who need refuge accommodation are likely to have challenging behaviours and complex needs. Because Melbourne City Mission seeks to support the most severely disadvantaged in our society,¹⁴ our refuges:

- Will not exclude young people, because of their challenging behaviours or the complexity of their needs
- Will strive to provide a service that is flexible and dynamic enough to cope with a diverse group of young people with differing needs.

The 'Opening Doors' framework and the designated Access Points provide the entry point to services for young people who are

experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness in Victoria. Access Points undertake an initial assessment, prioritisation and resource allocation for all homelessness services in the catchment.

Melbourne City Mission is committed to working proactively and collaboratively with the Access Points to ensure equal access to our refuge accommodation and other relevant services is available to all young people experiencing homelessness.

Risk

At Melbourne City Mission, we acknowledge that our work in youth refuges contains an element of risk. Risk is the chance that something will happen that will have an impact (positive or negative) affecting our ability to achieve our goals. This potential for risk can be very high as we are working with people in crisis who may exhibit aggressive, unpredictable and dangerous behaviours that can be complex and challenging to human service providers. Youth refuges are a unique environment, with an elevated potential for very complex situations, increasing the potential for risk to all people within the refuge, including staff, residents and visitors.

We understand that it is inevitable that risk accompanies working with people with complex needs, but we believe that we cannot allow this risk to unduly limit which young people have access to our services.

Our approach is to acknowledge that risk exists, and take all due steps to mitigate this risk. Our approach focuses on providing our staff with the skills, training and equipment they need to ensure the safest environment we can provide. This position means we can remain focussed on continuing to provide a service to young people, while being flexible and responsive to the risk they may present.

¹³ Melbourne City Mission, *Melbourne City Mission Strategic Plan (2010–2015)*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11.

Our vision and philosophy

Through its refuges, Melbourne City Mission aims to provide young people with a safe and supported living environment, which enables our staff to engage, empower and coach young people to:

- Find stable accommodation
- Make informed decisions about their future
- Enhance their health and wellbeing.

Central to our approach is the integration of crisis accommodation and structured case management support. This enables us to address the underlying causes of homelessness while providing safe crisis accommodation. Our approach is to do things *with* young people, not *to* or *for* them.

What outcomes can a young person expect from our refuges?

A young person entering a Melbourne City Mission refuge can expect:

- Stable short-term crisis accommodation which focuses on lessening the severity, duration and trauma of their homelessness
- A safe environment and the opportunity to explore their issues with support to access relevant services, if they choose to do so
- An individual action plan which articulates their short term goals and strategies to achieve their longer term goals.

'All I wanted was a safe bed for the night.'

Refuge resident, aged 19



Playing basketball at Stopover Youth Refuge

Our youth refuge model

At Melbourne City Mission we aim to work with young people to develop pathways away from homelessness and disadvantage. We believe that empowering young people to secure suitable accommodation and to address the underlying issues which contributed to their homelessness is core to achieving this goal.

With this in mind, Melbourne City Mission youth refuges will:

- Provide all young people with equality of access to refuge accommodation and resources, and ensure they are valued and respected while living in our refuges.
- Engage with young people using a strengths-based approach and self-directed support.
- Work with young people to address their accommodation needs, and to help them address the underlying issues which contributed to their homelessness in the first place.
- Ensure its refuge staff are well supported in their role by providing effective management, regular supervision, professional development and ongoing training.
- Build and maintain effective partnerships and collaborations with other services and the community.

Our youth refuge model is made up of four components:

1. Crisis accommodation
2. Individualised client-centred support and coaching
3. Professional staff
4. Partnerships and collaborations.

Crisis Accommodation – providing young people experiencing homelessness with a safe place to live during a crisis.

Melbourne City Mission youth refuges will do this by:

- Sharing information and working collaboratively with partner organisations.
- Maximising the utilisation of our beds and other refuge resources, including listing vacancies as quickly as possible.

- Being responsive to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness by providing a timely response to referrals received from the Access Points.
- Acknowledging that young people may exhibit unsafe behaviours and heightened emotions during their stay in a refuge and therefore have in place policies, procedures and staff support to manage this appropriately, and within the policy parameters of non-exclusion.
- Delivering services using person-centred practice, coaching and promoting self-directed approaches, with each young person experiencing an individually-tailored response.
- Working with an understanding that young people make mistakes, and providing a flexible environment which allows for this and provides opportunities to address this to prevent a return to homelessness.
- Proactively working to create a refuge environment that balances the needs of both residents and staff given the inherent tensions of young people living together in crisis accommodation.
- Appropriately resourcing each refuge with staff training e.g. managing challenging behaviours, supervision, administration and management support.
- Constantly reviewing staff workloads and case plans and providing an environment in which youth workers can dedicate their time to the refuge residents.

‘As a refuge, we don’t see all the young people waiting at the Access Points for accommodation. A refuge should never be a “gatekeeper”. When considering referrals from the Access Point, the issue should not be if we can work with a young person, but how. Only in exceptional circumstances, with a good reason, should a referral not be accepted.’

Youth Refuge Manager

Individualised client-centred support and coaching – providing young people with assistance to secure ongoing safe, secure and stable accommodation.

Melbourne City Mission youth refuges will do this by:

- Listening to young people and ensuring they feel heard.
- Providing young people with advice and information about their accommodation options and supporting them to make realistic decisions about their future accommodation.
- Using a coaching approach while respecting young people's choices and decisions.
- Remaining vigilant to prevent discrimination through assumptions made about young people due to their background or experiences.
- Assisting young people to apply for public housing or to secure private accommodation in accordance with their preference.
- Exploring the option of young people returning to family or kinship networks, if appropriate.

Professional staff – ensuring that each refuge has the management supports and staff capabilities in place to deliver services in accordance with the standards set out in this document.

Melbourne City Mission youth refuges will do this by:

- Ensuring staff have the skills and competencies to work in a crisis service.
- Offering staff regular professional development and training.
- Supporting staff in their coaching role.
- Providing regular supervision for refuge staff.
- Participatory engagement with staff.
- Having line management to support staff in place.
- Employing refuge workers who have the capabilities to deliver services.

Partnerships and collaborations – working in partnership with other services and the community to advocate for the needs of young people, and to ensure they can access the services and supports they require.

Melbourne City Mission youth refuges will do this by:

- Working with local councils and other services to improve the community's responsiveness to youth homelessness.
- Advocating for policy, program and systems change.
- Promoting opportunities to improve the service system and the delivery of youth refuge.

'I had a meeting with, like, four workers. I didn't like it; I wasn't listening. I just agreed with what they said so I could get out of there.'

Refuge resident, aged 17

The refuge youth worker

The importance refuge staff have in delivering a best practice youth refuge cannot be overstated.

Melbourne City Mission acknowledges the unique challenges and rewards presented to the youth refuge staff and is committed to focussing on providing the best support and leadership possible.

The *No Vacancy* policy assumes that refuge beds will be assigned without excluding young people with risk of behavioural or disruptive histories. This means that we carry a heightened risk that staff will be called upon to deal with challenging issues and problematic tenancies.

It is very difficult to define what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour by residents in the refuge environment. All situations are unique and many variables need to be taken into account, often by a sole worker.

Guiding principles

Violence, threatened or actual, is unacceptable behaviour and should be addressed immediately. Depending on the severity or potential impact this action has on others (staff, fellow residents, neighbours), staff may choose to act in a range of ways, including discussion.

In order to be able to meet these challenges, Melbourne City Mission's refuge staff require the following key attributes:

- Genuine care, warmth, consideration, honesty, transparency and empathy in their interactions with young people.
- Ability to communicate respectfully and sensitively with young people at all times, using non-judgemental, positive and affirming language.
- Sensitivity to listen, reflect and respond to young people's lived experience and expertise.
- Coaching skills to assist young people to identify, utilise and build on their strengths, resourcefulness and resilience when things do not go to plan.



Residents relax at Stopover Youth Refuge

Our current services

Melbourne City Mission operates three youth refuges:

Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP)

Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP) is an eight bed refuge in the suburb of Sunshine, approximately 15km north west of Melbourne. WRAP is a cluster model refuge, with four semi-detached units each with two bedrooms and kitchen and living areas. All eight beds at WRAP are six week placements. WRAP is a flexible model which can cater to families or sibling groups providing them with their own space. The shared units also provide a supported shared tenancy experience which prepares young people for share housing in the future.

Vicky's Place Refuge

Vicky's Place Refuge is a young women's refuge with seven beds plus a medium-term bungalow located in the backyard. Vicky's Place is located in the north eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Vicky's Place is a refuge designed to provide a gender-specific space for young women and accompanying children. Operational staff at Vicky's Place are exclusively women

and the program is Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) exempt for this purpose. Male staff (tradesmen, management, and allied support workers) are welcome at Vicky's Place with sensitivity to the current residents' particular situations.

Stopover Youth Refuge

Stopover Youth Refuge is a nine bed refuge in the inner city suburb of North Fitzroy. Stopover runs eight beds as six week placements, and one emergency short term bed. Each of Stopover's nine bedrooms has its own ensuite, and there is a large shared kitchen and lounge room. Stopover's proximity to the city and Melbourne City Mission's Frontyard services places it ideally for crisis responses.

Stopover sits within Melbourne City Mission's integrated youth service hub – The Precinct. The Precinct incorporates a range of youth programs, including a vocational school called The Academy, a longer term youth housing Foyer Model, a job network provider and various other youth support programs. Being part of an integrated youth services hub allows Stopover residents excellent access to allied support services.



Melbourne City Mission's Western Region Accommodation Program (WRAP), Sunshine



Courtyard at WRAP, showing the semi-detached units



Living space at Stopover Youth Refuge



Outdoor living space and gardens at WRAP

Part 3. Opportunity to improve youth refuge in Victoria

Our commitment

Melbourne City Mission will continue to provide youth refuge on behalf of the state government for young people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne, in line with the best practice framework set out in this document. However, Melbourne City Mission believes that the youth refuge service system can be improved and better outcomes for all young people, in particular the most severely disadvantaged and complex young people, can be achieved.¹⁵

The new directions set out in the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan* provide a unique opportunity for the youth refuge system in Victoria to address current challenges in the service system, and to innovate and operate in a more sophisticated way.

The Victorian Homelessness Action Plan: an opportunity

The *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)* sets out a 'new service approach to break the cycle of homelessness in Victoria'. The overall aim of this approach is to assist all people experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of homelessness, to access and maintain stable housing, leading to social and economic participation. The approach explicitly recognises that homelessness affects people from different age groups, backgrounds and circumstances including families with children, young people, adults and older people, and acknowledges that a different service response is needed for:

1. People at risk of homelessness, or who are experiencing homelessness for the first time. For this group, the service response should focus on access to effective and timely assistance to help them get back on their feet quickly.
2. People who have a history of housing instability and/or multiple episodes of short term homelessness. The service

response should focus more on helping to stabilise people's lives, addressing individual needs, connecting people with support services and building capabilities that break the cycle of homelessness.

3. People who have experienced long-term homelessness. This group is likely to require intensive and longer-term personal support and health support, combined with housing.

By utilising an approach that targets the specific issues experienced by each group, this model aims to provide a more specific and effective service.

The youth refuge sector, as it is currently configured, struggles to accommodate and support the three broad groups of homeless young people within one house. Our experience also suggests that young people with complex needs and challenging behaviours are being excluded from youth refuges.

Breaking the cycle of homelessness

The Victorian Government has made a significant investment in addressing youth homelessness over the last few years. Recent National Partnership Agreement (NPA) funding to enhance refuges' capabilities has provided much needed resources and flexibility into the service system. The youth refuge sector can build on this investment by re-organising services in line with the approach proposed in the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)*.

In metropolitan Melbourne, there is an opportunity for the refuges to work together to develop a specialisation system based on servicing these three categories individually. Specialisation would open up the opportunity for a new way of managing demand for youth refuges and enable a better match between risk, need and response.

¹⁵ *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan (2011–2015)*, p.19, identifies the following outcomes for young people: has regular income source, including maximalisation of government assistance; health issues are managed; engaged in school, training or employment; has relevant life skills; is in stable accommodation; is connected to family and/or friends and/or community; and committed to their integration plan.

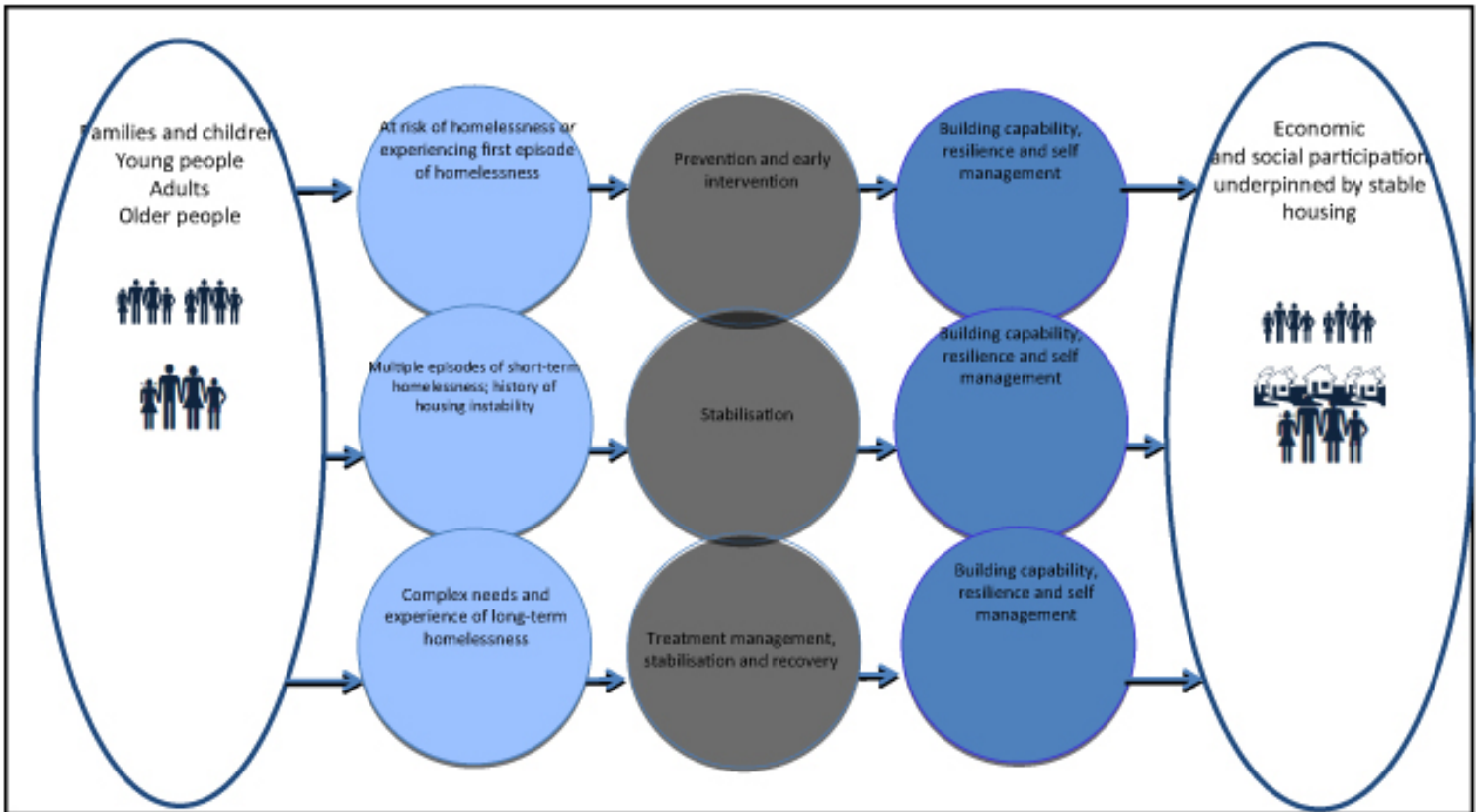


Figure 1. New service approach to break the cycle of homelessness

Some options for change – specialisation

At Melbourne City Mission, we wish to reflect the diversity identified in the plan by offering specialised refuges that cater to the needs of the different groups. This is a fundamentally new and different approach to youth refuge which allows a response tailored to each young person's needs.

There are a range of options, but the most obvious and appropriate would be to diversify the refuge network into more specialised services, aligned with the three types of homelessness and associated service responses, proposed in the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan*.

Recognising meaningful subgroups within the homeless population helps target interventions to match people's housing and support needs with the appropriate resources.¹⁶

Three examples of possible complementary specialisation are:

Across Victoria there are a number of young people in youth refuge who don't need 24/7 staff support. Many of them are responsible enough to live peacefully with each other at night, while case work occurs during the day. While these young people are no less homeless, we should not assume they need such a high level of support. If a less resource intensive solution can be found for this group of young people, then youth refuge resources could be diverted to strengthen the response for the young people with more complex needs, in particular those who have experienced long-term homelessness and those who need intensive support to be connected to a range of support services, and to break the cycle of homelessness. Such a model is currently operating in family crisis accommodation programs.

¹⁶ G. Johnson, S. Parkinson, Y. Tseng and D. Kuehnle, *Long-term homelessness: understanding the challenge – 12 months outcomes from the Journey to Social Inclusion Pilot Program*, (2011).

A refuge designed to suit 'first time' homeless, or those experiencing temporary homelessness is one option. A 24 hour supported model where early intervention approaches are offered with family mediation and reconciliation. The purpose of this model would seek a reunification with family and/or significant others as a preferred outcome, rather than seeking alternative housing options. The design, staffing model and training requirements would be designed to support an early intervention approach.

Another option would be to design a youth refuge which targets support to young people with defined high and complex needs, who also may be experiencing chronic or ongoing homelessness. This environment can be tailored to risk and harm minimisation while still providing a homelessness response to this group. Similarly, the design, staffing model and training requirements would be designed to support a more complex cohort of young people. Again, the service response (and refuge resources) is based on the level of risk and need.



Let's start the conversation

Melbourne City Mission believes that the current youth refuges could be supported to specialise in line with the new service approach proposed in the *Victorian Homelessness Action Plan*. Workforce capacity, staffing models and resource allocation could then be tailored to match this specialisation, and more appropriately reflect risk and need.

Melbourne City Mission looks forward to engaging in discussions with the sector and the Department of Human Services on the future innovation of youth refuge services in Victoria.

Glossary of terms

Advocacy – Public support for, or recommendation of, a particular cause or policy.

Affirming – To declare positively or firmly.

Consistency – Logically ordered and/or following the same pattern.

De-escalation – A reduction in intensity, particularly regarding situations where people are displaying aggression or stress.

Discrimination – The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things.

Kinship – Connection by blood, marriage, or adoption; family relationship. This can also be relationship by nature or character; affinity.

Person-centred practice – Treatment and care that places the person at the centre of their own care. It is treating clients as they want to be treated.

Rapport – A close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well.

Resilience – The capacity to withstand stress and change.

Strength-based approach – An approach which looks for opportunities to complement and support existing strengths, instead of focusing on the 'problem'.

Transparency – An avoidance of unnecessary secrecy in process. A transparent service is one in which motives and operations can be seen by all. While some information needs to remain confidential, this should be limited as much as reasonably possible.

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