



23rd April 2010

Health and Wellbeing Service Framework Project Manager  
Child and Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Division  
Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination  
Department of Education and Early Childhood Development  
Victoria

**Submission to DEECD Discussion Paper,  
Towards a health and wellbeing service framework**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the DEECD document *Towards and health and well being service framework*.

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak body for homelessness in Victoria, representing individuals, organisations and other stakeholders with an interest in homelessness.

**Background**

Youth homelessness has doubled in the last twenty years. According to the 2006 Census unaccompanied young people aged 12 – 24 years constitute almost a third of the homeless population in Victoria (totalling almost 7,000). The total number of homeless people in Victoria is 23,299 and over a quarter of these (almost 5,000) are families with children. One in every three homeless Australians is a child.

According to Victorian government figures, only 51% of homeless young people stay within the Victorian school system. Homelessness has a significant impact on finishing your education, finding a job and earning money ([www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au](http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au)).

Research and statistics also indicate that Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual and Intersex (GLTBI) youth, young people leaving state care and Indigenous young people are overrepresented in youth homelessness populations.

The causes of child, youth and family homelessness include domestic and family violence, abuse and neglect, mental ill-health, substance abuse, unemployment and poverty.

**Impacts of homelessness**

The impact of homelessness on children, young people and their families can include:

- transience and geographic dislocation
- emotional and psychological trauma, including grief and loss of family
- disengagement and risk of disengagement in education
- loss of confidence and low self-esteem

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- feelings of shame and embarrassment at their circumstances
- stigma and isolation
- poorer education, and so life outcomes.

I have provided the weblink for a copy of the publication *Does Camping Count?* which provides an overview of the experiencing of young people experiencing homelessness. [http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/salwvr/\\_assets/main/documents/reports/children\\_and\\_homelessness-report.pdf](http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/salwvr/_assets/main/documents/reports/children_and_homelessness-report.pdf)

### **The value of education – voices of young people**

Teachers and education services play an essential role in providing assisting at risk and disadvantaged children and young people to remain in education.

The following quotes are from young people experiencing homelessness who attended CHP youth forums last year. They were asked to comment on the role of schools and the support they provide:

“My year level co-ordinator took me shopping for toiletries and helped me get set up after I had to leave home. It really helped me. She cared about what happened to me and I wasn’t doing it all on my own.” Young woman in Geelong 2009

The following quote highlights the importance of the youth homelessness service sector in supporting young people experiencing homelessness to remain in school:

“Knowing that my worker cares about me makes all the difference. Workers help me to stay in school, otherwise I would drop out.”

The quote below indicates that while quality support exists for young people experiencing homelessness, more needs to be done to educate teachers and school support staff about homelessness and its impacts:

“School principals or counsellors are usually more approachable than teachers. It depends on the teacher.”

The following quote indicates the crisis-driven nature of homelessness for young people and the risk of disengagement in education:

“When I went to the refuge, I didn’t have anything except the clothes on my back. I didn’t have my medication and I couldn’t go to school without my medication.”

### **Current policy context**

CHP supports the Victorian government’s commitment to give every young Victorian “the opportunity to thrive, learn and grown to enjoy a productive, rewarding and fulfilling life,

while contributing to their local and global communities” (p.16 of the Discussion Paper), described in the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development.

In the context of a universal service system we support a health and wellbeing service framework that recognises the full scope of services required to support children and young people experiencing homelessness to remain, or to re-engage, in education. We insist that every child and young person experiencing homelessness and disadvantage should be given the same opportunities as their age counterparts in safer and more secure housing and family circumstances.

In the policy context referred to in the Health and Wellbeing Service Framework Discussion Paper, Appendix A (pp. 16-17), CHP supports the current range of early childhood, school-based and regional/network health and wellbeing services that exist to support children, young people and their families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness including:

- the recent DEECD Guidelines for Schools working with children and young people experiencing homelessness
- Primary Welfare Officers
- Schools-focused Youth Support program
- Student Wellbeing Co-ordinators
- Student Support Services
- School-appointed wellbeing and engagement staff.

We also recognise the significant contribution of the federal Reconnect program in preventing homelessness and family breakdown and providing early interventions for young people aged 12-18 and their families. However, there is obviously more to be done to embed the right to an education for children and young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

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While children, young people and their families experiencing or at risk of homelessness are identified across all seven common service delivery domains described in the Health and Wellbeing Service Framework Discussion Paper, addressing the issue of homelessness is identified in Domain Five: ongoing management, intervention and monitoring for those requiring complex responses.

Clearly, responses under the other domains that focus on prevention of homelessness in the first place, and early interventions that reduce the risk of homelessness, should be a high priority service response. In this context, there remains the ongoing problem of identifying children and young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

However, where homelessness has occurred or is imminent, timely service responses across the education and homelessness service sectors is paramount. The specialist homelessness service sector is undergoing significant reform under the federal government's White paper on homelessness, titled "The Road Home: A National Approach

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to Reducing Homelessness". Under National Partnership Agreements, targets to 2020 to reduce homelessness have been set and a greater level of cross-sector co-operation is required between homelessness services and education, health and other universal services in order to achieve these targets.

Moving forward in this homelessness policy context, in particular, we recommend:

- The completion of the education and homelessness protocol between the DEECD and DHS, specifically to include a policy commitment to amending housing allocation policies to ensure children do not have to make frequent moves while in the homelessness system ('education first')
- The inclusion of the DEECD Guidelines for Schools working with children and young people experiencing homelessness as a health and wellbeing policy context document in the service framework and the promotion of the use of the guidelines in schools culture
- The continued education of teachers, student wellbeing services and education support staff on the causes and impacts of homelessness to improve service responses, for example through in service, professional development and other existing structures
- The establishment of a "alert system" or teacher training tool that provides a means of identifying children and young people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. This alert system must be mindful of privacy and stigma issues. Potentially this could form part of the Vulnerable Youth Framework, degrees of risk methodology
- Dedicated funds for learning support for accompanying children and young people experiencing homelessness as part of the broader policy and service framework. This includes targeted programs for children and young people at risk of disengaging from education, such as the On Track program which assists young people transitioning from school to further education and training who may otherwise disengage
- A greater emphasis on the Schools Focused Youth Service to provide a liaison role between the education and homelessness service sectors
- Increased resources for Student Well-being Co-ordinators for responding to and having comprehensive knowledge of local services that are available to support children, young people and families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness
- Increased funds for targeted after-school hours programs such as the DEECD-funded Learning Beyond the Bell
- Development of outcomes measures and KPIS for engagement with specialist homeless services at a local level

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission. If you have any enquiries please contact Jane Lazzari, Youth Policy Officer on 9419 8699.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Burrell  
CEO

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