



Mr Andrew Wallace MP
Chair of the Committee
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

8 April 2020

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia

Dear Mr Wallace,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this important topic. This submission from Blue Sky Community Services (formerly Mid Coast Communities) has been informed by our expertise in delivering the NSW government-funded Momentum Youth Housing service as well as a range of early intervention and prevention programs targeting vulnerable children, young people and families on the NSW Mid North Coast.

[Blue Sky Community Services](http://www.bluesky.org.au) has a strong reputation for delivering Commonwealth and state funded services in regional NSW. Our Families, Young People & Communities team assists more than 800 vulnerable children, young people and families each year with multiple and complex needs. Through delivery of the Momentum Youth Housing service, we support young people aged 17-25 already experiencing homelessness (80%) and those who are at risk of homelessness; among them are those living in severely crowded dwellings, people couch surfing, people living in temporary accommodation, and rough sleepers. We provide a range of services from general support and case management (including assisting them to secure and maintain a private, social or transitional housing tenancy) to supporting young people's access to immediate crisis accommodation.

Our submission will outline the following:

1. Factors pushing young people into homelessness in the Mid North Coast, addressing the specificities of the region
2. Characteristics of clients assisted by the homelessness services over the past two years including the main reasons for seeking assistance
3. Recommendations to prevent and address youth homelessness

1. Causes of homelessness

The factors pushing young people into homelessness in the NSW Mid North Coast include:

- Lack of affordable, safe and stable housing:
 - Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour are two of the least affordable local government areas in regional NSW. In Coffs Harbour, the Affordable Housing Income Gap – the amount households need to increase their income by to avoid housing stress - is \$192 per week; in Port Macquarie it is \$152 per week¹.
 - Other factors contributing to a shortage of affordable properties is Airbnb (tourism is a major industry in the Mid North Coast): repurposing units in the region that might otherwise be long-term housing, has strained an already supply-short market and has increased the cost of rent.
 - Major capital works across the Mid North Coast also impacts on the affordability and availability of housing as a percentage of the workforce relocates to the area (usually for a number of years) – once again increasing the demand on rental properties and the cost of rent. Recent (and ongoing) capital works include major upgrades to the Pacific Highway (and soon the proposed by-pass of Coffs Harbour), new or major renovations to hospitals (e.g. Coffs Harbour Base Hospital) and the building of the Correctional Centre near Grafton.
- Financial difficulties: recent research shows that youth unemployment in Coffs Harbour – Grafton region is the second highest in the country: it currently sits at 23.3%². In 2019, 68% of clients accessing our homelessness services were unemployed.
- Domestic and family violence: Almost 10 women a day (nationally) are hospitalised for assault injuries perpetrated by a spouse or domestic partner³. Research shows that domestic and family violence is the leading cause of children’s homelessness in Australia⁴. Data below (section 2) illustrates the pervasiveness of domestic and family violence in the lives of young people seeking our homelessness services.
- Health issues: For many people with a mental illness, achieving and maintaining a stable home can prove difficult⁵. The onset of mental illness is typically around mid-to-late adolescence and Australians aged 18-24 have a higher prevalence of mental illness than any other age group⁶. In 2019, 35% of clients accessing our homelessness

¹ *The Affordable Housing Income Gap: 2018 Report*, Compass Housing Services. Retrieved from: www.compasshousing.org

² *Smashing the avocado debate: Australia’s youth unemployment hotspots*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2019. Retrieved from: www.bsl.org.au

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019. *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: Continuing the national story*. Cat. no FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW.

⁴ Campo, Monica, 2015, *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence*, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved from: www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/childrens-exposure-domestic-and-family-violence

⁵ Morrison, S., March 2009, *Mental Health, Housing and Homelessness in Australia*, Retrieved from: www.mhaustralia.org

⁶ The Black Dog Institute, 2020. Retrieved from: www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

services had been previously diagnosed with a mental health issue by a health professional (an increase of 7% from 2018). Moreover, we have witnessed that wait times for young people to access a mental health service or professional has increased over the past 12 months with many of our clients waiting (on average) 6-10 weeks.

2. Client characteristics: Momentum Youth Housing service

An analysis of our client data over the past two years (2018 and 2019) illuminates the following:

- 59% of young people accessing the service are women
- 24% of young people accessing the service have children (aged between 0-5)
- The highest proportion of clients are from the following age groups: 20-24 years (42%), 18-19 years (25%) and 0-2 years (14%)
- 51% of clients identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

The most prominent reasons for clients seeking assistance:

- Housing affordability stress: 12% (an increase of 6% from 2018)
- Lack of family and/or community support: 12%
- Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions (including overcrowding): 11%
- Family breakdown: 11%
- Housing crisis (e.g. a recent or impending eviction): 10%
- Financial difficulties: 9%
- Mental health issues: 6%
- Domestic and family violence: 4.5%
- Drug or substance abuse: 2.8%

Clients accessing Momentum Youth Housing service often have complex needs and experience significant economic and social disadvantage. More often than not homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of a number of factors, rather than a single cause. Below is an example of a young person we are currently assisting which demonstrates the multiple challenges experienced by our clients:

Mary is a 19-year-old Torres Strait Islander woman who is pregnant. Over the past year she has been accessing emergency accommodation and couch surfing. Our client has applied for and viewed every available property within her affordability and is yet to secure accommodation. Almost all properties have multiple prospective tenants in attendance. On more than one occasion, our client has been advised that her application has been unsuccessful while the property remains listed as available for rent and other viewings are scheduled. On one occasion, a (private) landlord informed her that young single mothers were not the type of tenant they were seeking.

3. Possible strategies to address the housing crisis

Blue Sky Community Services proposes the following strategies for consideration by the inquiry, which our experience indicates will greatly assist in preventing and addressing youth homelessness in rural and regional areas:

1. Increase availability of homelessness prevention and early intervention programs with proven records of success. One such example is Rent Choice Youth (a NSW government funded program we deliver) which assists young people aged 16-24 to secure private rental properties with access to the Rent Choice Youth subsidy.
2. Increase the availability of services supporting families in crisis and to deal with family breakdown to prevent homelessness. An example of a successful initiative which alleviates the pressures on families in crisis is Kids Under Cover⁷; this organisation supports vulnerable young people between 12 and 25 years who are either already homeless or at risk of homelessness by building relocatable studios (with a bathroom) in the backyard of a family or carer's home. The extra room relieves overcrowding, eases tension and provides young people with a secure and stable environment. When the studio is no longer required it can be relocated to another eligible young person. Under this initiative young people (and their siblings) are also awarded education or job scholarships to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage.
3. Increase opportunities for vocational training as part of school curricula for students in years 11 and 12 to encourage young people who may experience barriers to continuing their education (such as overcrowding at home or mental illness) to complete schooling while also beginning a practical pathway to future employment. The program could also incorporate a mentoring or coaching component to build the skills, knowledge and confidence of the young person to be able to positively respond to situations and address and overcome barriers as they present. This in turn will increase the likelihood of the young person completing school and achieving greater success when transitioning into employment. Supporting young people to develop key work ready soft skills such as how to make a good impression and how to retain employment would also be highly beneficial, as our experience suggests that often young people haven't had the opportunity to learn these important skills.
4. Increase investment in rural and regional economic development and employment initiatives to increase the availability of employment opportunities, which are limited in smaller regional centres in particular. Access to traineeships and apprenticeships in the renewable energy, eco-tourism, technology and other growing sectors, provide great opportunities for young people in regional areas such as ours to gain meaningful and sustained employment.
5. Encourage private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing stock through a range of incentives, subsidies and grants and by reforming housing taxation.

⁷ Kids Under Cover: www.kuc.org.au

6. Increase public housing stock in the Mid North Coast to help meet current demand.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to this important inquiry. Should you wish to further discuss any of the material in this submission, please do not hesitate to be in touch on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Terry Robb

Executive Manager: Service Delivery and Quality

Blue Sky Community Services