

Overview: Background to the Project

In 2009-2010 Berry Street services provided 656 placements across the regions in which we provide out of home care: Hume, North & West Metropolitan, Southern Metropolitan, Eastern Metropolitan and Gippsland. These 656 placements were spread across residential care, foster care and kinship care. In addition to providing out-of-home care, Berry Street is a provider of funded leaving care programs in North & West region and Hume region, as well as operating a partnership with Whitelion to provide a leaving care mentoring program in the Gippsland region. Hume region are currently in the process of expanding their service provision to include a mentoring program.

In response to the documented concerns and increasing anecdotal evidence, and the practice wisdom of Berry Street program staff, leaving care was highlighted as an area of organisational priority for service innovation in the Berry Street Strategic Directions 2027 which states the following:

Integrated support for young people leaving care

Each year approximately 400 Victorian teenagers leave care and must fend for themselves without the back up support of a family. Report after report has documented that many of these teenagers go straight from Out of Home Care to homelessness, unemployment and all the social problems that being so vulnerable creates. We will develop, pilot, evaluate and promote services and policies to support young people make a successful transition to adulthood.

Berry Street was successful in receiving significant funding from the Ian Potter Foundation to undertake the “My Life – Our Community” project. The balance of the funding was received from a major donor. The purpose of the project was to **“establish answers and action for early intervention approaches for young people with complex presentations who are in care in Victoria, to prevent homelessness when they leave care.”**

The project draws on the experiences of the current cohort of young people preparing to leave care, and aims to identify potential models of service to better serve the needs of this client group and thus provide an opportunity for improved outcomes. The project also includes a literature review on current knowledge and practice of leaving care and leaving care service models from around the world. Finally, we make recommendations as to approaches that could be implemented by Berry Street in the future, and we identify where Government policy and resource allocation should be changed to enhance the long term outcomes for young people who have been in State Care.

Definitions

The phases of leaving care can be more clearly defined into two distinct stages: **leaving care** which focuses on the preparation of children and young people to exit the out-of-home care system; and **post care** which refers to the period after the cessation of formal child protection intervention. For the purposes of this document, the term “leaving care” will refer to the stages of both the preparation and after care experience, unless otherwise specified. Internationally leaving care is referred to under a number of umbrella terms including “aging out”, “transitioning” and “emancipation”.

For the purposes of this report, the types of out-of-home care models are defined as:

Home-based care – where placement is in the home of a carer who is reimbursed for expenses in caring for the child.

The three categories of home-based care are:

Foster care – where care is provided in the private home of a substitute family which receives payment that is intended to cover the child’s living expenses;

Kinship care – where the caregiver is a family member or a person with a pre-existing relationship with the child;

Other home-based care – care in private homes that does not fit into the above categories.

Residential care – where placement is in a residential building whose purpose is to provide placement for children and where there is paid staff. This includes facilities where there is rostered staff, where there is a live-in carer and where staff are off-site (for example, a lead tenant or supported residence arrangement).

Family group homes – where placement is in a residential building which is owned by the jurisdiction and which typically run like family homes, have a limited number of children and are cared for around the clock by paid resident or substitute parents.

Independent living – where children are living independently, such as those in private boarding arrangements.

Other – where the placement type does not fit into the above categories or is unknown” (Australian Government Department of Senate Community Affairs Committee 2005, p. 78)

For the purposes of this report, **homelessness** will refer to accommodation stipulated by the following discrete categories.

Primary homelessness refers to people with no accommodation.

Secondary homelessness is defined as people who move frequently within temporary housing options such as crisis accommodation and transitional housing.

Tertiary homelessness refers to people who reside in medium to long term boarding houses (Chamberlain & McKenzie 1992).