



About Yfoundations

For over 40 years, Yfoundations has served as the NSW peak body advocating for children and young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, and the services that support them. Our members and board are made up of highly experienced youth specialist homelessness services (SHS) providers who have direct knowledge of and experience with the issues young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness face. We are also the only peak body representing this cohort nationally.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to Treasury on the Housing Legislative Package - Exposure Drafts for the Housing Australia Future Fund, National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, and Amendment Bills.

Yfoundations welcomes this suite of critical housing legislation and is encouraged that the Australian Government has taken on an active leadership role in housing and homelessness policy and investment. For too long, this has been considered solely as a responsibility by state and territory governments, leading to significant underinvestment in housing and homelessness, as well as a lack of cross-government coordination and accountability.

However, we agree with Homelessness NSW and Homelessness Australia that more needs to be done to tackle the current housing crisis. To this end, Yfoundations' endorses Homelessness NSW's and Homelessness Australia's submissions.

Further, Yfoundations has serious concerns with the lack of consideration and mention of unaccompanied young people as an identified cohort with 'acute housing needs' in the **Exposure Draft - Housing Australia Future Fund Bill 2023**, where 'acute housing' is defined by Treasury as:

[...] crisis housing offered to cohorts at serious risk of, or who are already experiencing, homelessness. This includes short-term and emergency housing, medium-to-long-term transitional housing and specialist services in relation to housing.¹

At present, the legislation identifies 'Indigenous persons, women, children, and veterans' as examples of cohorts with acute housing needs.² As the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF) has evolved from an election commitment to draft legislation, Yfoundations is disappointed that unaccompanied young people continue to be excluded. Consequently, this results in young people being excluded within the HAFF's intended funding and allocation provisions relating to

¹ Australian Government, The Treasury (2023). *Housing Legislative Package, Explanatory material - Chapter 1: Housing Australia Future Fund*, 1.66.

² Australian Government, The Treasury (2023). *Housing Legislative Package, Exposure draft - Housing Australia Future Fund Bill, Clause 2A - Object(a)*.

acute housing needs, social housing, and affordable housing in its first five years. Currently, these provisions include:

- 4,000 (out of an intended 30,000) social and/or affordable homes for women and children impacted by domestic and family violence or older women at risk of homelessness;
- \$200 million for the repair, maintenance and improvement of housing in remote Indigenous communities;
- \$100 million for crisis and transitional housing options for women and children impacted by family and domestic violence and older women at risk of homelessness; and
- \$30 million to build housing and fund specialist services for veterans who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness.

An unattainable rental market, a lack of specialised SHS accommodation and longer-term affordable housing contribute to a gaping lack of appropriate exit options for young people within the SHS system. At Yfoundations, we strongly advocate for the Government to adopt an explicit focus and commitment to increase housing supply and outcomes for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Key recommendation

The Australian Government must identify 'unaccompanied young people' as a cohort with acute housing needs in the Housing Australia Future Fund Bill 2023, Clause 2A - Object (a) so that this cohort is consequently considered in future reviews, funding and/or allocation provisions as part of the HAFF.

Supporting information

Our submission aims to demonstrate why excluding unaccompanied young people is a serious omission by the Australian Government and it must be rectified. Going forward, unaccompanied young people must be considered as a group with acute housing needs, requiring specialised housing and support.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census data showed a 26% increase in homelessness over a 10-year period for 12 to 24-year-olds.³ This number is estimated to increase in the 2021 Census data following the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and cost of living pressures. The most recent Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) data indicates that almost 40,000 young people aged 15 to 24 years presented alone to an SHS in 2021-22, making up around 14% of all SHS clients and the third largest client group.⁴ Of this group, 46% needed long-term housing, with only 3.9% receiving it.⁵ This was followed closely by short-term or emergency accommodation, with 44% needing this service and only 51% receiving it.⁶ Despite being identified as a priority cohort in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), under *NHHA Performance Indicator (i)*, there has been a steady rise in

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*. ABS.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

children and young people aged 25 years or younger experiencing persistent homelessness since 2019-20. Currently, 17,100 of this group experience persistent homelessness.⁷

We also do not fully understand the extent of the issue of youth homelessness. The Census fails to accurately capture the numbers of young people who are overwhelmingly experiencing couch surfing and severe overcrowding. Regardless, these are the most prevalent forms of homelessness that young people experience. Anecdotally, we know that couch surfing often puts young people at risk of servitude, exploitation, sexual violence, and abuse.

Homelessness continues to grow for young people. We are seeing too many young people couch surfing, living in unsafe overcrowded accommodation, sleeping rough or 'refuge hopping' in crisis accommodation. Young people have been failed by previous housing and homelessness responses and the failure to include them as a cohort with acute housing needs in this new legislation will see many more fall through the gaps.

Currently, there is a serious lack of options for young people across their continuum of need. Young people do not have the same coping strategies and resources generally attributed to adults, and thus require a range of housing options depending on their age and development, independence and presenting issues. This includes crisis accommodation, specialist domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV) accommodation, medium-term accommodation, Youth Foyers, and youth social housing.

Crisis Accommodation

Crisis accommodation or youth refuges are a short-term, emergency response that offers young people experiencing homelessness shelter and support for up to three months. During this time, staff work with residents to identify longer-term housing solutions.

As indicated above, almost half of all young people seeking emergency or short-term accommodation across Australia did not receive the bed they required. This is particularly true in regional or rural areas. In our recent NSW Regional Youth Homelessness Forums, we heard from regional youth SHS about a severe lack of crisis accommodation as an example of a significant local service system gap. We heard heartbreaking stories where the only options were to provide young people with a tent or to refer them to refuges considerable distances away from their community⁸ Young people experiencing homelessness are at significant risk of exploitation and violence⁹ and moving them out of their local communities can disrupt their education, distance them from supports and disrupt belonging.

The Council to Homeless Persons detailed similar experiences in Victoria and refer to a 'postcode lottery for youth refuge accommodation' where refuge services have been developed in a piecemeal fashion with parts of Victoria missing out, and others provided with too few beds compared to the population of their catchment.¹⁰

Young people who are not able to secure a bed due to lack of availability often return to unsafe situations, couch-surf, or stay in overcrowded or inadequate dwellings.

Specialist Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV) Accommodation

A significant gap is the lack of specialised support and accommodation for young people

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yfoundations (2022). *Regional Youth Homelessness Forum Consultation Report*.

⁹ Synergistiq (2013). *Family mediation and reconciliation interventions in youth homelessness: Literature review for Melbourne City Mission*.

¹⁰ Council to Homeless Persons (2022). *A plan to end homelessness in Victoria*.

experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence. Nationally, over one third of young people presenting alone to SHS selected family and domestic violence (DFSV) as a vulnerability.¹¹ Yet, DFSV funding underpinned by both Federal and State DFSV Plans is largely channeled into support and accommodation for adult women and their accompanying children. This means that the needs of this cohort are not being met, as they require age-appropriate, specialised, best practice accommodation models and support. Responding to young people who are experiencing DFSV alone require a different approach and skills to those needed for adult women and their children.

Sadly, young women represent a significant proportion of those murdered by their intimate partners or someone known to them. Young people often don't see themselves as victims/survivors of DFSV and the absence of refuges and specialist youth DFSV support only strengthens this belief. The Australian Government has an opportunity to change this mindset.

Social Housing

The absence of any policy directions requiring community housing providers (CHPs) to quarantine a portion of social housing stock to young people places them at an extreme disadvantage and often having to wait-time of up to 10 years before being placed in a social housing property, if they are lucky. Most recent national AIHW figures showed that there are currently 163,508 households on the social housing waiting list¹². To further exacerbate this, some evidence suggests that CHPs are less likely to prioritise young people's applications because they think they're risky tenants¹³. These factors help explain why across Australia in 2018 only 3.1% of social housing principal tenants were young people aged 15-24 despite the growing number of young people in need of affordable, long-term accommodation¹⁴.

There are many young people who require the stability and feasibility that the social housing model can provide but need specific support that mainstream social housing cannot provide them with. Therefore youth-specific social housing models (including Youth Foyers, transitional housing, or transitional housing plus) are crucial for inclusion in policy and funding to end homelessness for young people.

Medium Term Accommodation

In our annual survey, 'lack of medium-term accommodation' was the second highest reported issue affecting the youth homelessness sector over two years¹⁵.

Medium-term accommodation is a supported housing model for young people with complex needs. It provides wrap-around support for up to two years and gives young people experiencing homelessness an opportunity to live in stable accommodation in a home-like environment. Medium-term housing provides in-house programs, 24/7 onsite support, and access to mainstream services such as mental health or education. Participants are supported to reconnect with family, finish their education or training, and transition to independence.

Medium-term accommodation is a valuable lifeline for these unaccompanied young people, especially those within the 16-18 age cohort. This cohort is too old for policies and programs aimed at children 15 and under, and whilst they are eligible for services targeted at young adults such as transitional housing, it is unrealistic to expect that they will always have the independence

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22*.

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). *Households and waiting lists*.

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019). *Housing assistance in Australia 2019*

¹⁴ Hand, T. and MacKenzie, D., (2020). *Young People and Housing Supports in Australia: Income Support, Social Housing and Post-Homelessness Outcomes*, University of South Australia.

¹⁵ Yfoundations (2022). *Annual Membership Survey 2022*.

and life-skills necessary for these programs, particularly if they have complex issues and needs. The time and support offered from medium-term services can dramatically help young people with complex needs avoid the negative long-term outcomes of homelessness and avoid unsafe practices such as rough sleeping, refuge-hopping or couch surfing. Unfortunately, there is a critical shortage of medium-term accommodation options despite the demand. In 2021-22, 16,287 young people presenting alone to SHS needed medium-term accommodation with only 24.6% of them receiving this service¹⁶. In NSW alone there are only five of these services, none of which are in regional or rural areas.

Affordable Private Rentals

Young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness within the SHS system who have a level of independence to sustain a rental are locked out of the private market as a viable, affordable exit option. Conversely, the current rental crisis is pushing young people out of housing and into homelessness. 'Housing crisis e.g., eviction' is now the main reason young people presented alone to SHS in 2021-22.¹⁷ Anglicare's 2022 Rental Snapshot indicates that there was only one affordable rental property across Australia for someone on the youth allowance payment.¹⁸ In our 2021-22 Annual Membership Survey, 79.6% of respondents identified 'unaffordability in the private rental market' as the biggest issue affecting the youth homelessness sector.¹⁹ With renting becoming less affordable in every capital city in the past year²⁰ and vacancy rates at a record low²¹, renting is increasingly unattainable for young people on low incomes. As well as rising costs, young people face further challenges such as age-based discrimination²², a lack of rental references²³ and insecure share housing.²⁴

Despite these challenges, the Government has not increased Youth Allowance in real terms since 1994. Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) is also insufficient to meet the needs of low-income renters. In June 2022, 63% of CRA recipients paid more than 30% of their income on rent, and 23% paid more than half of their income on rent²⁵.

Concluding remarks

Governments must commit to the highest standards for our young people to give them every opportunity to be safe, free from abuse, trauma, and violence, to live their best lives and be given opportunities to thrive and enter adulthood equipped with life skills. If we fail to take the issue of youth homelessness seriously and continue to overlook this cohort in housing and homelessness legislation, it will have devastating consequences for their futures. Therefore, we are urging the government to include unaccompanied young people as an example as a cohort with 'acute housing needs' in Clause 2A - Object (a) in the Housing Australia Future Fund Bill 2023, so that this cohort is consequently considered in future reviews, funding and/or allocation provisions as part of the HAFF.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022). *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021-22*,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anglicare Australia (2022). *2022: Rental Affordability Snapshot*.

¹⁹ Yfoundations (2022). *Annual Membership Survey 2022*.

²⁰ SGS Economics and Planning (2022). *Rental Affordability Index*.

²¹ Burke, K. (2022). 'A landlord's market': Little relief for renters amid tight vacancy rate. *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

²² Hall et al. (2020). *Staying home: A Youth Survey report on young people's experience of homelessness*. Mission Australia.

²³ Choice, National Shelter and the National Association of Tenant Organisations. (2017). *Unsettled: Life in Australia's Private Rental Market*.

²⁴ Tenants' Union of NSW & Youth Action (2021). *Young Renters: We hear you! Key findings from our young renter survey and roundtables*.

²⁵ Productivity Commission (2022). *In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement*.

The Government must start working in meaningful ways to turn off the tap to stop the unending flow of homelessness for young people. If we get this legislation right now for young people, then we will effectively be turning off the tap for the next generation of adults.

Please contact Trish Connolly, CEO Yfoundations at trish@yfoundations.org.au should you wish to discuss any element of our submission further.