LOOKING FOR GOOD PRACTICE AND OPTIMAL SERVICES FOR YOUTH FACING HOMELESSNESS WITH COMPLEX CARE NEEDS AND HIGH RISK OR CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

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SUMMARY

This study employed qualitative research methodology informed by the grounded theory tradition to explore good practice and optimal services for young people presenting with complex care needs associated with challenging or high risk behaviour. In-depth interviews were conducted in three waves of data collection and analysis with fourteen experienced practitioners whose careers have included sustained periods of work with this group in a number of selected Victorian service systems.

The principal vantage point was the interface between the supported accommodation and assistance programs for homeless young people, statutory child protection and care, placement and support programs for young people at risk and juvenile justice programs for young offenders. The nature of the problem necessarily included some consideration of mental health and services dealing with substance abuse.

The findings propose a view of good practice giving emphasis to the accessible and assertive presence of a responsible adult to “be there” fostering relationships and skilled purposive intervention. Intervention should be planned, holistic, sensitive and responsive to particular needs. It provides active unconditional care. It attends to attachment and trauma concerns and works with short run goals and a long term perspective. Intervention is sustained until constructive disengagement can occur.

The complexity and challenge in the task of helping hurt youth warrants the support, strength and guidance of a multi-skilled team. Ideally the team will be described using normative terms. Optimal services are timely, congruent, seamless and robust in capacity to nurture, establish boundaries and meet developmental and therapeutic requirements. They should be connected to a community and there for as long as it takes, with ready access to suitable accommodation, purchasing power and flexibility of operation. To the greatest extent possible solutions are generated in the place where help is sought. Voluntary service commitment lasts till personal capacity and natural networks take over.
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from the thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Ethics Committee of Berry Street Victoria on 20 October 2005, the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Ethics Committee on 7 February 2006 (FHEC05/188) and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Services, Victoria on 1 March 2006 (HREC 01/06).

Sincerely,

Signed: Lloyd S. Owen

Date:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The major reason for pursuing this study arises from many encounters with young people, their families and the staff who have worked with them. Among ever present pain and uncertainty there have been many moments of warmth, humour, support and occasional exhilaration. The lessons about life have been, and continue to be, myriad, with each succeeding generation. For many years now, at the back of my mind, I have wanted to write something useful and call it, if it was good enough, Zita's bequest, in honour of a bright young woman who lost her life twenty years ago to a drug overdose. I don't think this is yet good enough. But I have to thank the many who have been on this journey for their effort and the insights freely shared with me. A special tribute is due to the group who came a little closer and adopted our family as part of their family. Watching them surmount challenges, become parents and grandparents, survive and in some cases thrive lends inspiration and drives a desire to find ways to make successful and fulfilling journeys possible and probable.

To the participants in the study I thank you for your generosity, time and insights so freely shared. Your experience is amazing and the skill and dedication I encountered is profound. I thank you for "being there." To my supervisors over the long lead up and the final burst of activity Professors David Cox and Allan Borowski thanks are due for patience, forbearance and support. I am grateful also to colleagues and students in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University and the Australian and International fraternity that has developed around projects like "Looking After Children," the former colleagues from the Department of Human Services and the Community Services Organisations I have worked in and with, who have helped to keep difficult but important ideas alive.

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