

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Shepparton—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

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WITNESSES

Ms Anita McCurdy, Manager, Education First Youth Foyer, Shepparton;

Mr Mark Cox, Practice Manager, Youth Programs, and

Dr Joseph Borlagdan, Principal Research Fellow, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The CHAIR: I am going to declare the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing into homelessness in Victoria open. Welcome, everyone. If you could please make sure that your phones are on silent, even your alarms and your memos—everything. Before we start, I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of this land that we are meeting on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge on this issue to the Committee, and those who are observing from the gallery. Welcome, everyone.

This is being recorded, so everyone be aware of that. All evidence that is taken at this hearing is protected under our parliamentary privilege, and that is through the *Constitution Act 1975* but also through the provisions of our Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore you are protected by law for anything you say here. However, if you were to repeat those statements outside of here, you may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you can see, we have Hansard here today, so they will be recording you. You will be provided with a proof version of that. We encourage you to have a look at it and make sure that we did not make any terrible errors. Eventually that transcript will go up on our website and be made public. As we spoke about last night, we would love to hear some opening comments and then we will open it up to questions from the Committee. Thank you.

Mr COX: Brilliant. Well, I will start things off. Thank you very much for having us here today, and once again for the opportunity last night to visit the foyer. As we go through the model we will each be adding our own comments before opening it up. Hopefully visiting last night will provide some context to running through this model.

So my name is Mark Cox. I am the Practice Manager for the youth team at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. I work with all three of the Education First Youth Foyers, and the role of the Brotherhood is really to support each of the three around service development, making sure that staff are trained around the model. We also led a large-scale research and evaluation project, which we will be talking about today in terms of what outcomes the Education First Youth Foyers have reached.

This is Anita McCurdy over here. She is the manager of the Education First Youth Foyer in Shepparton here, working for Berry Street. And this is Dr Joseph Borlagdan, also from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, who headed up the large-scale research project. We are each going to provide some information before opening it up.

First of all, Education First Youth Foyers began as a joint vision between Government and the community sector. Wendy Lovell—it is wonderful having you here today. Obviously in your role you were absolutely instrumental in advocating for this approach and this new way of working with young people around homelessness, and your work with Tony Keenan from Hanover Welfare Services at the time and Tony Nicholson at the Brotherhood of St Laurence at the time was instrumental in getting these three up and running—because I think what we have got now is something that is truly innovative in the space.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence and Hanover Welfare Services—as Launch Housing were known at the time—created a framework that really outlined this new offer to young people and this innovative practice that we call ‘advantaged thinking’, which I guess is a new way of working with young people around their aspirations and not merely focusing on the deficits but helping young people who have experienced homelessness cope with their situations, actually working towards that situation of thriving. We came up with this idea and this practice framework in collaboration with a gentleman called Colin Falconer. He worked for

the Foyer Federation in the UK and observed in the UK—where foyers have greater prominence than in Australia—that this new way of working was necessary.

We have got three Education First Youth Foyers that exist in Victoria. The first one opened up in 2013; that is in Glen Waverley. Our model is to be attached to TAFE institutions—so in Glen Waverley it is the Holmesglen Institute that we partner with to deliver that service. The second one that opened up was in Broadmeadows—so, the Kangan Institute there. That is run by Launch Housing, as is the Glen Waverley service. And of course in Shepparton in 2016 the third Education First Youth Foyer opened up, run by Berry Street in partnership with BeyondHousing—and the Brotherhood is part of the Government structure in supporting each of these three foyers. They all follow exactly the same model. It is framed around advantaged thinking, and it is a departure from traditionally problem saturated thinking about young people, as we said. Actually what we try to do is focus on what young people can do and what they can be in their lives.

So young people from the ages of 16 to 24 who have experienced or who are at risk of homelessness are welcome at our Education First Youth Foyers. We offer accommodation, and we do this in the form of a ‘deal’, which I will go into, for a period of up to two years. We think that that provides the time to provide not only some stability for that young person but actually an effective amount of time to work with them around goals that they have in terms of transitioning into adulthood and setting them up for the next steps.

Most of the young people who live at the three Education First Youth Foyers are experiencing or have experienced significant disruptions in their transition to adulthood, as you would imagine. Each young person we meet and the ones you met last night have their own individual stories that have resulted in them moving into an Education First Youth Foyer. Our evaluation of the program shows that three quarters of our young people across all three of the sites have previous experience in state-based or out-of-home care. One third reported feeling unsafe in their home prior to moving into a foyer, and that resulted in them wanting to move in. Seventy per cent report experiencing recent moderate or serious mental distress.

We, however, consider each of our young people as skilled and talented. We invest our time and resources as a program into supporting them to thrive, not just focusing on the difficulties that have led them to moving into a foyer. We enter into what we call a deal, and this outlines a ‘mutual investment for mutual gain’ kind of approach that we like to work with each young person around. Young people as part of this deal commit to setting and working on their education and wider life goals, to paying rent, to living there and to giving the opportunities brokered for them a go. In return the foyer and our staff commit to offering stable accommodation, 24/7 staffing and support, and linking young people in with opportunities in connection with their skills and talents—and these opportunities exist locally around the foyer. We see this reciprocal way of working with young people as respectful, something that prepares young people for the real world and really reduces their dependence on services—and Joseph will talk about some of the fabulous outcomes that we aim to achieve alongside our young people.

We focus on what we call six service offers at the foyer, and these are: education, employment, housing and living skills, health and wellbeing, social connections and civic participation. Everything that we program around the foyer relates to one of these six areas of life that we believe in balance every human needs to be thinking about and setting goals to work towards.

Key to our model are the partnerships it fosters with mainstream education, employment and other providers in the community. As such an education youth foyer is about so much more than what is delivered within its four walls. It really relies on these partners out there in the community. We call it a foyer approach rather than a foyer building. We prioritise linking our young people with inspiration opportunities, whether they be mentors, sporting clubs, volunteering, and really replicating the same activities that we would expect of our own children and making sure that the young people we are working with have the same opportunities that those who grow up in more stable circumstances are encouraged and expected to pursue. All our model is about having high expectations of our young people and ensuring they have the opportunity to show off the skills and talents we know they have.

The co-located TAFE that we have at each of the three Education First Youth Foyers delivers with us what is called a Certificate I in Developing Independence. It covers life skill modules, and they are delivered in experiential coaching sessions. We talk to young people about topics such as positive relationships, knowing your legal rights and how to transition into private rental, which is one of the goals that we have attached to our

program. The Certificate I in Developing Independence sets up an aspirational plan to work with alongside our young people, traditionally replacing what is commonly used around a case plan, which often is implemented on or for a young person, whereas we create a learning plan that actually is co-created with the young person themselves. So they are really directing their own journey through that. This plan is kept alive for the up to two years that a young person is in the foyer, and it is refined week to week with the coach that they are connected to within the foyer.

Anita will go into how the foyer in Shepparton has been working in place, and Joseph will talk about the longitudinal studies that we have been doing alongside each of our three. But I just wanted to touch on some of the systemic impacts that foyers have had. We really see that the foyer model is at the leading edge of homelessness reform, particularly for young people in this sector. Given the background of our young people and their intersections with the out-of-home care sector, leaving care, youth justice, we are aware of the need to work closely with these systems as well. We have been able to extend the offer of that Certificate I in Developing Independence as well as promote advantaged thinking and our way of working back into those systems as a way of preparing those young people for an eventual offer of foyer, if that is relevant to them, as well as just generally raising the expectations that we should have of this cohort of young people.

We have been able to support other foyers in Victoria—non-Education First Youth Foyers—to develop stronger links with their local TAFE or mainstream education providers, recognising that education pathways are going to be key in actually having young people move towards meaningful work, attain private rental and be able to maintain those homes as well. Recently the Tasmanian State Government asked the Brotherhood of St Laurence to work with their three youth accommodation supported facilities and actually transition those to the Education First Youth Foyer model. The Tasmanian Government has also announced two new Education First Youth Foyer models that it will be building, so bringing that up to five, and that will overtake Victoria.

We are observing great interest at the moment about this growing movement of Education First Youth Foyers. We hear of a lot of interest across this state—Geelong; Bendigo; Frankston; Wangaratta—where we will be tomorrow; Wodonga. There are many locations looking to develop their similar models. Recently—I think it was just last week actually—the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework was announced, and that recommended that youth foyers, in particular Education First Youth Foyers, should be created for this cohort as well. Nationally there is a foyer foundation, which is a growing movement that promotes accreditation and quality standards in foyers in this country. They have a bold ambition of working to increase the amount of foyers in Australia by 2030 to 30 foyers that would be accredited. So that is a wonderful campaign worth investing in.

As we know, homelessness is multidimensional. It cannot be fixed by working on just the homelessness system in isolation. Therefore our model does bring together the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as local placed-based partners—and these connections are from practice to ministerial levels—coming together to tackle this issue. So a strong governance structure and authorising environment has enabled this collaborative effort as well as building partnerships locally. I will allow Anita to explain for Shepparton.

Ms McCURDY: Hi, everyone. It has been great that you have been able to visit the program. It makes it much easier here because you can visualise it from your experiences with the young people. But I think the main thing for me is that the model has been so strong in being a really easy thing. I suppose it is in difficult times, but it was an easy thing to work with in terms of, 'Here it is; we will now go ahead', because we were the third foyer as well.

I think what came from there was actually building up a good team and also a good culture around that. We have a very diverse team, and I think that is a really important thing around working with young people in this cohort as well: who are we having to work with and be privileged enough to be around these young people but also how do we sustain that culture, because, you know, I have been around for a long time as well and you can see how teams can impact negatively at times. How do we keep this culture and this model going?

So in Shepparton we, regionally, think that we have had a great success in being able to link to community. We have many open days and we have many people come and visit over the time and entertain a lot—like we had last night. And as you can see, the young people who come in actually know that is part of their ride and journey as well. Their voice and us advocating and saying, 'Hey, this is your time and your chance to do this',

is great to go along with the model because they are choosing to come in and commit to this program as well. So the foundation is one thing that I really wanted to talk about, and with the certificate as well we have been able to show the community what we are doing with the young people and all the areas we are working on.

From that you can then take an area like employment and talk to the Committee for Greater Shepparton. We have had lots of great support from them, for example, and had mentor breakfasts with them where they come in and have their meetings with us. We have great relationships with Rotary and those different supports who have sponsored a lot of our young people to go on camps and weekends and leadership opportunities. We had our first young person actually sign up to be part of Rotary recently, and he loves it. We could see that that was something he was going to be linked into.

So we have a lot of examples of young people that have had opportunities that they would not have. In past programs that I have worked with, I suppose, this is something that is big, and it is proving to be successful. It is actually something to say 'I went to the foyer' or 'I worked there' or 'I have lived at the foyer' or 'I visited the foyer' and this is what is coming out of it. And the examples we are having are great. We talked about Alex last night, who bought his first house as well, which was great. We have two other students who are saving up to purchase their house as well.

Instrumental to what is happening is also that certificate in developing independence, because we can actually talk to real estate agencies about what they are learning with us and what support they are getting. Again, I have worked in homelessness for a long time and you just did not have that tool to say, 'We're investing'. Instead of being problem saturated we are now focusing on what these young people can do and they are committing to this program. So it is not just a roof over their head.

I did want to talk about the community. We have organised some fundraisers, so we also have the young people giving back to the community, which is something that we always talked about: 'Wouldn't it be great'. But this program has been instrumental because we have talked about the foyer, invited people in and asked, 'How about we do this?', and people were like, 'Yeah, we're on board'. So we have been able to raise money for local hospitals and local programs, and the students have been involved in that. Also—in picking those that may not be as boisterous as the ones you might have met last night—this model helps us make sure that we are accessing opportunities for those quieter ones as well. We have got a broad range of young people—as we all know—that come with us, and it is about us making sure that the foundation and the culture are that this young person's story can change or be rewritten or they can actually take that opportunity to do things differently from what they would have without the foyer because we are believing in them and investing in them and the community is investing in them. So what we are finding in Shepparton is we have open days and can have over 100 people come in and people still say, 'I haven't seen the foyer', and we are like, 'Come around'. So I think being transparent about the program is really important as well so that we are showing them and having young people talk to people all the time about what is happening. So social capital is really important, and I mentioned that.

The other thing I wanted to mention is the Better Futures rollout. In Berry Street I am actually managing that program now, so now we have been able to intersect with the certificate. We already were doing that with youth justice and out-of-home care, but now that Better Futures has come on board, because the foyer is pretty much a part of Shepparton now, it has been interesting to now be able to filter that out to Better Futures. Better Futures is young people that are leaving care and there are new policies being rolled out now, a new program, so that has been great to be able to talk to them when they are 16 to 18, still on orders, 'This is some opportunity that you could be involved in', and having that pathway accessible to them. We are hoping to increase young people from out-of-home care and also youth justice to be able to access foyer. We are talking with some of our youth justice counterparts as well. In the past with our certificate, but recently as well with a young person at the moment that may be coming out into foyer, we are giving those opportunities and making sure that our program can keep that culture going to ensure that we can take in younger people that would not have had that opportunity. I just wanted to talk about that.

For the campaign we have talked with a lot of other agencies. We have brought together a youth opportunity landscape which the Brotherhood have completed in other areas. That was quite successful in Shepparton because there are lots of pockets of programs that work in homelessness and with youth. We have worked on pulling those resources together. Part of the foyer campaign is actually doing that as well—us not leading it but being able to facilitate everyone to get together, to work together on things. We have got projects with The

Bridge Youth Service and SalvoCare about how do we work with the pre-foyer young people to get them ready for foyer or private rental or other opportunities—trying to work together on those things, which is great. In my time it was probably something that you did not see a lot in the past. Everyone is on board about how we support not only the young people that will be able to come to foyer—because there is another lot of young people that may not be ready for foyer or may not choose to come to foyer—but how we support other agencies to support them as well. So that is what we are doing.

Visual presentation.

Dr BORLAGDAN: Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Committee. I am going to spend the next 5 minutes talking about five years worth of research and evaluation work on the Education First Youth Foyer. The study comprises three parts. We have an outcome study which examines the impact of the Education First Youth Foyer on student outcomes. It is quite a unique study in that sense. We are the first study to follow young people from entry into the foyer through to exit and then two follow-up points: six months after they leave the foyer and then 12 months after they leave. The second part of our study is an implementation study. That is where we look at how and why we were able to produce these outcomes, really trying to get an understanding of the mechanisms and context that generated those outcomes—so asking what works for whom and under what circumstances. Thirdly, we had commissioned a financial study. KPMG did some cost-benefit analysis of the education foyers.

The key takeaway from our research is that the Education First Youth Foyer model works. Eighty-five per cent of students were in work or education in the year after leaving the Education First Youth Foyer. Just breaking that number down a little bit, what this chart shows are sustained improvements in education, housing and employment. In education we see some big gains here: 75 per cent, so about three-quarters, of young people held a year 12 or equivalent qualification a year after foyer. That was up from 42 per cent at entry. This is really significant when we consider that really the minimum requirement to gain access to decent work is that year 12 qualification. And this figure, although it can be a little bit difficult to compare, surpasses all previous foyer studies to date. When we look at those moving into employment, the rate has pretty much doubled. So it was 19 per cent at entry and up to 36 per cent a year after foyer. In terms of housing we see an improved capability amongst the participants to access and maintain independent and decent housing. About half were in their own place, so essentially renting in the private market.

The CHAIR: What were the other half doing?

Dr BORLAGDAN: The other half were being transitioned, working with the foyer to look at other forms of accommodation.

Ms LOVELL: Some have returned home.

Dr BORLAGDAN: Some did return home. That is a little bit ambiguous. Some of that is a positive outcome. There is family mediation work that is done in the foyer, so that is what we would count as a positive outcome.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Dr BORLAGDAN: So half were in their own place after exit. That was up from just 7 per cent at entry.

The other statistic there that supports that positive housing outcome is when we look at those who enter the foyer that were living in crisis accommodation, treatment centres or detention centres. That was about a third at entry, and that pretty much disappears down to 2 per cent, which might be a couple of people a year after exit. What is not shown in this chart are similar improvements in physical and mental health.

We think these findings are remarkable for three reasons. As I mentioned, it is the first longitudinal foyer study to provide rigorous evidence of sustained impact. It is also remarkable because 85 per cent of our sample of young participants entered the foyer in its early stages, so this is when we were dealing with a developing and partial model. We did not really see the impact of a fully developed model, so we think these are kind of conservative estimates in a way. Thirdly, it is remarkable when we consider young people's backgrounds. I just want to spend a bit of time diving into that. As Mark mentioned, about three-quarters of young people entering the foyer had experienced State or supported care.

The CHAIR: But that is not one of the qualifications for going into the foyer.

Dr BORLAGDAN: No.

Mr COX: It is not a qualification; it has just emerged in our data that that has just been the profile.

Dr BORLAGDAN: Yes, so the main intake criterion is willingness to engage in education, but when we looked at their background, this is essentially where they came from. A lot of them, so the majority—57 per cent—had experiences of unstable housing, so living in three-plus places in the year prior to foyer. They did not feel safe in this housing. They did not have adequate facilities in that housing as well. So, yes, while they are more willing to engage in education, and more of them were enrolled in education upon entering foyer compared to, say, specialist homelessness service clients, we do find that many of the young people come to foyer after struggling to maintain adequate and secure housing. Many had experiences in state or supported care, and the rest came from family homes where they experienced neglect and abuse or were in really temporary and unstable arrangements.

So coming towards the end now, we also looked at the value-for-money proposition of the Education First Youth Foyers. KPMG did some work here, and they found that the foyer compares favourably to other foyers and transitional housing management supports. They do caution when making a direct comparison that there are different types of services provided and different cohorts involved. Nevertheless, what they found was the Education First Youth Foyer compared favourably, largely due to economies of scale, so 40 young people at education foyers—other foyers tended to be smaller and other foyers also tended to have longer stays. So having that two-year cap on the stay was quite important in keeping costs down.

There were also benefits, as you would imagine, from avoided housing costs and avoided health costs. That health cost was really based on some data linkage work that we were able to do looking at emergency department presentations and hospital stays, and there were also broad benefits from educational attainment—benefits to the individual on employment and earnings as well as to government on reducing spending on unemployment benefits.

So, in summary then, we can confidently say that the Education First Youth Foyer model is evidence-based, is replicable and presents value for money. It really speaks to the importance of investing in early and integrated supports that really invest in and focus on young people's capabilities. It really pays off. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all three of you. I think that was a really lovely, rounded introduction, and obviously being able to visit yesterday enables us to have that picture in our heads. I do not think anyone doubts that the youth foyer is a fantastic program, and obviously your evaluation, Joseph, has really shown that. I suppose what I was thinking when I was reading the evaluation is: was there any comparison to a group of people that grew up in a family circumstance, because the outcomes are wonderful, and I wonder if you are actually almost reaching the same outcomes as you would expect from a child who did not have those difficulties in their growing up.

Dr BORLAGDAN: Yes, I mean, if you look at, I guess, the foundation of the model, it is based on a capabilities approach—so really supporting young people to have the freedom to provide them with opportunities to pursue lives that they value. The assumption in that is that—for this group of young people that we are talking about—they do not have the kinds of mainstream supports that other young people have. They do not have the kind of financial and social support from their families. So this model really steps in to provide that. And what we see is that along some of the measures they do reach parity with some of their counterparts. It is difficult to make that direct comparison, but when we look at the improvements and how they are sustained over time we can speak to the positive effect of that.

The CHAIR: Wendy?

Ms LOVELL: No, just: thank you, guys. No point me asking you questions; I know all about it. Just one thing that I would say is even with the results that we have there, and you touched on it there from early entries into the system before we had a fully developed model. But also for Shepp, which has been one of the stars of the three foyers—there is not a lot of data in there for Shepp because it was the last one that came on, and this was a study of the first five years. So I think the results would have been even more stunning had we had an

evaluation done perhaps after we had been going for a couple of years, but the next five years would have included Shepparton and a more mature model.

Mr COX: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Yes. I think Joseph mentioned that it raises that. It will be exciting to see the next evaluation.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you for coming. My apologies that I could not get there last night, but I have had the privilege to meet with Anita and go through the foyer, and I cannot understand why we do not have them—it is a no-brainer really, I believe—throughout the entire Victoria, even nationwide. The results obviously have proved that, and I have previously met the kids and heard how well they have adapted to that situation of having that support. So 33 per cent felt that there was a lack of safety at home. Has that been explored further? I know you gave some reasons, so whether it is family violence, sexual assault, drug use—whatever—have there been studies and more research done on that, because, Mark, as you alluded to earlier, this is not just about finding people accommodation; this is enormous, as are the complexities that lead to these children coming into the foyer. So I am interested in that side of it—as to the safety at home, and, you know, that is an area that we need to address also. So has there been research done in the area?

Dr BORLAGDAN: Well, what comes through in a lot of our qualitative data actually is that quite a number of the young people refer to the foyer—so the youth development workers to the other students there, to that community—as feeling like family. And many of them may have not experienced that close connection with family. So while they are there their rates of feeling that they have social support increases. One of the challenges for us is when they leave and maintaining that connection to the foyer community. So that becomes a really big part of it.

The others can speak to the kind of work that is done around family mediation. In terms of research, we have to triangulate our data to make sure that if they are returning back home, to consider whether that is a positive outcome or not. There was a lot of work done in our analysis looking at that.

Mr COX: What we have observed through the evidence and the evaluation, that figure around young people returning to home, it is much higher than we anticipated when we were coming up with a practice framework. Part of what we do at the Brotherhood of St Laurence is convene a community of practice between the three Education First Youth Foyers, and that is where Joseph and his team share the evidence—things like the fact that people are returning to home at higher rates than we thought, and that then challenges us in a practice sense or a model development sense to say, ‘Okay, how are we responding to that in the work that we are doing at foyers?’. You have raised an exact example of a conversation that we have had at our community of practices—i.e., how are we now building in family mediation approaches, given that our young people tend to return to home? How can we address domestic violence and other issues and make sure that young people are prepared and are able to navigate that if that is a part of their history, hopefully not part of their future? An example of what we have done is we have sent representatives from each of our three foyers—workers—to attend the Bouverie Centre, who do great family mediation work. They have undergone four days training, and they now, with a lens of the Education First Youth Foyer model, think about how conceptually that can be fed back to the rest of the staff but also practically what can be done with young people on the ground.

Our certificate I in developing independence does do some work around positive relationship building, and that does touch on family work. I know that there are some great examples in Shepparton of particular work they have done in terms of reaching out with more clinical partners around the exact topics you are talking about.

Ms MAXWELL: Those referral pathways.

Mr COX: Yes.

Ms McCURDY: The review in the certificate was to actually gather more information when they first come in, like a snapshot on who their family is, because we know that a lot of them are returning home. So let us get in earlier, I suppose, about what that looks like. Are there some relationships that could be worked through? In part of our coaching sessions and part of their two-year stay they might not return, but they could still have a strong connection even. So it is not about returning, but it is actually having that resource again relooked at. We have also, as Mark has just touched on, had other resources come in and train up staff about what it looks like: talking to them about family trees and writing up those, putting that together in a certificate.

Ms MAXWELL: And I guess reducing that demand for the foyer in the first place.

Ms McCURDY: Yes.

Ms MAXWELL: Which is where I come in about the family and how can we—

Ms McCURDY: And it is really important the work, that pre-foyer work, of when we are doing assessments. Is this something that we can refer to and work with other agencies that are in the community and we have got partnerships with as well to support family mediation and work on that? So not just taking them but really looking into exploring what is happening there.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you for allowing us to visit the foyer last night. It was fascinating, and I had many questions—which Mark has answered already—last night. What I want to know is the certificate course that you spoke about, do all the students at foyer have to do that course? If the answer is no, then I understand this course is developed for them to learn some of the life skills and make them ready to face the real world. So if they do not do this course, how ready are they to face the real world?

Mr COX: So the answer is yes. It is part of the deal.

Ms VAGHELA: It is a must.

Mr COX: Yes. It is part of the deal for each young person, and we aim for it within the first three months of their stay at foyer. We find that that is a real time when young people are provided with that housing stability and are able to often for the first time in a long time think about their next steps and think about setting some goals not only for education but those other six service offers I spoke on. All of those are introduced in the certificate I in developing independence. In fact the certificate begins on the very first day that a young person is interviewed. The first interview a young person does is at the co-located TAFE, and for us that is about a statement to the young person that this is an education program, we are not a housing program. The expectation around the certificate I in developing independence is there from the get-go. It wraps around whatever else a young person is studying.

Young people come to us in all sorts of educational situations. Some have been disengaged from mainstream education for years, and they use that certificate I as a reengagement tool. Others are highly engaged in terms of education by the time they come to us. We encourage an hour a week for them to complete that Certificate I in Developing Independence, and it wraps around whatever a young person is doing. So if they are at secondary school, TAFE, university, as some young people are, they do that. It is an expectation we have of anyone from 16 to 24, and it is adapted and co-delivered by the TAFE and the youth worker onsite. So it is delivered differently, which is really important, given the experience of our young people with mainstream education. It has to feel different.

Ms VAGHELA: And how long does the course go for?

Mr COX: Three months—that is, an hour a week with one-on-one sessions with your coach, but often it is delivered in a group setting as well, which is a lovely way for building that culture around learning. The structure of the course is very aspirational. It is around goal setting but then 11 life skill modules. I mentioned some of those topics. Four of those topics are related specifically to gaining private rental. In the way that Anita said, that is a great tool to then talk to rental agents and others about to say, ‘Actually our young people are the best people in your community because they’ve done some considered thinking and reflection around what it is to be a tenant in the community, and they are well-placed to be able to carry that forward with them’.

The other lovely thing about the Certificate I in Developing Independence is often it is the first formal, mainstream certificate that a young people has achieved in their life. We hold graduations; we celebrate that with every young person. It is something that they feel really proud of. They will often invite family or friends to those graduation ceremonies. For us, that mainstream education connection is just an absolute must as part of our model. It is always to be co-located for that reason, and we have been really lucky to have the department of education’s support in collaboration with DHHS on this foyer model, because the coming together of education and housing is critical.

Ms LOVELL: That was a critical thing in setting them up. We brought together a number of departments that work together on the foyers and a number of organisations as well. The partnerships were key to it.

Mr COX: Absolutely.

Mr BARTON: I just want to congratulate you on what you are doing. It was great going there last night, because you could feel the energy. Even this old bloke could feel the energy going in there. You could see the passion from the team down there, and I congratulate you for what you are doing. Sometimes we make decisions about things because it is the right thing to do, and what we are doing here is the right thing to do. However, we can back it up with some numbers. That makes a very compelling argument. The question for me is about you. How do we replicate the culture of what you have got here when we want to expand this notion, because clearly you have got a pretty good culture going on down there?

Ms McCURDY: Yes, I think, as I have always talked about when we have community practices around the culture of everything we are doing, picking the right people and recruiting the right people to be around these young people. It is not about us saving them. I think in our field—we all come to this field because we want to save them. We all go, ‘I really want to get into this field’. What I have seen and probably been part of at different times is that that is not what it is about; it is about providing opportunities. You lead the horse to water and they drink it, and that is pretty much what is happening at the foyer, I suppose. The certificate and the foundation and us working to keep that culture going through community practices is the key.

Being part of this Education First Youth Foyer side of things is bigger. It is about actually meeting, talking—even though it is millions of meetings. But at the same time it is needed, because that is how you keep that culture. If there were other foyers to come, it would be always about us making sure that we are available. The Brotherhood obviously do a lot of training around that. But it is about us going, ‘Great, come see our foyer. We’ll come to you. Let’s do shadow shifts’. I think they are crucial in setting up a foyer and making sure that for whoever is leading the place that is their main job. When people say, ‘What do you do as a manager?’, I think it is actually sustaining culture. Now it is there, it is all about sustaining advantage thinking. It is making sure that we do not fall back into that saving, problem-saturated place. That is not what they signed up for. They did not sign up to be talking about their this and that. It is talking about ‘What can I do in the future?’. These young people are feeling that the minute that they start looking at what the foyer program is. The minute they step in there it is not about their drug habit or whatever has happened in the past or what their family has done. It is about ‘These are the opportunities that are provided’. And the people that are around them do feel like family because it is very open. The culture of foyer has always been open office and being able to be available all the time and having 24/7 staff there. And stand-up is really important. The way the roster is structured is really important as well to make sure that it stays safe and it stays ‘advantage thinking’ and it stays a place that young people want to be.

Mr BARTON: Just tell me, have you got 40 kids in there today?

Ms McCURDY: Yes. We actually filled the rooms yesterday—

The CHAIR: Last night—otherwise we were going to stay. We were actually going to sleep there instead.

Mr COX: It is nice to think that any one time there are 121 stories and young people that are working towards the same outcomes that we have shared today across the three foyers—that is 120 within the foyers, but then think of the impact beyond that through the Certificate I in Developing Independence, in out-of-home care and others that we are working with in a campaign sense in place. We always say that foyer is more than the four walls, and we really have to challenge ourselves around that and our workers constantly. That is why we have the links with education and others. It is about how we increase that footprint and have a real impact using foyers as a hub for all of this.

Mr BARTON: How many supervisors do you have—just as a nuts and bolts thing, how many people are supervising?

Ms McCURDY: It depends what time of day it is, but 9 to 5 is me, a team leader and a transition senior worker, and then there is the rotating roster. So you have got day staff—

Mr BARTON: So are there one or two people there overnight or—

Ms McCURDY: There is one stand-up, and there is also the limitation around it being a free-for-all in that the cards do not work after 11 o'clock, so there are not any ins and outs—

Mr BARTON: So there is sort of a curfew?

Ms McCURDY: Well, they can do what they need to do, but if they get let into the building after 11 by the night worker, and there are also visiting hours till 9 o'clock. There are certain things that are there and expectations that keep it that safe and supervised, I suppose. When people ask, 'How do you have 40 young people in the CBD?', there are lots of little rules and regs that go with it, and it works well.

Dr BORLAGDAN: It is a minimal staffing model.

Ms McCURDY: Yes.

Ms LOVELL: So curfew is 11, but like on a weekend even a 21st goes beyond 11 or something. Are they able to make arrangements before they leave?

Ms McCURDY: They can come and go as they please. If they were going away for a couple of days, we always say, 'Just let us know that you're not around', but for overnight stuff it is just that they get let back in the buildings. There is always someone there. They just—

Ms LOVELL: Yes, it is 24/7 supervised, but you do not want to be waking the supervisor up at 2 or 3—

Ms McCURDY: It is stand-up actually, so they do not sleep; it is not a sleepover.

Ms LOVELL: Okay, so that is easy.

Ms McCURDY: We have talked to other foyer-like models. I think the stand-up works well, because the young people know there is someone there.

The CHAIR: And that they are not waking someone; that respect for the staff was just so evident last night.

Just a quick last question, Joseph, you looked at the social connections and civic participation, and I think that goes to what Wendy was saying—that this model has developed since you started it—and listening to the kids talking about the charitable work and what they were doing, we know that that equals resilience. Do you expect that for that component, which in the evaluation you said did not significantly improve, from what anecdotally you have seen, there will be significant improvement in the next evaluation?

Dr BORLAGDAN: Yes, absolutely. Part of that was because we had a fairly narrow measure of what civic participation looked like. So we were using the standardised measure that looked at accessing and using facilities in a community. We did not necessarily look at volunteering, and we did not look at political engagement, for instance, which would have broadened out that measure. It was also one of the last service offers to be developed, so in terms of making it a priority it took some time to work with staff on that. So again this speaks to the capabilities approach. Yes, we prioritise education, but you must look across different life domains and each is as important as the other. That is basically the approach that the staff now take, so we would expect better outcomes out of that.

Ms LOVELL: Just a devil's advocate question: one of the criticisms we had when we first started the foyers from others in the sector was that we cherrypicked kids because the foyer model is not for everybody. We fully understood that, and that is why we still have to have crisis responses as well for kids who would not fit into the foyer model. But how do you combat that to say, 'These results are great, but it's not because we are picking really great kids'?

Dr BORLAGDAN: Yes, that is definitely one of the criticisms in the sector. We bring it back to the cohort, their background and their experiences with homelessness, and we can see that that does compare to, for instance, SHS clients and their experience of homelessness. So we go quite deep into what that background is.

I think the other part to that is, and maybe Mark can speak to this, the kind of work that the Education First Youth Foyer does with other parts of the sector in ensuring that young people are ready and willing to engage in education, and there is a lot of work that goes into that. We are collaborative in this model; we do not see

other parts of the sector as competition. We tend to shy away from this notion of cherrypicking and focus on how we work in partnership to make sure that young people benefit the foyer and that young people will get the best outcomes out of it. I know Mark—

Mr COX: Yes, we would say and the statistics show from the demographics and the background of our young people coming into foyer the young people are not necessarily different in terms of their story, but our way of working is quite different—so really flipping things around that aspirational model: advantage thinking, connection to opportunity, working back in the system, making sure that people are ready for the offer of foyer. Foyers can be a hub for that, as we have said. Foyer is more than just a foyer phase: there is a pre-foyer phase; there is an after-foyer phase, and we are really keen on and offer to all young people in a given area to make sure that those pathways are set out and their expectations are raised.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, but I would also say the safety net has different values of holes that the kids fall through, and if we had more foyers and more opportunities and we caught more kids in that first level of the safety net and stopped them falling through to the lower levels—

Mr COX: Absolutely.

Ms LOVELL: then you would have less kids who did not fit the criteria for a foyer.

Mr COX: That is right.

Ms McCURDY: And as Anita touched on before, we do work with a lot of the other homelessness services all the time about pre-foyer space, making sure that it is never a ‘no’ and it is about how do we become aspirational for that, and if it was not foyer, what else can it be, and look at that sector.

The CHAIR: Yes, and we heard that from Jack last night a bit too and his process to get there. Thank you so much. Please thank Lyndsey and Annalei and Avid and Jack and the rest of them for really spending time with us last night. We really appreciated it. Thank you again.

Mr COX: Thanks, everybody.

Witnesses withdrew.