

More care required: An analysis of leaving care support in New South Wales in 2021

Abstract

This report is based on case studies provided by Children in Care Collective agencies in April 2021. The Collective undertook this study to add contemporary evidence to its advocacy for increased resources and support for young people leaving care in New South Wales. Dr Lindy Annakin, author of the report, is the Co-ordinator of the Collective.

The analysis reveals that the main issues in planning for leaving care were the difficulties faced in finding stable housing, particularly those who were the most vulnerable (i.e., leaving residential care, living with disability) and the difficulty in ensuring consistent and caring relational support. Agencies provide post-care support until the young person turns 25 years, as required by their contracts, but this work is not specifically funded– the cost is built into the package of funding for the young person whilst in care.

Without these two fundamentals, care-leavers are severely disadvantaged in navigating bureaucracies and the new responsibilities of independent living, their access to education and/or employment and any other building blocks that provide the foundation for ordinary living.

New South Wales has made some important reforms to out-of-home care in the last decade, including the introduction of targeted small scale or pilot programs to support young people transitioning out of care. Most of these are conditional on the young person meeting program requirements and may well not be available to the most vulnerable whose complex needs arise from disability and/or childhood trauma.

The Children in Care Collective supports establishing a legal framework in New South Wales, together with adequate resourcing, that guarantees access to unconditional stable and secure housing and individualised relational support until at least the age of 21 years.

The intention is not to extend dependence on the care system but to build a scaffold that supports vulnerable young people to strengthen their own capacity and the skills necessary for successful independent lives.

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Introduction

The Children in Care Collective was formed in 2016 by a group of out-of-home care service providers and leading experts in working with children with complex needs. The aim of the Collective is to share experience, discuss best practice informed by research, provide advocacy and learn from policy and practitioner experts in out-of-home care. The Collective focuses on a range of issues for children and young people with complex needs living in out-of-home care and seeks to address solutions to difficult systemic practice issues faced by the sector. It fosters collaboration by identifying high level organisational needs and opportunities for sharing resources and expertise.

This report is based on case studies provided by Children in Care Collective agencies in April 2021. The Collective undertook this study to add contemporary evidence to its advocacy for increased resources and support for young people leaving care in New South Wales. The aim is to establish a clear picture of what is available and where the gaps are.

Summary of case studies

Agencies were asked to complete questionnaires about the process of supporting young people in their care in order to assess the supports available to a care-leaver in New South Wales and whether there were any gaps or deficiencies. The questionnaire covered nine domains where planning is necessary to ensure the young person leaving care continues to be supported to be independent and able to achieve their aspirations. These domains were:

1. Placement and accommodation
2. Daily and independent living skills
3. Education, training and employment
4. Health and wellbeing
5. Recreation, social and personal development
6. Identity and cultural connections
7. Family, significant others, supportive networks and contact
8. Legal matters and personal records
9. Aftercare and follow up support.

The cohort of 24 young people in the review includes 10 young women (two with babies) and 14 young men (two with current involvement in the criminal justice system). Fifteen of the young people had already left care.

The findings of the initial review of the case studies, presented to the April meeting of the CCC, revealed that the main issues in planning for leaving care were the difficulties faced in finding stable housing and the lack of consistent support available to care-leavers, particularly those who were the most vulnerable (i.e., leaving residential care, living with disability). Agencies provided post-care support, as required by their contracts, but this work is not specifically funded.

Following consideration of the initial report on the case studies, it was decided to review relevant literature in order to provide context, and perhaps explanations, for the main findings of the preliminary analysis of case studies. This was not a formal literature review, but an iterative process following up recent government reports and other references.

Successful transition from out-of-home care to independence: what the literature tells us

From a legal position, statutory orders may expire at age 18 years, but this need not impact on the care provided, which should continue as long as needed (as occurs in the general population).¹

There is clear agreement in government reports and academic literature that young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. This is evidenced by the poor outcomes they experience in key areas such as housing, education, employment and involvement in the criminal justice system. Mendes and McCurdy (2020), in their review of six recent Australian inquiries, noted that none of these inquiries ‘explicitly questioned the general disadvantaged or stigmatized status of care leavers who seem to be judged as unworthy of the same supports as their non-care peers’ – a point also made by the HomeStretch campaign when it compares support for care-leavers with that of young people in the wider community who benefit from family support. Mendes and McCurdy contend that

One consequence of this stigma is arguably the focus of policy makers on introducing discrete support services addressing the alleged deficits of individual care leavers (Australian Government, 2018) rather than broader social and economic reforms aimed at advancing greater fairness and opportunity for care leavers as a collective.²

In 2020, a group of international care leaving researchers, developed principles to support practice in supporting care-leavers. They too emphasise the need for systemic change:

To improve current outcomes for care leavers, changes are needed on all three levels: policy, organizational/operational, and on the level of direct practice. Namely, following Bronfenbrenner’s framework (1977), providing young care leavers with protective resources in different levels/systems can help them overcome their adversities. Accordingly, we offer a recommendation for anyone wishing to apply research findings to practice and policy: to create meaningful change for care-leavers, there is a need to go beyond the consideration of individual profiles to query systemic issues as targets of reform.³

They note that ‘legal frameworks that support entitlements to remain in care beyond the age of majority and promote enhanced supports, are related to positive outcomes’.⁴

The Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP Victoria) tabled a report, *Keep Caring*, in the Victorian Parliament in December 2020. Her finding in the report on a systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria, was in summary, that:

To have the best possible chance at a good life, young people leaving care need somewhere stable to live, a means of supporting themselves through work, further study or training and the independent living skills to do things like cook, clean and budget. Young people leaving care and

¹ McDowall, J. J. *Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care: Independence or Interdependence*. CREATE Foundation (2020) pxix

² Philip Mendes and Samone McCurdy, Policy and practice supports for young people transitioning from out-of-home care: An analysis of six recent inquiries in Australia *Journal of Social Work* 2020, Vol. 20(5) 599–619

³ A.T. Harder, V. Mann-Feder, I. Oterholm, T. Refaeli, Supporting Transitions to Adulthood for Youth Leaving Care: Consensus Based Principles, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2020), p22 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105260>

⁴ Ibid, pp18-19

recovering from trauma endured before or during their time in care need ongoing access to therapeutic or other mental health supports so they can seek help when they need it. Care leavers also need a community around them to encourage and support them through the tough times that all young people experience through early adulthood, especially Aboriginal young people for whom connection to culture and community can be a strong foundation to build a life on.

Many care leavers with a disability, complex needs or experience with the youth justice system need extra help to live independently, continue studying or working and to navigate the service system.⁵

The literature supports this succinct statement about the needs of young people leaving out-of-home care. This report focuses on their need for stable and secure housing – something everyone has a right to (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) – and their need for consistent and caring relational support. Without these two fundamentals, care-leavers are severely disadvantaged in their access to education and/or employment and any other building blocks that provide the foundation for ordinary living.

Stable and secure housing

There is clear agreement among policy makers, practitioners and academics about the need for stable and secure housing for vulnerable young people leaving care:

Australian research has consistently found that care leavers with stable housing are more likely to experience successful transitions to independence, including improved employment, better education and training outcomes, more secure relationships and increased social connectedness. Stable housing is also the factor most closely associated with good mental health outcomes for care leavers.⁶

Although the order allocating parental responsibility ends at 18 years, there is no requirement for young people to leave their carer's home. Research indicates that a significant number of young people are able to stay with their home-based carers beyond the age of 18.

For example, in the 2017 report from the *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care* (focusing on a cohort of 76 young people) it was reported that a majority (85 per cent) of the foster/kinship carers in the study would be willing to have the young person stay on, while just under half (46 per cent) the young people said they would choose to stay, 28 per cent said they definitely would not and about a quarter did not know or refused the question. This question was not asked of the young people in residential care.⁷

⁵ Commission for Children and Young People, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, 2020 p92.

⁶ Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, p92

⁷ Burke, S., Hopkins, J., Paxman, M., Zhou, A., Butler, M. (2019). *Leaving Care Cohort (15-17 years) Statistical Report: Experiences of Young People who Entered Out-of-Home Care Aged 9-14 years. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care*. Research Report Number 5. Sydney. NSW Department of Family and Community Services p 19

More recent research by the CREATE Foundation (2020) found that less than four per cent (n.6) of the sample of 156 young people were staying with former carers.⁸

In the CCC study, a third (n.8) of the young people were staying on with carers, three of them in kinship placements and most of the others in long term foster placements. For two of them, this arrangement had broken down within six months and another within nine months.

Three young people were living with their family or their partner's family when they left care, including two young women with babies. One of these young mothers was already looking for alternative accommodation as the arrangement had broken down.

For young people who are not able to stay with carers beyond the age of 18 years, or whose plan to stay with carers or family fails, for whatever reason, finding stable housing is a very difficult endeavour even with the assistance of caseworkers. The CCYP Victoria reported that:

Child Protection and funded agencies advised the Commission that it is very difficult to find suitable supported or step-down housing options for care leavers, particularly for those:

- experiencing mental health issues, substance use issues or challenging behaviours – they informed us that these young people are often less likely to be willing or able to share housing, further reducing their accommodation options
- who are reluctant to engage with services or with education and employment – as engagement is often part of service eligibility criteria
- transitioning from a high support setting such as residential care to independent living.⁹

The *Pathways of Care* study referred to above, reported that of caseworkers asked about the accommodation plan for the young person leaving care, nearly a quarter reported that either they did not know where the young person would be living, or the plan was for unspecified 'other' arrangements.¹⁰

In New South Wales, data on the housing status of young people who have left care, even in their first year of independent living, is not available. However, the Specialist Homelessness Services Program Guidelines published in June 2014 include the following shocking statement:

Approximately 50% of young people leaving care in Australia are expected to experience homelessness at some stage in their lives. Young people leaving care are more likely to have a low income as a result of unemployment and have lower levels of educational attainment compared to the general population.¹¹

⁸ McDowall, J. J. *Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care: Independence or Interdependence*. CREATE Foundation (2020) p39

⁹ Commission for Children and Young People, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, p96

¹⁰ Burke, S., Hopkins, J., Paxman, M., Zhou, A., Butler, M. (2019). *Leaving Care Cohort (15-17 years) Statistical Report: Experiences of Young People who Entered Out-of-Home Care Aged 9-14 years. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care*. Research Report Number 5. Sydney. NSW Department of Family and Community Services p 24

¹¹ NSW Family & Community Services, Specialist Homelessness Services Program Guidelines, June 2014, p7 [available online at https://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/325196/SHS_Program_Guidelines.pdf, accessed 21/05/2021]

For young people leaving care, there is a range of short-term accommodation options including crisis or refuge accommodation. One young person in the CCC study had been referred to a refuge service and a referral made to NSW Housing as part of her leaving care planning.

There are transitional housing programs, supported accommodation and youth foyers. All of these accommodation options are conditional: the young person is required to be able and motivated to work or complete study or training to help obtain a job and to engage with a support provider who will assist with this engagement. Even the NSW Government's Rent Choice Youth Program includes these conditions, and that the young person must be case managed by a participating support agency. While the aim of encouraging young people to engage with study/training or work is important, not all young people leaving care – particularly those with disability or complex needs– are in a position to meet these requirements.

The CCC study includes five examples of the difficulties faced by young people in meeting these requirements (20 per cent of the sample):

- 'A' lacks the social, independent living and financial skills to navigate and secure safe housing for himself. He has next to no family connections or support. 'A' was able to access the Rent Choice program so that he could enter the private rental market. However, after 'A' secured a rental he was informed his lease would not be renewed after three weeks, due to his underdeveloped independent living skills and issues he was experiencing with his new housemates. (The young man, aged 19, was in a transitional placement at the time of the study).
- 'O' lived with ex carer for six months and then moved to independent provider, who needs him to be engaged in education, training or employment. 'O' struggles with self-care, planning, organisation, social. He has never had a formal diagnosis which means, because of the NDIS, that he cannot access supports in education or employment which he needs.
- 'C' has a mild intellectual disability. She remained in care with her carers for 9 months after turning 18 years. Her carers could not maintain this placement without the full/ usual support of the agency, case management, carer allowance, etc. 'C' has recently moved to [...] program until housing can be found for her. 'C' is required to pay board and we are getting this funded through DCJ Leaving Care Plan. I worry for homelessness – many of the accommodation options available to 'C' come dependent on meeting a certain criteria which she will likely struggle to maintain e.g. engagement in education and training or employment.
- 'D' was originally accepted into a Transitional Housing Property through [...]. 'D' was unable to sustain his tenancy due to disagreements with his co-resident. 'D' was evicted and resorted to temporary accommodation. He is currently working with stakeholders to find a suitable long-term placement.
- We have struggled to secure transitional accommodation for 'T'. Most of the transitional accommodation within the Western Sydney region does not have vacancies and his housing pathway application is still in progress.

Comments made in the CCC study indicate the difficulties faced by out-of-home care agency staff in finding suitable accommodation for young people with complex trauma histories:

- Criteria for most housing options are unachievable. Young people aging out of care need to at minimum have a job or education, no AOD use, stable mental health and accessing mental health supports among other things. This is very rare with the young people we are working with.
- More often than not, housing options stated they were at capacity.

- The housing options are usually in a group setting. These young people (especially 'D') did not wish to live with a group of new young people transitioning out of care. These young people have just spent in some cases, years in care and are not happy to live with a group of people who are likely to trigger each other to some degree.

Two young people in the CCC study were part of the Premier's Youth Initiative, a support service for young people leaving statutory out-of-home care who are identified as being vulnerable to experiencing homelessness on exit from care. One of these young people was nonetheless already homeless – couch surfing or living in his car; the other young person is mentioned above, temporarily accommodated in a transitional program until housing can be found for her.

In the absence of supported accommodation of some kind, the options for housing require the young person to secure a private rental or social housing. This is extremely difficult for any young person without a rental history and good references, and particularly difficult for a young person leaving care who is dependent on government allowances for their income.

In the CCC study, rental accommodation had been secured for four young people, including one in university accommodation. One CCC agency had made the rental application and entered into a lease agreement on behalf of a young person who had a history of engagement in the juvenile justice system. While providing a temporary solution, this reduced the young person's chance of securing long term social housing:

- Government funding housing options were also not available to 'M' whilst he is still supported by the agency as they deem his situation not a priority. 'M' had no previous rental history which found securing a private rental quite challenging; the only way this was secured was with the agency being able to enter a lease agreement with him. Although he is currently in a rental property, he faces homelessness within the next 90 days as the owner of the property is wishing not to renew the lease.

One respondent to the CCC study indicated the difficulty with obtaining social housing for young people leaving care:

- The Department of Housing – there are no options if a young person turns 18 and leaves care with no housing alternative. Housing refers the caseworker and young person to Link2home and their trauma history of being moved from placement to placement starts again.

In New South Wales currently, the average expected waiting time for general applicants for social housing is 5 to 10 years.¹² The CCYP Victoria report also noted, *'(t)he long waiting times for public housing often make it an unrealistic option for young people exiting care who require this housing response.'*¹³

Priority applicants in New South Wales are advised that they will be interviewed to assess the urgency of their situation, and that they must demonstrate they are *'in need of urgent housing and are not able to rent*

¹² NSW Communities & Justice, Expected waiting times [available online at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/expected-waiting-times>, accessed 21/05/2021]

¹³ Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, p99

privately. Applicants must also show that they have tried to find accommodation in the private rental market before being considered for priority housing'.¹⁴

Care leavers are not specified as a priority group but would qualify for consideration for priority housing if they were experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness due to specific factors, or had disability. Qualifying for priority housing does not necessarily lead to immediate housing. The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported in 2020 that:

In 2018–19, among new allocations to greatest need households, the majority (72%, or 10,800 households) received public housing within one year of the household being on the waiting list.

Only 26 per cent of newly allocated public housing households had spent less than three months on the waiting list.¹⁵

Observations

A survey of NSW care leavers in 2014 found that within one year of leaving care around 35% of young people had experienced homelessness.¹⁶ The 2020 CREATE research reported an alarmingly similar finding:

A total of 30% of respondents indicated that this had been their experience, with 23% having five or more homeless episodes. ... 2% of respondents were without appropriate housing for one week; by contrast, 37% were homeless for six months or more. At the time of completing the survey, 14% of the sample was still homeless.¹⁷

In this review, apart from the young people staying on with carers, accommodation is mostly temporary or conditional. This is consistent with the broad findings about the frequency of homelessness.

Only 45 per cent of the young people in the CCC study could be said to have stable and secure housing, despite the best efforts of committed out-of-home care agencies.

As Mendes says:

Extended care provides care leavers with a safety net including guaranteed housing assistance that enables a more gradual and less compressed transition from care to adulthood. The availability of stable housing assists care leavers to participate in education, training and employment, and to maintain continuing relationships with key supportive carers, extended family members, and informal community contacts or mentors.¹⁸

The CCC study provides evidence consistent with this statement. Seven of the eight young people staying on with former carers were either working or studying. Of the six young people in transitional or temporary accommodation, or already homeless, only one was either working or studying. This young woman remained with her former carers for nine months after turning 18 years, but they could not maintain the

¹⁴ NSW Communities & Justice, Waiting times for social housing [available online at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/waiting-times>, accessed 21/05/2021]

¹⁵ AIHW Housing assistance in Australia 2020 [available online at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2020/contents/priority-groups-and-waiting-lists>, accessed 21/05/2021]

¹⁶ (Beauchamp T, 2014 cited in Deloitte Access Economics Pty 2018 *Extending care to 21 years in New South Wales*)

¹⁷ McDowall, J. J. *Transitioning to Adulthood from Out-of-Home Care: Independence or Interdependence*. CREATE Foundation (2020) p42

¹⁸ Mendes, P. (2021) Housing plus supportive relationships: What do extended care programs internationally tell us about best practice transitions for care leavers? Parity 34,1. P6-7

arrangement without financial support. Having moved to a transitional program, the young woman was said to have been struggling to maintain her engagement with TAFE.

The need for strong relational support

Studies have shown that the most resilient youth all had at least one person in their lives who was absolutely crazy about them.¹⁹

Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be.²⁰

The CCC study did not explicitly ask about ongoing relational support for young people leaving care. However, its importance – and the risks to vulnerable young people navigating bureaucracies and independent living - were highlighted in many responses. Some examples follow:

- 'A' lacks the social, independent living and financial skills to navigate and secure safe housing for himself. He has next to no family connections or support. 'A' relies heavily on youth worker support to assist him.
- Complex needs package to allow for drop-in support. Agency remains only support network. We are seeing young people leave care with no connection to their biological family and not having any support networks in place, yes some look forward to not being in care but majority are scared and worried about the unknown, the young boy in this document in particular was very fearful of losing agency support and his connection to the only safe people that he knew, people that no matter how bad he was travelling were there to help him when he needed them most, without the support of our agency and consistent casework support that we provide to this young person who knows what path he would of taken. Throughout his care experience he was not connected to his biological family
- Without carer consistency post 18 'M' would have struggled to engage with education and employment and would also have struggled in maintaining any sort of independent accommodation. There is enough research to show that supporting placements financially to 21 is more cost effective than trying to support 'M' leaving care solely through a number of financial packages of support with no clear, and funded, After Care safety net.
- Support is not only financial but relational, and building in ongoing CW support (at age appropriate levels) and maintenance of placement will contribute significantly to the significant transition from child to adult.
- 'O' is a young man who will need consistent support moving forward. 'O' would have no hope of navigating any bureaucracy (housing, Centrelink etc) without support. The different streams of aftercare support available would have been far too complex to navigate without carer/CW/semi-independent provider support.
- Management has weekly contact with [young person] via phone calls and house visits.
- 'C' is not equipped emotionally for independence. She is vulnerable. DCJ has funded 12 months case coordination for the agency to remain involved to support her to move to independence.

¹⁹ Werner E E and Smith R S. 1992 *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*, Cornell University Press, Ithica and London

²⁰ Rita Pearson, Educator. Cited by Dupree L. 2021 'Being With': The Importance of Relational Practice Parity Vol 34, Issue 3, p87

Relevant to the obvious need of young people for consistent ongoing relational support is the information supplied about their health and wellbeing. Mental health and disability issues were highlighted for a number of care leavers in the CCC study:

- For 11 young people, the leaving care plan includes provision for ongoing psychiatric care/counselling support
- 2 young people are receiving a Disability Support Pension
- 2 have had NDIS referrals made
- 1 was receiving NDIS support and another had been refused this support.

This is not an unusual sample of young people experiencing difficulties. The *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care* reported that its analysis showed that:

at the time of leaving care, over a third of the young people had clinical range behaviour problems, over half had below normal range language development and just under half had below normal range non verbal reasoning.²¹

The same study reported that less than half of carers thought the young person would be able to manage on leaving care; nearly a quarter thought the young person definitely would not manage independent living. 'The biggest concern for carers was around the young person's self-care and coping skills'.²²

In reporting on case management and case work supports for young people transitioning from out-of-home care, the CCYP Victoria reported that:

To leave care successfully, many young people need a key worker – during and post-care – to help them navigate the service system to get the support and services they need. As noted throughout this report, sometimes care leavers need extra help to find somewhere stable to live, engage or re-engage with further education or training, reconnect with family or culture or learn essential independent living skills.

Care leavers also need a stable worker. Research suggests that worker stability has a significant impact on how well young people transition from care,²³ and that building a trusting relationship between workers and children and young people is one of the best predictors of positive wellbeing outcomes.²⁴ Developing a therapeutic and trusting relationship with workers is also necessary to reduce potential re-traumatisation and is aligned with the principles of trauma-informed care,²⁵ as recovery from trauma must take place in the context of healing relationships.

²¹ FACSIAR 2018, *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Literature review – factors Influencing the outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care*, Sydney, NSW, p. 26

²² Ibid p15 and 25

²³ Muir S, Purtell J, Hand K and Carroll M 2019, *Beyond 18: The longitudinal study on leaving care Wave 3 research report – outcomes for young people leaving care in Victoria*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne; cited in Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, p 113

²⁴ FACSIAR 2018, *Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Literature review – factors Influencing the outcomes of children and young people in out-of-home care*, Sydney, NSW, p. 63; cited in Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, p 113

²⁵ Mendes, Baidawi and Snow 2014, 'Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: A critical analysis of leaving care policy, legislation and housing support in the Australian state of Victoria', *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp.

In New South Wales, ongoing support from the out-of-home care agency responsible for supervising a young person's last placement of more than 12 months is a policy and contractual requirement. It includes offering follow up to the care leaver at regular intervals after their exit from care, which may include a review of the leaving care plan, ongoing advice, support and advocacy and assistance where appropriate. This support is available until the young person is 25 years.

This ongoing work with young people who have transitioned from out-of-home care is not specifically funded – the cost is built into the package of funding for the young person whilst in care. The example above, where DCJ funded 12 months additional case co-ordination, indicates the resources sometimes required for agencies to provide necessary support. One CCC agency advised that *'young people don't need you until they need you. At exit they have accommodation, part-time work and are connected to health services. Twelve months later it can be a completely different story'*. And at that point, when considerable work may be necessary to deal with the crisis and re-establish the young person, workers with whom they have had a relationship may well not be available or even still employed by the agency. As noted above, this work is not specifically funded so workers have to find the time and resources to support the young person by fitting them into existing full caseloads. This undoubtedly limits capacity to develop trusting relationships.

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) advises that:

If a care leaver cannot access support from their existing provider, for example they have moved or do not wish to communicate with them, they can seek support from a Specialist Aftercare service.²⁶

At the time of writing, there were nine specialist aftercare services in New South Wales.

The CCC study reveals mixed results for young people accessing specialist aftercare services:

- The staff at [the specialist aftercare service] were lovely and meet [the agency] quite easily. The [aftercare] worker met with the foster carers and the young person before the leaving case conference and was very helpful.
- Funded aftercare services require reasons in their intake/referral form why the young adult cannot access the support from their OOHC NGO.
- The different streams of aftercare support available would have been far too complex to navigate without carer/CW/semi-independent provider support.

Types of aftercare assistance available to care leavers are listed on DCJ's website. A young person 'may be able to receive' the following assistance:

- Information and advice about other government or non-government agencies which can help with family searching, family mediation and family reunion services
- Help to apply for financial assistance such as Centrelink, Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA), Smart and Skilled fee-free scholarships and Safer Drivers Course to support your driver licence
- Referral for finding accommodation, education or vocational training, counselling, employment, legal advice, health services or professional services

41–42; cited in Commission for Children and Young People, 2020, *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*, Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, p 113

²⁶ DCJ Aftercare support [available online at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/leaving-care-planning/aftercare-support>, accessed 25/05/2021]

- Accessing any personal effects, clothing, equipment such as car seats, wheelchairs or furniture that may have been purchased specially for you while in care (this may be required if you choose to leave the place you live in)
- Help with viewing your file and accessing personal documentation (for example your birth certificate, school reports, medical reports, personal photographs).²⁷

It is obviously important that young people have assistance, as necessary, to navigate the patchwork of fragmented financial and other supports available – although there is also an implication that without a worker’s support to negotiate the administrative processes, a young person may miss out on funding so it belies the assumption that all young care leavers can access available services.²⁸ But what these services do not include is the possibility of relationship-based practice even though trusting relationships are a key element described in most research about outcomes for care-leavers (see, for example, Muir et al 2019, *Beyond 18: The longitudinal study on leaving care Wave 3 research report – outcomes for young people leaving care in Victoria*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne). Services that exist to support young people with ‘wellbeing issues’ are usually designed around specific problems and crises.²⁹

The ‘Towards Independent Adulthood’ (TIA) trial in Western Australia, funded by the Commonwealth Government, has been an initiative under the Third Action Plan of the *National Framework for Protecting Australian Children 2009-2020*. The trial has been aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of wrap-around support services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care through an intensive case management service, priority access to government funded services and online resources. The evaluation, in summary, has found that:

The evaluation found the trial improved access to opportunities and provided a more seamless transition for the young people involved across a number of areas including housing stability, employment, education, relationships, support networks and life skills. Success factors related to the achievement of outcomes include a dedicated, capable workforce, effective collaboration between the leaving care service provider and government, resourcing and case load management, and operation outside the formal child protection system.³⁰

One of the key findings of the evaluation was the importance of emotional support.

All participants emphasised emotional support as one of the key benefits of the Trial. Youth Workers offered a range of supports to young people, including financial assistance, referrals to other programs, priority access to services and practical assistance with day-to-day issues. However, the emotional support provided was universally highlighted by participants as one of the most helpful aspects of the Trial...

²⁷ Department of Communities and Justice *Types of aftercare assistance* [available online at <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/out-of-home-care/children-in-oohc/planning-for-your-future-and-support-after-care>, accessed 31 May 2021

²⁸ Purtell, J. and Mendes, P. (2020). *Relationship-based practice and service system expertise to support young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria: An evaluation of the Salvation Army West Care Continuing Care Program*. Monash University Department of Social Work, Melbourne. P.26

²⁹ Ibid p33

³⁰ Department of Social Services, *Towards Independent Adulthood Evaluation Report* [available online at <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities-families-and-children/towards-independent-adulthood-evaluation-report>, accessed on 31 May 2021]

The key benefit of the Trial was that Youth Workers were able to spend large amounts of time with each of the young people on their caseload, giving them intensive, tailored support. This appeared to be manageable with the relatively small caseload for each worker but the effectiveness of this support may be diminished if these caseloads increase (particularly given the diversity and complexity of circumstances of each young person).³¹

Observations

While provision is made to assist young people to navigate the complex world of financial and other supports, particularly with referrals, there is no resourced commitment in New South Wales to ensure vulnerable care leavers have ongoing strong relationships with trusted adults.

Many of the support and housing programs are conditional on the young person meeting obligations in relation to study or work with the consequence for non-compliance being the threat of support being removed. This is far from ideal and is very different from the intensive individualised support provided through the 'Towards Independent Adulthood' trial. The evaluation reported that young people attributed their progress to the relationship with their youth worker and the emotional and moral support they provided. Three-quarters of case managers also considered the one-on-one support and mentoring was beneficial.³²

Conclusions

It is not enough for government reports and research studies to continue repeating the message about the vulnerability of care leavers without actually taking the practical steps necessary to fully support all young people leaving care to achieve good outcomes.

As proposed by the Home Stretch campaign, and supported in academic and government reports, extending care until the age of 21 does not require the young person to stay with carers. It requires the government – the corporate parent - to commit to providing support to all young people leaving care until 21 years, whether this be in the form of ongoing carer reimbursements or funding independent or supported accommodation. This form of extended support would be less disruptive for many young care leavers and is less expensive than programs like 'Towards Independent Adulthood'. Both the evaluation of this trial and the Deloitte Access Economics report confirm the socio-economic benefit of extended support:

The analysis estimates that \$4.76 million in benefits are generated one year post-Trial. It is estimated, therefore, that for every \$1 invested in the Trial, \$1.80 in benefits are returned... The analysis also suggests that the estimated returns increase significantly as the assessment period is extended to three and five years post-Trial.³³

As part of the report, a complete Australian State and Territory comparison was conducted. The findings show that for every dollar spent on extending support to age 21, the community would save between \$1.40 and \$2.69, depending on the State... the NSW saving would be \$2.57... There would be many benefits across all Australian states and territories should care be extended for young people in care. These benefits may include improved access to education, employment,

³¹ ACIL Allen Consulting 2020 *Towards Independent Adulthood Trial Evaluation* Report to Department of Social Services pp36-37

³² *ibid* piii

³³ *ibid* pviii

improved housing stability, reduced interaction with the justice system, improved access to healthcare and reduced incidence of alcohol and/or drug dependence.³⁴

The 'Towards Independent Adulthood' introductory webpage states:

State and territory governments will use the evaluation findings to guide future interventions for young people transitioning to adulthood from out-of-home care.³⁵

It is to be hoped that New South Wales government will indeed review its current limited and complex provision of support for care-leavers in light of the evaluation findings.

New South Wales has made some important reforms to out-of-home care in the last decade, including the introduction of targeted small scale or pilot programs to support young people transitioning out of care. Most of these are conditional on the young person meeting program requirements and may well not be available to the most vulnerable whose complex needs arise from disability and/or childhood trauma.

The intention is not to extend dependence on the care system but to build a scaffold that supports vulnerable young people to strengthen their own capacity and the skills necessary for successful independent lives. *'Transitioning should be based on the maturity and needs of the young person rather than simply age'*.³⁶

Establishing a legal framework, together with adequate resourcing, that guarantees access to unconditional stable and secure housing and individualised relational support until at least the age of 21 years would be a major step towards improving the outcomes for young people leaving care – a moral as well as socio-economic imperative for our whole community. As the Deloitte Access Economics report says: *'If young people leaving care are to thrive as active citizens in our community, they need more supports than the average teenager, not less'*.³⁷ The economic modelling by Deloitte in 2018, which has not been challenged, demonstrates both the net benefit to government spending through avoided costs of ongoing engagement with services and the criminal justice system, and the incalculable contribution to the lives of young people as they embark on independent adulthood.

³⁴ The Home Stretch – An Australia wide analysis [available online at <https://thehomestretch.org.au/news/home-stretch-australia-wide-analysis/> , accessed 31 May 2021]

³⁵ Department of Social Services, Towards Independent Adulthood Evaluation Report [available online at <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities-families-and-children/towards-independent-adulthood-evaluation-report>, accessed 31 May 2021]

³⁶ Deloitte Access Economics Pty 2018 *Extending care to 21 years in New South Wales*, Commissioned by Home Stretch Campaign NSW, p16

³⁷ Ibid, p10