

UNITINGCARE HARRISON FINDING SOLUTIONS FAMILY SERVICES

3.3 What are the strengths and weaknesses of current services designed to assist families who are at risk of becoming involved in the statutory child protection system?

STRENGTHS:

- UnitingCare Harrison has a history of running family programs starting with MADS (Mediation & Diversionary Service). We have surged forward on how to best manage these programs, with the 'Stronger Families', 'Finding Solutions' and 'Adolescent Support' Programs.
- We have built a strong relationship with other agencies and services, maintaining positive connections with CAHMS / Schools / Y-ATAPS / DHS Child Protection and many other organizations.
- Information sharing – Collaborating with other services / agencies.
- Team work – a diversity of strengths and knowledge from all workers.
- Circuit breaker – Family when referred to our program are at a heightened state with many emotions and the support from worker can bring clarity and put things into perspective.
- Flexible ways worker can engage with client – one on one / family meetings / mediation / referral to appropriate services / outreach.
- Discussion with Child protection for consultation / service coordination.
- Access to housing if needed.
- Access to interpreters.
- Finding Solutions Conferences.
- Working with the young person and/or family on moving forward with case management / case plans.
- Non Judgmental
- Voluntary – The young person and family don't feel the pressure and it is their choice if they want to move forward.

WEAKNESSES

- Not enough respite care options. Finding Solutions does not provide this, have to access through homelessness sector, outer agencies and extremely difficult.
- Brokerage – As a resource for clients and also for training and further development to up skill workers.
- Availability to utilize outside services / programs immediately when needed. For eg: Taking Charge / CAHMS / Psychologists / etc.
- Time Frame – The Finding Solutions Program is a 3 month program & with some young people and families this is sufficient but with a majority of the families we work with this is not enough time.
- Our program does not have a Multicultural specific worker although we have more clients coming through from more culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Lack of Specialist Services and accessibility. Long wait lists for Family Therapy, etc.
- DHS Child Protection relinquishes support from 16years, yet in our program we work with the young person until 18 years. At times we are needing their support.

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry response

3.2 From my experience supporting families involved with Child Protection and having worked with young people who have been involved with Child Protection the most obvious gaps that I see is that the Child Protection staff are;

- Overworked- case loads so large unable to see clients regularly and often have to cancel visits at short notice due to a 'crisis'. This obviously is incredibly frustrating for a client who is expected to change their schedule according to Child Protection however are told that they are not allowed to reschedule appointments.
- Out of all the Child Protection staff I have met and worked with there is only 1 who I felt provided my client with a positive experience and actually acknowledged to the client the progress she had made. All other staff made no attempts at any times to acknowledge improvements and in numerous cases continually referred to the clients previous history ie drug and alcohol use when the client no longer used. I felt that these attitudes came from older staff who had been at Child Protection for many many years and new staff straight out of university. Both of these groups clearly lacked skills in engaging with people and potentially did not understand their roles in working with the family.

⇒ These issues I believe could be resolved through ongoing training in working with difficult clients for all staff new and old, workshops on engaging people including discussion around the use of language as playing an important part in developing a working relationship with a person as well as in depth training for staff around what their roles are when working with a family. As my background is in Youthwork I believe that potentially staff should have training in this too.

3.5 The fact that there are some options available for children and young people if their family home breaks down is a positive; however the lack of options is continually frustrating, especially if a placement breaks down. In regards to residential care, having worked in a residential unit and worked with young people exiting one, while it provides children and young people a bed and roof over their head, I have struggled to find it provide anything else including making it feel like a home. This is largely attributed to the lack of trained skilled staff working in the units who are only there for money and who are not there because they genuinely care about the welfare of the child or young person. Low pay means that any trained and skilled staff will most likely move on taking with them the desire to actually assist and support the children or young people in the unit.

3.5.1 Appropriate training of staff working in these roles, and appropriate training and support to foster carers etc. would hopefully mean that young people would be provided with appropriate support and care and understanding. I have seen numerous times staff and carers manage young peoples behavior inappropriately and actually make a bad situation worse placing themselves and other staff in dangerous situations, all due to little to no appropriate training and study. I have also

seen staff behave inappropriately with young people in a residential unit ie giving them cigarettes to appease the young persons mood, instead of dealing with and addressing the issue and assisting the young person to develop the skills to negotiate difficult situations. This situation in particular very clearly demonstrated to me that the worker did not have the skills to manage the young person behavior and wanted to avoid having to enter into conflict with the young person. This particular young person was just about to leave care which was even more inappropriate due to the fact that once out of care the young person wouldn't have somebody there to give them a cigarette every time they were angry or annoyed. This just set the young person up with unrealistic expectations about the community and meant that they were not able to learn how to manage difficult behaviours by themselves. I was lucky enough to work in a higher support model residential unit where the idea was that there would be 2 staff on at all times which in theory would have been great however due to difficult in finding appropriate staff I often worked alone with young people whose behaviors had been deemed unmanageable by 'regular' residential units. Low staff numbers meant more locum staff who had not youth training and who again, to avoid conflict with the young people, would allow then young people.

3.5.2 Yes and no. The concepts are ok however in reality the options are not appropriate (see attached photos of rooms in a residential unit for young people in eastern region). No young person or child should live in a place where it has become common place for the young people to damage the property. More staff need to be made available to each young person from an earlier age with more intense work. Residential staff need to have more involvement with the young people considering that they see the young people more frequently, not just their case managers. Better and more frequent communication between the different supports involved with a young person and the young person to be included in decision making about their own lives.

3.5.3 From experience young people leaving residential care lack the independent living skills to be able to obtain and sustain affordable accommodation. Young people are rarely in education training or employment and often have not been engaged for a long period of time. What needs to be occurring is that every young person in residential care should have access to a service such as Creating Connections Life and Living skills who can deliver one on one or groupwork type activities to prepare them for when they leave care and so that leaving will be successful. I believe that the reason that this does not occur is due to the young people being very demanding in their behavior towards staff and the staff lacking in the skills to manage the challenging behaviours. Again I have often seen staff choose to allow a young people to not attend appointments because the young person swears and threatens them and then the staff member does not attempt to address the issue with the young person at any stage thus this tells the young person that they can just repeat this behavior to avoid doing anything in the future, which they do. While we cannot physically make a young person do anything there are ways to address the issue. Ie a young person does not want to attend a centrelink appointment and their payments will remain cut. The worker should discuss with the young person the consequences of this choice such as no money will be given to them from staff, the young person was wanting to go out this weekend and how will they do this without any money etc etc. This assists the young person to learn about choices and decision making and consequences of decision making. This also assists in them developing and understanding of the responsibilities that come along with being able to make decisions. In regards to contact between a young person and their family my experience has been that no matter how awful or neglectful a parent has been the young person still wants to see them and have them apart of their life. Where

appropriate this should be facilitated in an organised fashion to ensure that the young person does not experience any further hurt etc.

3.5.4 . The whole process of going into care, future plans etc should be as transparent as possible.

The young person (age appropriate) should be involved in care meetings and should at least be consulted in any planning in their future. More exploration of a young persons education pathways options etc should be provided. More flexibility in working with a young person should be explored also. All involved services/support works should be consulted in regards to their knowledge of the young person etc.

3.5.5 My experience with Child Protection has been little no exploration or support to families to allow their child/young person to remain with them. Reunification can only occur where the family has been given the opportunity to improve their parenting skills etc. Unfortunately this rarely appears to occur and instead families are demonized by child Protection and not actually given any support in becoming better parents and having their child return home.

3.5.6 With limited foster care placements and carers there is limited opportunity to be able to place young people in the most appropriate placement. Again more training for the carers so they are fully aware of the challenges that lay ahead and more support to the young person in a more flexible manner as soon as possible.



Inquiry Note: Some photos have been omitted as they contain individual names that can be viewed as part of the graffiti.