

The key to effective early intervention is to build the capacity of those organisations and individuals who have existing trusted connections with vulnerable young people and their families. This will lead to improved identification of and response to the complexity of issues surrounding and influencing a young person's risk taking behaviour. YSAS effectively engages this population.

YSAS response to

The Victorian Government's

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

29 April 2011

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Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

Submission 29 April 2011

Established in 1998, YSAS is an accredited community service organisation providing a range of innovative and client-centred services to vulnerable young people aged 10 - 25 years who are affected by issues such as social disconnection, drug and alcohol use, and mental health problems. Operating across metropolitan and regional Victoria our work includes direct client care, health promotion, public policy advocacy, research, education and training, community development and prevention.

Recommendations

1. Several models of engaging and intervening with young children and young parents at risk have been developed and trialled at YSAS successfully (ie. Young Parents Program, Young Parents Retreat, Rug Rats Parenting Group and Supported Accommodation). YSAS recommends the implementation and expansion of similar models to meet the needs of young parents, with substance use issues and parenting responsibilities, in other areas of Melbourne and regional centres in Victoria, in partnership with community based child and family support agencies.
2. YSAS recommends that drug and alcohol services form part of the contractual arrangement within the Child First consortiums with concomitant funding and accountability arrangements.
3. YSAS recommends that continued inter agency opportunities are developed and promoted to build on collaborative relationships and shared understandings between Child Protection, child and family services, and drug and alcohol agencies. Strategies to be employed should include joint professional development, expanding parent and child specific services within drug and alcohol agencies with dedicated involvement of Child Protection advisers, and funding and accountability structures that support and reflect these relationships.
4. YSAS recommends that evaluation and research should be explicitly linked with program initiatives so that outcomes and processes can be documented and evidenced.
5. YSAS recommends that suitable funding and technological support is made available to assist agencies to accurately and systematically collect data that will inform program effectiveness and service demand.
6. The professional development of drug and alcohol workers needs to be strengthened and include sufficient training in the issues surrounding young parents and vulnerable children. The training of child protection workers

should be strengthened in the area of drug and alcohol issues and an increased understanding of the developmental needs of adolescents.

7. Salary levels and career paths for youth workers needs to be enhanced in order to attract and retain skilled and experienced workers who are better equipped to address the needs of vulnerable children and young parents.

Introduction

YSAS congratulates the State Government for its ongoing commitment to improving Victoria's child protection system and providing the opportunity for comment on making recommendations to strengthen and improve the protection and support of vulnerable young people. We are pleased to contribute to the discussion highlighting an issue that impacts the lives of a significant number of our clients, their families and community. We support a rigorous process with an ultimate aim of achieving positive outcomes for the YSAS client group: young people experiencing complex problems who are some of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of our community.

About YSAS

Established in 1998, YSAS is an accredited community service organisation providing a range of innovative and client centred services to vulnerable young people aged 10 to 25 years. Operating from 14 metropolitan and regional Victoria sites, services provided include: early intervention, youth outreach, short-term residential withdrawal, youth residential rehabilitation program, supported accommodation, home-based withdrawal, primary health services, family reconciliation, the Reconnect Program, Koori Youth Alcohol and Drug Healing Service, day programs, youth supported accommodation, young parents support, YSAS line, and alcohol and drug youth consultancy.

YSAS provides a distinct service delivery model that responds holistically to the needs of vulnerable young people. YSAS works with the multiple and complex needs presented by vulnerable young people including a specialist approach to alcohol and drug use. YSAS' organisational response incorporates direct client care, health promotion, public policy advocacy, research, training, community development and prevention.

YSAS supports vulnerable young people to achieve optimal health and wellbeing through community and Government action that ensures maximum social and economic participation. YSAS approach aims to engage, support and strengthen vulnerable young people affected by social disconnection, drug and alcohol use and mental health problems in order to improve their health, wellbeing and participation in the community. YSAS staff develop supportive, respectful and caring relationships with vulnerable young people, their families and communities; provide holistic, integrated services; establish productive, collaborative partnerships; generate research, innovation and growth and influence positive social change. YSAS' work with vulnerable young people is based on meeting individual needs, responsiveness and accessibility.

With this background YSAS is ideally placed to comment on the panel's inquiry into Vulnerable Children. In particular, a significant number of YSAS' client group is made up of children and young people who are or have been in contact with the child protection system. Indeed a proportion of our clients are young parents with children who may be considered *both* at risk of abuse and neglect given their complex circumstances.

Response to the Terms of Reference

2. Strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk including the role of adult, universal and primary services. This should include consideration of ways to strengthen the capability of those organisations involved.

Supportive family environments

YSAS works with many families where there are intergenerational substance use patterns of behaviour with attendant adverse effects on parenting including inconsistency, emotional detachment and neglect, mental health problems, family violence, feelings of shame, guilt, anger, resentment, loss and grief, marital breakdown and withdrawal from friends and other supports.

Families are mostly unaware of the variety of approaches for dealing with substance use issues and how their efficacy is dependent on the specifics of a young person's circumstances and willingness to change. YSAS aims to assist families to become stronger by providing them with drug education, parenting support, communication skills, counselling, mediation, housing support, advocacy and links with social supports resulting in positive socialisation,. YSAS support (skills development and tools) enables families to deal with future situations that may involve drug or alcohol use. We work from a broad harm minimisation and capacity building perspective, rather than focusing narrowly on the drug use alone. YSAS has found that effective holistic support for parents is critical and includes:

- involvement in treatment planning
- dedicated specific resources within agencies (eg. Family workers)
- outreach work, flexible appointment times which fit in with family schedules
- positive parenting programs (for parents of all ages)
- practical support - material aid, transport assistance and budgeting
- violence prevention, anger management programs, communication skills
- development of support networks
- provision for respite and accommodation

YSAS Interventions Targeted at Children and Families at risk

In responding the needs of vulnerable young people who are parents, YSAS has developed several programs to meet their specific needs.

- Young Parents Project
- Young Parents Retreat
- Wilum Drug and Alcohol Supported Accommodation
- Rug Rats Parenting Group

Young Parents Program

YSAS workers have observed that many service interventions for young parents focus on deficiencies and shortcomings in their parenting skills and lifestyle choices. YSAS' Young Parent's Program aims to build on strengths and increase awareness of appropriate parenting approaches. The young person is often trying to acquire new skills in an environment of chaos, and crisis without a sense of space to really consider their future beyond the current presenting issue – whatever that may be. Young parents who have permanent custody of their children are confronted with greater barriers to vocational training, adolescent peer networks and other 'rites of passage' considered normal for people in this age group. Of course, access to other therapeutic initiatives such as counselling and even YSAS residential and recreational programs are limited due to their responsibilities as a parent.

Based in Frankston, Young Parent's Program (YPP) is a program for pregnant/parenting young people with substance use issues, whose children are likely to become subject to Child Protection notifications. Through intensive case work and support, the program aims to enhance young peoples' parenting capacity and provide family support and drug treatment simultaneously.

The YSAS Young Parents' Program was established in 2004 with a National Illicit Drug Strategy (NIDS) grant in response to an increasing client group presenting for drug treatment. YSAS identified that around 10% of presenting clients were either pregnant or parenting and that it was a group who had quite specific issues and challenges apart from their substance use that needed to be dealt with in a holistic, systemic way. It was also identified that there was a lack of services that catered for young parents with substance use issues and it was noted that they were especially susceptible to negative parenting behaviours and as a result, protective involvement. The **YPP Practical Casework Guide** (available on request) was developed to assist workers to work effectively with this client group, minimise harm to young people and their children and maximise their outcomes.

A key element to achieving this is the way in which the YPP worker engages the various protective and other relevant agencies involved in any given case. In an environment where workers and organisations experience anxiety around the protective outcomes for young people and their children, decisions are often made without the opportunity to fully explore their impact on burgeoning therapeutic pathways or any individuals potential to build upon their parenting capacity. Statutory authorities are naturally very nervous about reports of substance use where babies or toddlers are present.

Crucial elements of this program include: engagement and trust building with the young person; maintaining a consistent working presence with other services that are concerned about the parenting ability of these vulnerable young people (such as Child Protection Services) and strong links with other services which can actively build their parenting capacity (such as Maternal & Child Health Service).

The YPP worker, through maintaining a consistent working presence with these services, and as a result of holding recognized AOD expertise, has placed herself in a strong position to more effectively advocate the needs of her clients and to achieve, in many instances, a more considered approach from Child Protection agencies when working with young parents who use illicit substances and/or alcohol. This has not been an easy task but the effort has been worthwhile.

At a local level the Young Parents Program has been recognized as having a unique capacity to engage young people and to then facilitate positive interventions that have prevented the need for involvement with Child Protection. The client/worker relationship-building philosophy, synonymous with so much of YSAS' approach generally, has also been recognized as a crucial element by other local services.

Young Parents Program Case Study

17 year old "Zoe" was an existing outreach client at YSAS who'd had a negative experience of protective services whilst being the subject of a Child Protection custody order herself since age 9. "Zoe" was known to have multiple protective concerns, particularly around chaotic, poly-substance use, significant traumatic events and numerous violent relationships. She was referred into YPP upon becoming pregnant (a fact she learnt only after her partner had been incarcerated). Child Protection services became involved formally approximately 8 weeks after the initial referral into YPP. Of paramount concern at that stage was the potential for the growing therapeutic relationship with "Zoe" to be compromised as a result of statutory involvement.

Through a combination of highly skilled work and a service framework approach that allowed a foundation of trust to be built, the intervention of protective services was able to be seen by the client as a positive outcome (though, this required ongoing work). The YPP worker became an effective 'buffer' between the two parties which provided the basis for mutual deeper understanding. Effectively, this meant that protective authorities were less inclined to be 'reactional' as a consequence of instances of reported substance use that were of relatively minor concern.

The Young Parent Program's capacity to work with young people from pregnancy through to birth and beyond has created opportunities to ensure further positive outcomes. Chief among these is the ability to play a strong advocacy role with other community based services, such as Child and Maternal Health Centres, local hospitals, midwives and specialist medical clinics (Chemical Dependency Clinic). These new networking requirements have, in our experience, opened up a greater level of awareness of issues confronting highly marginalised young parents who are using substances, and have elicited a different type of service response than might have otherwise been the case. Clients of YPP have also quickly recognized the benefits of being in the program and also the value in accessing the broader health service system.

The Young Parents Project was initially funded as a pilot project and has received ongoing funding through annual applications. It has the capacity to intensively case manage around 10 young parents.

The Young Parents Project has demonstrated a successful model of intervention for at risk children and families. It has been successful in working across services and enhancing the capabilities of all the organizations involved.

Young Parent's Retreat

YSAS has explored the challenge of working innovatively with young parents and their children through recreation and experiential based learning. In 2010 YSAS facilitated a 5-day retreat on the Mornington Peninsula for a group of young families and their children. The aims of this project were to provide young marginalized parents with a blend of opportunities including respite and recreation; a series of positive family experiences; a supportive peer-learning environment; and childhood development education.

YSAS workers recognised that the opportunity for young people involved in the Young Parents Program had extremely limited opportunities to participate in activities such as a family holiday. For young families to have any sense of future as a family unit, it is important for them to be able to participate and remember a series of positive family experiences. The retreat therefore aimed to provide parents with an opportunity to break from their normal routines, indulge in some relaxation and fun activities and to connect with other young parents.

The Young Parent's Retreat was held at Merricks Lodge on the Mornington Peninsula over a five day period in May 2010, with six families attending from a range of YSAS sites across Victoria. The families were mostly single mums with one child, though some couples also attended. The age range of the children attending was from three months to four years old. A number of people had to overcome serious barriers to attend the retreat, including access and custody issues, Department of Human Service involvement, and work or study commitments. Nearly all participants required support to manage complex substance use patterns prior to attending, as well as a myriad of family, relationship and other social issues.

Retreat activities included a boat cruise, beach walks, swimming and a visit to Peninsula Hot Springs. One of the retreat highlights was the establishment of an art room which started out with a worker facilitating the art activities, and shifted to young parents playing with their kids in the space without workers present. Families were given folio books to create albums of their time at the camp. A staff member took photos of the young parents and their children enjoying the different activities for inclusion in the folio as workers had noted that many clients didn't have any family photographs. At the end of the retreat, families had a permanent reminder of positive family experiences to reflect on in building on their parenting skills.

Feedback from participants

I've learn't / seen other ways of parenting.

Having the kids in a different environment and taking advice from workers and seeing other parents – with their kids – I think it's terrific.

We loved the arts & crafts, pool, beach and hot springs the best!
Thanx for a great time everyone

Week has been hard to fault. Set up well, craft room set up well. Massages good.

(My child) enjoyed it, will be talking about it for ages. Loved the photos.

To all the YSAS workers who were involved in the young parent's retreat, thank you very much for such a lovely time. (My daughter) and I really enjoyed ourselves. All the months of planning and organizing was really worth it as it was such an enjoyable experience, so thank you for all your time and effort! We can't wait for the next one...

One young mother stated that she was going to seek permanent custody of her child because the retreat provided her with the chance to see that parenting was 'do-able'. A worker noted that another young parent hadn't had a break for three years. Providing supported 'time out' for young people created a space for reflection and the possibility of new options. An evaluation is underway to improve the planning and delivery of similar activities at YSAS in the future.

Wilum Supported Accommodation Program

Wilum (Aboriginal word for 'hut or camp') is a Youth Drug and Alcohol Supported Accommodation Program within YSAS that provides stable and secure accommodation to young people in order to facilitate independent living skills and improved self management. The aim of the program is to integrate young people with significant substance use backgrounds back into the community by the provision of therapeutic activities, life skills programs and community connections. Young people are free to choose from a range of programs and activities and may stay within the program for up to 12 months.

The program manages eight properties in the inner northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, with two beds in each house. The properties are provided by Metro West Transitional Housing, Footscray and St Vincent De Paul Housing, Glenroy. Two of the houses are run on a lead tenant model, which means the lead tenant provides assistance around independent living skills, as well as informal personal support to young people staying at the property.

Principles of Service Delivery:

- Provide safe, secure and stable housing options to young people
- Provide developmentally appropriate services to young people
- Address substance use in the context of a young person's lived experience rather than treat it generically or in isolation from the rest of their life
- Address substance use within a harm minimisation framework through ongoing support and a therapeutically focused programs
- Collaborate with other support services and community based activities to integrate support and provide optimal service provision wherever possible
- The Wilum program acknowledges the important role that parents, carers, friends and significant others play in the development of a young person's life skills and community connections
- Wilum is committed to an action reflection process of program development.

Wilum Case Study

'Elijah' and 'Misha' are in their late teens. They have two children under a year old. For many years they have struggled with significant substance use issues. Like many of the young people who come to Wilum for help, there is a history of significant poverty and social disadvantage. It's hard enough to get any sort of housing in these circumstances, but for young parents who are seen as 'druggies' it is almost impossible. As parents, they really want to make a go of it. They love their children, they're scared of losing custody and they have limited resources to deal with the dilemmas and challenges that face them as a young family.

From the age of 13, 'Elijah' spent most of his time couch surfing or sleeping on the streets due to physical violence at home. He was regularly beaten by his mother and her partner who drank alcohol heavily. From 15 years of age, he was incarcerated on three separate occasions and would sleep on the streets or in squats when he was not locked up. He would use outreach services to obtain food and material aid and was using substances throughout this time on the streets. 'Misha' was unable to live at home due to domestic conflict and substance use within her family. Due to these circumstances, from an early age both young people were homeless and unable to secure a safe place to live. Like many young people who find themselves seeking assistance from Wilum, drug use is just one of the many issues that is complicating their lives.

YSAS staff assisted with accommodation provision and connection with / referral to appropriate support services. Wilum has become a 'safe place in a rough sea' where a range of psychosocial support services and therapeutic interventions are assisting 'Elijah', 'Misha' and their two little ones to not just survive, but have a chance to flourish.

The majority of young people who participate in the Wilum program have significant backgrounds of disadvantage, which includes experiences of abuse, neglect, family violence, parental substance use, incarceration, homelessness and poverty. Particular cohorts of young people such as young parents with children and Indigenous clients are given priority based on their individual needs. Indeed YSAS works proactively with young parents and children and Child Protection, to ensure maximum participation in the program. In general there are no other supported accommodation options that will accept young parents and their children.

The program caters for young people who identify a need for intensive support around their substance use and associated issues. Substance use is not seen as a barrier but as a challenge, along with many other issues young people in the program are dealing with. Wilum attempts to assist participants to take more ownership and responsibility for their lives, thus enhancing their ability to live independently and create self efficacy.

The program is based on a psychosocial model of support. Young people receive assistance around a range of issues including substance use, mental health, housing, relationships, employment/training and parenting. Staff role includes case management, facilitating groups, conducting interviews / assessments, developing service linkages, liaising with transitional housing services, completing public housing applications and assisting in employment and training applications. Wilum is committed to working collaboratively with other services where there are clients shared between services. As in the case study described above, extensive work and collaboration was conducted

between the YSAS workers and Child Protection to facilitate the young family's entry to the supported accommodation program. This case demonstrated the effectiveness of a strong working relationship between the two agencies.

Rug Rats Parenting Group

Rug Rats is designed for young parents aged 12-25 experiencing problems with substance use, and their children. Rug Rats operates in partnership with Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service. It is open to all clients irrespective of where they live. The program has been operating for several years from the YSAS location in Fitzroy. The parent and child group meets fortnightly for two hours. It is a semi-structured program whereby there is time for parents to meet and share experiences, receive support from YSAS practitioners and to participate in structured baby/child focused activities, such as story time, music, or craft.

The program works holistically to support young parents to:

- Assist parents to maintain the care of their children,
- Provide education / support to parents with substance use issues,
- Prevent or minimise the need for protective or correctional involvement of the Department of Human Services, and in particular, the need for substitute care or statutory order,
- Assist parents to build on and develop connections to family and community supports,
- Empower parents to make informed decisions for their own lives,
- Provide a flexible service that responds to the unique needs of each client,
- Provide information, advocacy and referral to parents and families to improve their access to community resources and opportunities for education, training and employment,
- Assist parents and families to access activities for the purpose of personal development, recreation or to enhance their feeling of self worth and connection to the community.

The primary source of referral for the program in the past has been clients attending other YSAS programs. The need to expand the program and provide access to clients in other areas has been identified. As such the Rug Rats Group is actively developing collaborative relationships with The Women's Drug and Alcohol Service (WADS) at The Royal Women's Hospital and local Maternal & Child Health Services.

The greatest barrier to client participation is their ability to get to the Fitzroy location. Given the range of presenting issues such as substance use, mental health problems coupled with the expected fatigue associated with pregnancy and child rearing, simple solutions such as providing public transport or taxi

vouchers were not effective. YSAS practitioners have found that picking up parents from their homes has been the most effective way of engaging clients who are struggling to leave the house.

The 'travel time' provides opportunity for the development of a therapeutic relationship and other individualised interventions.

The YSAS program has limited reach as it operates from one location, has limited vehicle resources, and it is largely self funded.

In spite of these challenges, the Rug Rats program has been effective in engaging young parents with a history of substance use. This engagement has reduced the vulnerability of the next generation of children, providing them with additional support and opportunities for a more positive future.

Recommendation 1

Several models of engaging and intervening with young children and young parents at risk have been developed and trialled at YSAS successfully (ie. Young Parents Program, Young Parents Retreat, Rug Rats Parenting Group and Supported Accommodation).

YSAS recommends the implementation and expansion of similar models to meet the needs of young parents, with substance abuse issues and parenting responsibilities, in other areas of Melbourne and regional centres in Victoria, in partnership with community based child and family support agencies.

4. The interaction of departments and agencies, the courts and service providers and how they can better work together to support at-risk families and children.

Multiple and complex causal factors require collaborative, concerted and co-ordinated efforts involving a range of services, programs and policies in integrated settings. Multi-disciplinary teams maximise effort and resources whilst supporting vulnerable young people to resolve a range of interconnected social and family problems.

Closely coordinated effort between homelessness services, youth mental health services, drug and alcohol support services, employment services, Youth Justice, generic youth services, and indeed family services and Child Protection, help individual young people to map out ways to address their problems. The provision of flexible support must take into account the lack of structure in the young person's life and potential suspicion that they may have toward professional intervention.

Recent Departmental initiatives have established systems and structures that recognise these issues. The YSAS approach with young people who are vulnerable with complex needs, is to work collaboratively with the full range of services and professionals that the young person may require, including family services.

The Multiple and Complex Needs Panel (MACN) is a good example of a coordinated assessment and referral mechanism (Victorian Department of Human Services 2011; Hamilton & Elford, 2009). As a multi-disciplinary statutory body, MACN membership has extensive expertise across a range of fields including alcohol and other drug dependency, mental health, disability, correctional services, child protection, education. Through the process of determining eligibility for the service, people with highly complex needs receive the type and level of support needed along the continuum. Individual Care Plans are developed, coordinated and reviewed. Brokerage funds are allocated where appropriate. YSAS identifies this as a model that could be more broadly implemented as an early intervention strategy for vulnerable young people who are also involved with Child Protection services.

The development of the **headspace** mental health centres across Australia demonstrates another effective and successful model of collaboration. **headspace** has a national presence in the early intervention of mental health issues for young people (12 to 25 years) (**headspace**, 2010). It is supported by multiple agencies that have joined together contractually and have developed systems of co-operation and transfer of information. More importantly **headspace** has funding that supports and promotes the development of these arrangements.

The Child First consortiums were also developed to improve inter-agency coordination and collaboration, and hence service delivery. However, an area

in which significant risk is associated, the drug and alcohol sector, was not included in the contractual obligations of the Child First consortiums.

YSAS continues to work collaboratively with vulnerable young people, their children, their families and Child Protection. Unfortunately, this is not reflected, nor supported or acknowledged through current funding and accountability arrangements.

Recommendation 2

YSAS recommends that drug and alcohol services form part of the contractual arrangement within the Child First consortiums with concomitant funding and accountability arrangements.

Recognition of the cultural differences between services is critical to a realistic appraisal of the capacity for collaboration and partnerships.

YSAS supports service development work aimed at establishing more integrated models of care for vulnerable young people with complex problems. This also requires a realistic appraisal of the factors that either promote or act as barriers to collaboration. In this sense, recognition of the cultural differences between services is critical for cohesive collaboration. These differences can be positive in terms of adding diversity and flexibility, greater consumer choice and promoting help-seeking and engagement. Valuing and promoting a diversity of approaches to service provision, including services that emphasise social interventions, is particularly important for vulnerable young people whose reduced social functioning in various life domains is what prompts them to seek assistance from services.

Establishment of service development processes involving a genuine partnership requires greater understanding and acknowledgement of the following areas:

- Expressed preferences of the young people regarding types and styles of service delivery
- Different and complementary strengths of child protection and youth drug and alcohol services
- Depth of the philosophical differences between youth AOD and Child Protection services

These differences are generally dealt with superficially but their qualitative nature, extent and implications for practice are rarely explored in depth or in a systematic way. It is important to note that these differences are not viewed as deficiencies that need to be rectified, but rather as complementary skills that can be used to help inform the design of more effective collaborative support.

Initiatives across services need to include interventions aimed at recognising, understanding and developing organisational cultures. If we acknowledge that services share some core values whilst engaging in quite different practices, it is likely there are areas of significant difference in relation to values and assumptions. Deeper exploration into these areas of commonality and difference and their implications for effecting change is warranted, including:

- An understanding of how underlying values and assumptions that maintain current practices may work to limit achievement of shared, espoused values
- The nature of values and assumptions needed to support and maintain new collaborative practices
- Ways in which current values and assumptions may be inconsistent with new collaborative practices, and
- How current values and assumptions may need to change

Although many core espoused values are shared, we acknowledge that at times YSAS practice model can differ from other services. These differences arise from, and are maintained by a range of historical, environmental and organisational variables that come together to shape and are shaped by organisational culture.

These relationships could be improved by:

- Developing and undertaking joint professional development programs
- Expanding parent and child specific services within alcohol and drug services which includes the dedicated involvement of Child Protection advisers
- Memorandums of understanding governing the exchange of information and role clarity between drug and alcohol services and Child Protection
- Improving funding arrangements and accountability structures that reflect these relationships.

The fundamental philosophy underlying YSAS interventions is that of engaging the client with respect to all issues and at all levels. This includes developing a relationship of trust and confidence with the young person's Child Protection worker and other support agencies and networks of family and friends to ensure the best outcomes for that individual young person. It is through an open dialogue, and allowing time for this dialogue to occur, that both systems are able to learn from each other to the benefit of the children whom they are serving.

Recommendation 3

YSAS recommends that continued inter-agency opportunities are developed and promoted to build on collaborative relationships and shared understandings between child protection, child and family services, and drug and alcohol agencies. Strategies to be employed should include joint professional development, expanding parent and child specific services within drug and alcohol agencies with the dedicated involvement of Child Protection advisers, and funding and accountability structures that support and reflect these relationships.

7. Measures to enhance the government's ability to: plan for future demand for family services, statutory child protection services and out-of-home care; and ensure a workforce that delivers services of a high quality to children and families.

Research into the effectiveness of services and programs for vulnerable young people is critical: evidence-informed practice needs significant investment.

In the context of researching the health and well being of vulnerable young people with diverse, complex needs, an expanded interpretation of evidence based practice needs to be explored. The American Psychological Association (APA) Policy Statement on evidence-based practice (EBP) represents a realistic and appropriate approach to evidence-informed practice that could be adopted. The APA recognises the validity of research using a variety of methods; that psychological services are most effective when responsive to the client's specific problems, strengths, personality, social context and preferences; that clinical expertise is necessary to integrate research evidence with client factors and contextual factors to make decisions, and that a central goal of "Evidence Based Practice" is to maximize client choice among effective alternative interventions.

This approach implies that data gathering processes producing research evidence about the effectiveness of interventions should integrate data about client and contextual factors. Typical clinical intervention research tends to control out client and contextual factors, hence it needs to be supplemented by practice-based research that explores how evidence-based interventions can be applied most effectively in different settings. These two approaches can be complementary in achieving effective integration of practice and research based evidence with the outcome of evidence-informed practice.

Practical strategies consistent with this approach could be employed to promote evidence-informed practice in provision of holistic, client-centred support for vulnerable young people:

- implementation evaluation to focus on questions such as practitioner adherence to core practice principles;
- outcomes evaluation expanded to embrace client defined goals and achievement of mutually identified needs-based objectives;
- practitioners and clients engaged in the generation of practice-relevant evidence and selective use of experimental methods such as Randomised Controlled Trials to test the extent to which interventions are capable of adding benefit in achieving particular kinds of outcomes for particular groups of clients
- ethnographic techniques explored to better understand the efficacy of services and interventions from the perspective of the young people themselves.

As a matter of priority there is a need for further research to inform future policy direction and to identify programs and interventions that are effective in

reducing the risk and inevitability of involvement with the child protection system.

Recommendation 4

YSAS recommends coupling the introduction of innovative programs with research and evaluation so that outcomes and processes can be documented and evidenced.

The capacity of data collection systems needs to be expanded to enable better interrogation and research

Most service delivery data collection systems are established for operational requirements - recording, monitoring and reporting client episodes of care for the primary funding body. This is also the case with the client database at YSAS.

Research capacity was not considered in the initial development of the database so subsequent data mining for issue specific information is time consuming, costly and at this point in time severely limited. Improving existing data collection systems can be a costly exercise. Organizations need to be resourced adequately to design and implement systems change to ensure future strategic planning and program development are strengthened and further informed by meaningful evidence and data. "Better use of information technology and data collection systems is a critical tool... in driving service coordination and a client-centric approach to improving local service networks. With careful application, technology can play a transformative role." (DHS, 2008)

Valuable data regarding client participation in drug and alcohol services and their involvement in child protection, or other child and welfare agencies, is not being systematically collected. This doesn't allow for easy access to data that will inform decisions regarding program demands, program utilisation and program effectiveness.

Recommendation 5

YSAS recommends that suitable funding and technological support is made available to assist agencies to accurately and systematically collect data that will inform program effectiveness and service demand.

Professionals working with vulnerable young people increasingly require knowledge and skills to recognise and respond promptly and appropriately to a range of complex concerns for maximum client benefit

The youth services sector must have a workforce that is highly skilled, adaptable and has the competency to respond to the full range of diverse and complex needs of vulnerable young people, maximise outcomes and prevent escalation of problems that affect a young person's wellbeing. A concerning trend has been observed at YSAS with new workers who have recently graduated – often they have inadequate skills and experience to engage with highly vulnerable young people.

We believe this is due to insufficient field placements structured within courses, placements that are simply too short to be of any value and a large number of youth work courses that vary in lengths, standards and levels of training. In addition more emphasis, or specialist emphasis, needs to be placed on the needs of young parents and children, who are or are at risk of coming into contact with the child protection system.

A Youth Services Workforce Development strategy needs further investigation to establish a formal training and further education coordination mechanism, a set of common core standards across tertiary courses and target education and training programs to areas of greatest need. In particular the training of Child Protection professionals could be enhanced by increasing knowledge in drug and alcohol issues and the developmental needs of adolescence.

Recommendation 6

The professional development of drug and alcohol workers needs to be strengthened and include sufficient training in the issues surrounding young parents and vulnerable children. The training of child protection workers should be strengthened in the area of drug and alcohol issues and an increase understanding of the developmental needs of adolescence.

Incentives need to be implemented to attract skilled workers into the sector who are capable of working with the complex needs of vulnerable young people

Investment needs to be made into increased salary rates and ensuring pay parity across similarly qualified workers operating in different parts of the youth services system. Existing financial incentives are inadequate and symbolically send a message that current or prospective worker skills and contribution aren't respected or valued. As such age of the youth workers is relatively young, thereby lacking in a depth of experience and understanding required to work with young parents and children.

Multiple career paths leading to lifetime career opportunities within the sector need to be developed and promoted to attract new workers and experienced and senior professionals and to ensure availability of supervisors and mentors.

Recommendation 7

Salary levels and career paths for youth workers needs to be enhanced in order to attract and retain skilled and experienced workers who are better equipped to deal with vulnerable children and young parents.

References:

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