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A major component of Australia's homelessness service system will continue to be supported accommodation for homeless young people. The demand for supported accommodation is excessive; about one in every two young people who seek accommodation on a night are turned away. Only some 14 per cent of the homeless population can be accommodated in SAAP on any night. The transition out of homelessness to independent living has been restricted due to long wait times for public housing and steeply rising rents. Teenagers may not be ready to take on full responsibility for living independently. Many services believe that supported accommodation has lost a major degree of flexibility to meet the varied needs of young clients. For over a decade SAAP funding has been increased at less than the real rise in the costs of providing support services for homeless people.

Chapter 14 | Supported Accommodation

Introduction

14.1 The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is Australia's primary response to homelessness. Jointly financed by the Australian and state and territory governments, it funds community organisations to provide supported accommodation and related services in order to help people who are homeless to achieve a degree of self-reliance and independence. SAAP was established in 1985 by incorporating homelessness programs funded by individual state and territory governments and the Australian Government into one nationally coordinated program.

14.2 In addition to SAAP there is the Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP). CAP is part of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and provides funds to eligible organisations for the purchase, construction, upgrade and lease of accommodation for homeless people or people at risk of homelessness. It has been the main source of capital funding for organisations providing homelessness services.

History of youth supported accommodation

14.3 The Inquiry received some interesting reflections from a SAAP service manager in Victoria about the way the youth homelessness sector worked in the 1970s and early 1980s before SAAP was introduced. She described the services as:

... houses rented on the private rental market, lead tenants and volunteer mentors offered some support to enhance the function of the council youth worker, as well as offering positive adult role models and a link to the community... Committee members undertook "landlord" roles in regard to property matters, tenancy, rent collection and all the associated roles. A lot of hands on work all round.¹

14.4 She reflected that in the early days of SAAP, prior to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Inquiry into homeless children, there was a positive vision of a wrap around service response. While funding was limited, and there was quite a lot of make do work, there was also more freedom to work 'holistically' and differentiate between clients on a needs basis. She wrote, somewhat nostalgically, explaining that:

*... the absence of "targets" and complex intake processes enabled young people to replicate the family experience by moving in and out of the youth housing system, until ready for full independence. There was no restriction to length of support and housing was not linked to tenancy laws, rather more a support framework of choices and consequences.*²

14.5 The manager advised the Inquiry that during the early years of SAAP it was administered centrally and contained staff members who were experienced community workers, noting that:

*... those outside of SAAP (as well as from within) often remarked that SAAP was visionary, responsive, creative, with a strong (and vocal) representation of youth workers, supported by regional youth networks eg YASSP, which predated the Homelessness Network*³

14.6 She stated that her Committee pro-actively engaged in advocacy on behalf of young clients and her service had access to public housing stock and resources (both donated and funded) to establish houses as 'homely' environments for young people.

14.7 The manager was not advocating a return to pre-SAAP arrangements, but rather seemed to be highlighting a time when there were closer links to the community and a less bureaucratized style of service provision.

Administration of SAAP

14.8 SAAP as a joint program between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments commits the Commonwealth and the states and territories to a nationally co-ordinated response, and represents a major improvement on the pre-SAAP arrangements. The current situation allows for the Australian Government to provide approximately 50 per cent of the funding to SAAP with each state and territory government providing a matching contribution.

14.9 The Australian Government takes on the role of coordinating policy leadership for the program. The state and territory governments do the operational administration of the program, establish guidelines and service frameworks, and fund the community organisations that deliver the services.

14.10 Each five years, all the governments involved negotiate a multilateral and bilateral five-year agreements that establish the strategic priorities for the development of the program. The current agreement, known as SAAP V, is the fifth such agreement. Its period of operation is from 2005 to 2010. The SAAP V agreement raised three strategic priorities⁴: pre-crisis intervention for people at imminent risk of homelessness, post-crisis transition support for clients leaving SAAP and better linkages to allied support services.

14.11 Investment in pre-crisis intervention for people who are at imminent risk of homelessness recognises that timely intervention can often minimise or prevent a range of secondary problems such as loss of employment and disruption to client's (and their children's) social and educational networks and supports. However, there were no new resources for developing this priority in any major way.

14.12 Post-crisis transition support for clients exiting SAAP services represented targeted support to provide the skills, confidence and management strategies to enable them to secure and maintain appropriate long-term housing. The primary target group for this priority area was clients with multiple or complex support needs, such as mental health issues, drug or alcohol addiction or experience long-term unemployment. These clients are inclined to experience cyclical or chronic homelessness.

14.13 Allied support services and government and non-government agencies in health, education and employment services emphasised improved linkages in recognition of the fact that the causes of homelessness are generally varied and complex. As such, addressing the causes of homelessness and finding sustainable solutions can require the development and implementation of a tailored suite of integrated and well-coordinated supports. A problem with this objective is that without new more flexible ways of amalgamating funding from different sectors or packaging such funding in new ways, the objective is weak in an operational sense.

14.14 The state and territory government departments are now working with the services and peak bodies to implement these strategic priorities. The result is that each jurisdiction is implementing the priorities differently. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it does complicate systemic reform and makes comparisons across the jurisdictions difficult.

14.15 The NYC has formed the view on evidence provided and on the basis of a series of evaluations that the development of SAAP as a special joint Commonwealth-states program is overwhelmingly a success story, but one which has been held under financial constraint for more than a decade and over a period when the demand for homelessness services has increased. Youth homelessness has substantially increased since the early nineties.

SAAP services

14.16 The Burdekin Report, in describing the Youth Supported Accommodation Program (YSAP), highlighted three main types of support provided: refuges (crisis and medium to longer term), community placement schemes and detached housing workers. Other forms of services were for 'special needs' groups.⁵

14.17 While a particular service could be placed in one or more of these three categories they are not as useful to describe SAAP services in 2007. The descriptions of SAAP services for young people provided to the 2007 Inquiry cover a broad array of services from early intervention and support, through crisis and emergency support and accommodation, to outreach and transitional support and combinations of these. All services are provided using a common case management approach which works with the individual to develop options to resolve crises and move from support to independence.

14.18 The services often combine additional resources from programs funded by all tiers of government to provide extra and complementary services. There were many examples of services that had effectively put into practice joined up service delivery by combining funding and program elements from a range of sources. One example, was the Young Women's Place in Toowoomba, which told the Inquiry that in addition to its SAAP money, it also receives funding through the Innovative Health Services for Homeless Youth (IHSHY) program for a full time youth health worker and Queensland Health directly employs a part-time midwife as part of the service.⁶ Another example was Anglicare in Darwin, which used funding from Territory Out of Home Care, Commonwealth Suicide Prevention and Reconnect to complement SAAP and to better work to meet the needs of young people. Southern Youth and Family Services in NSW has used Government funding to deliver a 'wholistic' response across all the areas of need that homeless youth have. The combined funding comes through SAAP, CAP, the National Homelessness Strategy and community housing linked closely to education and employment needs through JPET, Connections, and Links to Learning, early intervention through Reconnect, and CSGP, health needs through an IHSHY initiative, suicide prevention and help for particular groups of young people such as NAYSS.

14.19 The NYC heard and read a great deal of information and evidence that a major impediment to coordinating and joining up service delivery was the requirements of different sectors of government funding, each with their own set of rules, and from the standpoint of service deliverers, inflexible and onerous administrative requirements.

Numbers in SAAP Growing

14.20 In 2005-06, the SAAP system supported 106,500 adults or unaccompanied children (i.e. SAAP clients).⁷ The number of SAAP clients has been steadily growing. In 1996-97 there were around 83,200 SAAP clients.⁸ This represents a 28 per cent increase in client numbers.

Table 5: SAAP from 1996-7 to 2005-6

Year	Total number of clients/ year	Young clients/ year (Aged < 25 years)	Proportion of youth
1996-97	83,200	n/a	n/a
1997-98	94,100	n/a	n/a
1998-99	90,700	35,100	38.7
1999-00	90,000	33,300	37.0
2000-01	91,200	33,200	36.4
2001-02	95,600	34,600	36.2
2002-03	97,600	34,400	35.2
2003-04	100,200	33,800	33.7
2004-05	100,400	34,400	34.3
2005-06	106,500	36,700	34.5

Source: SAAP National Data Collection annual reports 1998-99 to 2005-06; n/a means data not available

Young people using SAAP

14.21 In 2005-2006, SAAP services had 36,700 clients who were aged less than 25 years, around 34.5 per cent of the client group.⁹ This was comprised of 19,100 young people aged 15 to 19 years and 15,600 young adults aged 20 to 24 years. A further 2000 clients were aged less than 15 years. In addition, there were a further 54,700 children assisted with their parents or caregivers but these are not counted in the client number. The number of SAAP clients aged less than 25 years has remained reasonably constant over the past few years (see table).

Excess demand for SAAP services

14.22 The evidence presented to the Inquiry shows that SAAP services are running at capacity. At almost every hearing the Inquiry was told that SAAP accommodation services have had to turn away young people's requesting for accommodation. For example, Kyabra Community Association, located in Brisbane, told the Inquiry that:

*... in the last six months, Kyabra has had upwards of 20 applicants for each SAAP vacancy allocated. Given that young people are the largest target group in accessing SAAP accommodation, the level of need far outstrips the availability of accommodation.*¹⁰

14.23 In Darwin, three young people told the Inquiry they were sleeping in a car because the refuge had only one bed available.¹¹

14.24 In Adelaide, UnitingCare Wesley told the Inquiry that if a:

*... young person turns up and you phone up Trace-A-Place in the afternoon, lots of time they say forget it. Unless that young person is there first thing in the morning, we're full by lunchtime, you know, and we've got no accommodation available.*¹²

14.25 The Tasmanian Government, in their submission, suggested that:

*It is inevitable that services providing accommodation for homeless people will at times operate at full capacity and therefore be forced to turn away people seeking accommodation.*¹³

14.26 However, the Tasmanian Government believed that Tasmania had a:

*...strong focus on providing services for young people [which] is reflected in the low turn-away rates for young people. The most recent data available (2004-05) estimates a turn-away rate for young people of 32 per cent, which is significantly better than that across all client groups (56 per cent). This means that two out of every three requests for accommodation by homeless young people in Tasmania are successful. When coupled with data for those already accommodated, for every young person turned away another 42 young people are accommodated. This is more than twice the rate for the entire client group where for every one person turned away only 20 clients are accommodated.*¹⁴

14.27 One SAAP worker in Sydney told the Inquiry that his service was careful to avoid being inundated with requests for assistance:

*We have, for many years, deliberately maintained a fairly low profile. We have had referrals constantly coming in. We're always full. We're identified by enough people around the place to keep us full.*¹⁵

14.28 The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare produces an annual report on the demand for SAAP services. The data from these reports provide statistical confirmation of the evidence presented to the Inquiry. In 2004-05 (the latest data published) SAAP services, on an average day, turned away 193 adults and unaccompanied children who requested immediate accommodation (within 24 hours).¹⁶ Of these, 98 were young people less than 25 years of age. The Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations quoted SAAP data that showed:

*Each day SAAP agencies that target young people turn away 60 per cent of people who approach their services.*¹⁷

14.29 These statistics need to be placed in context of the large number of people who continue in SAAP accommodation from earlier requests for support. By adding the number of people turned away to the total number in SAAP accommodation, the AIHW calculate that '... the unmet demand to total demand for accommodation ratio was 3 in 100 adults and unaccompanied children'¹⁸ on an average given day in 2004-05. The vast majority of people who request SAAP accommodation on an average night are in SAAP accommodation.

14.30 These figures do not include the people who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness who do not seek assistance from SAAP agencies. It has been estimated that only 14 per cent of homeless people were accommodated in SAAP accommodation on census night in 2001.¹⁹ This is roughly the same as the proportion of homeless people sleeping in improvised dwellings or sleeping out (the remainder are in boarding houses or other inadequate accommodation or staying with friends and family).

14.31 The unmet demand for SAAP is significant and needs attention. Even though only three in 100 of those that need SAAP accommodation are turned away on a given night, a substantial increase in SAAP would be required to accommodate all those who requested assistance because most homeless people require more than one night in SAAP accommodation. When the number of people who do not seek assistance from SAAP but spend the night in improvised dwelling or sleep rough is included it becomes clear that SAAP accommodation would need to be substantially increased or alternatives found, if policy determined to match expressed need.

14.32 Many SAAP services do not turn away young people but attempt to find alternative options with friends, extended family or in a motel. UnitingCare Burnside wrote:

*In these situations caseworkers may advocate on the young person's behalf and can often find them some alternate short term accommodation locally, for example in F1 Motels, sometimes with the use of brokerage funds. Such measures are short term and do not address the need for stable, appropriate housing options.*²⁰

14.33 In Sydney, the Kings Cross Youth At Risk Project has developed a model that averted a situation where homeless young people would have to sleep out in inner Sydney.²¹ The project uses a brokerage support system to place young people in accommodation such as motel rooms and other places. It can take the overflow from youth refuges and supported accommodation.²² In Victoria Housing Establishment Funds (HEF) are used in a similar way but are available to agencies throughout SAAP.

14.34 However, not all SAAP workers consider this approach to be appropriate. The housing worker from YWCA Darwin told the Inquiry:

*Brokering accommodation from commercial properties is not really the best way to address homelessness issues, because it's not about stable accommodation, it's about stopgap measures to try to overcome the shortfall in crisis accommodation.*²³

Funding for SAAP

Recurrent Funding

14.35 In the 2005–06 financial year, the total recurrent funding for SAAP was \$348.8 million. Funding directly to SAAP agencies was \$333.4 million.²⁴ Funding for SAAP agencies has been increasing. For example, in 1996-97, \$200.5 million was allocated to SAAP agencies. Once inflation is taken into consideration, total funding for SAAP agencies increased by 26 per cent between 1996-97 and 2005-06.²⁵ However, during the same period the number of SAAP clients increased by 28 per cent although the number of support periods increased by only around 15 per cent²⁶. The result is that funding per SAAP client has declined slightly in real terms.

14.36 In addition, costs for SAAP agencies have increased over and above the rate of inflation. A SAAP worker from Brophy Family and Youth Services (Vic), told the Inquiry that:

*... our costs are going up higher than the supposedly CPI that's given to us and so, you know, there's a 4 per cent increase in our costs and the department says look it's only 2.9 per cent. ... we're continually behind the eight ball ...*²⁷

The program is conducted with funding formulae that do not guarantee funding in real terms for the same level of service delivery to continue. The low level of indexation has not matched CPI rises and according to SAAP managers nor have there been additional funds for changes in service delivery such as computer technology, communication changes, accreditation and standards requirements, occupational health and safety, and insurance and wages costs such as workers compensation insurance which have also increased substantially. Over the past 12 years, funding for SAAP has increased by 20 per cent but this has not translated into growth in real terms because the costs of providing services to homeless young people have generally risen at a faster rate than the CPI. Yet the program has faced an increased demand for its services. In this context, the application of a Commonwealth efficiency dividend, which has increased a downward pressure on program funds, is a highly questionable action, especially for a program designed to assist people experiencing the most extreme poverty possible. There is a

compelling case that community programs for highly disadvantaged people should be quarantined from effects of efficiency dividends.

14.37 SAAP staff wages under the salient awards have been increasing at a greater rate than government funding for SAAP. The wages paid to SAAP workers are at the lower end of salaries paid in the human service work force more broadly. Yet the work carried out by SAAP workers is complex, requires skills and training, at times can be dangerous and is often demanding and stressful. Staff turnover is relatively high as workers seek higher wages and better conditions in related areas such as employment services or Government Departments. After a new award was introduced in NSW, some SAAP services were forced to close services, reduce service delivery or downgrade some of their workers to a lower grade on the new award. The new wages levels even with the last upgrading in NSW were still below other human service areas and not at the same level as similar government positions. This ultimately negatively affects service quality. The Inquiry found that, to assist in enhancing SAAP and other similar programs, action is required to ensure that staff are remunerated more adequately that enhances service quality and work force performance.²⁸

14.38 According to the Youth Accommodation Association (NSW), Youth SAAP services have been under-funded compared to adult SAAP services²⁹ and yet are often serving clients with more complex needs. These funding decisions were made on an ad hoc basis more than 20 years ago and have not been reviewed.³⁰

14.39 Further, in some areas SAAP services are inadequately funded to provide an appropriate level of care. For example, a number of SAAP workers told the Inquiry that the SAAP funding for youth shelters in Townsville has provided for a staff to client ratio of one to six only. This means the service must close during the day and young people are required to leave. Other services provided information that in Youth SAAP services there was often only one worker on duty particularly at weekends and evenings and in other service systems such a situation would not be tolerated. By comparison, services such as police, mental health response teams and child protection responses always send two staff to any call out or ensure that two duty staff are on duty at any on time, yet youth SAAP services are apparently exempt from these widely adopted standards.

14.40 Low staff numbers have health and safety implications. One former SAAP worker told the Inquiry that:

Workers have raised concerns about safety and I know what a challenge it is ... for example if a young woman or a young person hurts them-self or self-harms or is violent in a shelter, the ability to respond to go to hospital with that person, the funding is really restrictive in that respect. Provision of on-call and callouts for the work is really under estimated in the funding that the government provides.³¹

14.41 These services are clearly inadequate resourced and the lack of support for young people during the day is a concern. Most services had tried to undertake some case planning with their clients and assist them with getting back into school or TAFE, and to deal with Centrelink. Their best attempts were thwarted because there were insufficient resources available for case management. A former SAAP worker told the Inquiry that

there has been recognition of the problem by the Queensland State Government, but that:

... these ageing services, the ones that have been around for a long period of time that are slowly you know, not keeping up with the CPI and costs are increasing, so [they are] slowly getting worn into the ground.³²

This is a curious position, where expectations are held about what SAAP services should achieve, yet many smaller agencies, in particular, operate financially on a starvation diet. A single worker on duty at an accommodations service might be expected to do all the case management, the case work tasks, liaise with other agencies, attend case conferences, visit the school, liaise with potential employers, deal with crises, attend medical and health appointments, and advocate with Centrelink in addition to other aspects of the work.

14.42 SAAP was best placed to engage and work directly with the young person and their situation, while other workers and relevant programs like JPET, PSP, and Connections would enhance and improve the exit strategy of gaining education and employment as a way out of homelessness. The NYC found that improved responses in linking young people in SAAP to employment, education and training would enhance SAAP and outcomes for young people and that the addition of staff to assist in this area attached to Staff services would be welcomed.

14.43 SAAP services also told the Inquiry of the increasing numbers of clients with complex needs that require additional funding if they are to be supported properly. However, the NYC also heard about cases where on the basis of their direct relationships SAAP Staff were able to achieve results. The wait times for specialist services often frustrate young people's sense of engagement with the services and undermine results that might otherwise have been achieved. Significant brokerage funds to buy in specialist services could relieve this problem. An example would be the provision of funds to bring in a psychologist to undertake brief counselling on family issues as has been done under the Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program initiative in Victoria. The high and complex needs of homeless young people in SAAP are discussed later in this chapter.

14.44 Excess demand, increasing client numbers, inadequate services provision, increasing numbers of clients with complex needs and escalating costs have led to calls from many services and peak bodies for a substantial increase in SAAP funding. For example, UnitingCare Burnside explained that:

In order to boost the capacity of safe, adequate and affordable housing there is a need to increase funding for SAAP services. The current funding allocated for SAAP V is disappointing and is likely to lead to further strain on the system. Some accommodation options will not be sustainable if funding levels are not increased to match the level recommended in the evaluation of SAAP IV.³³

14.45 They warned that:

If accommodation options close down or are unable to meet demand it places young people at greater risk of homelessness for longer periods.³⁴

14.46 The National Evaluation of SAAP IV presented several options for funding the program.³⁵ However, the evaluation argued that there was a need for funding to be increased by 15 per cent to sustain service viability and 35 per cent to 40 per cent to meet the demand for supported accommodation.³⁶ These figures were probably underestimates of the financial impact of these measures. The figures were calculated on the basis of estimates of the impact of financial degradation due to inadequate indexation and the effects of the efficiency dividend. Another way to redress the resources deficit would be to reframe supported accommodation in terms of community capacity which would assess current need community by community and identify service gaps against an agreed template for a continuum of services. For this purpose, a large LGA or a group of small LGAs are the closest boundaries to real communities of people. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 22.

14.47 The fact that no real increase in funding was forthcoming in the SAAP V agreement has led many to be sceptical of the Australian Government's commitment to the program. The Youth Accommodation Association (NSW) suggested that:

*After this evaluation the Federal Government decided to provide no increase in funding and to tinker around the edges of SAAP programs with the spin of innovation and investment.*³⁷

Capital funding

14.48 Around \$41 million per annum is allocated under the Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP) to the states and territories via Special Purpose Payments.³⁸ CAP funding for new housing stock for SAAP agencies, whether purpose-built or for purchase, seems to have all but have disappeared. CAP funding, it appears, now is primarily used to maintain or rent existing properties. None of the SAAP representatives told the Inquiry that they were aware of recently receiving additional funding under CAP. Where additional housing stock had been provided it had come from the relevant state and territory housing authority but the provenance of the funding was not known.

14.49 The lack of CAP funding for additional housing stock was a significant concern for many of the witnesses, who told the Inquiry that governments are no longer taking a 'bricks and mortar' approach to homelessness but as one SAAP worker pithily put it "... there needs to be housing stock to put young people into"³⁹. Southern Youth and Family Services (NSW) wrote that:

*Properties and buildings are essential to the youth housing and accommodation area. We need access to funds to build safe and appropriate services. Buildings for services in Europe, the United Kingdom and the States are often far better in design and specifications than in Australia. NSW has moved away from purpose building and spot purchase in favour of leases. This in the long term does nothing about building capacity and often means the property is not appropriate. We seek most strongly an increase in CAP. We suggest it needs to be doubled each year for the next five years.*⁴⁰

CAP was a small but important component of SAAP in the context of the overall CSHA – providing bricks and mortar properties for supported accommodation. In some

models a purpose-designed property is essential for safe and effective delivery. The shift in government thinking towards rental subsidies has created some serious problems as rents have steeply risen in recent years. The same kind of thinking has been reflected in CAP, which has favoured leases rather than capital building. While this strategy was a way to deliver additional housing it is a short-term option, and questions must be asked about whether this is sound strategy from a longer-term perspective.

14.50 The Commission heard argument that emphasised the importance of SAAP services and other housing models such as Foyers having suitably designed and well constructed premises. Many of the States and territories have moved away from supporting residential and housing models, a shift that seems more driven by cost imperatives than what would be the safest and best way to enhance the services to young people. Design is essential to enable a service to have a safe environment, an environment conducive to the supports needed, an environments that provides privacy for clients and one that is pleasant to reside and work in. Many SAAP services have been limited in the sorts of additional supports they can provide because of the lack of interview and case management space, and the lack of space for staff training and a computer room and facilities. Witnesses who had visited services overseas had seen excellent examples of buildings that enhanced and added to the quality and outcomes of the service. Evidence to the Commission highlighted the importance of purpose-built dwellings for some youth service models.

Issues in SAAP

Age appropriate services

14.51 Across the country, workers spoke about an array of issues involved in offering supported accommodation to young people under the age of 16.

14.52 The Inquiry was told that separate SAAP accommodation is needed for homeless young people under 16 years as mixing the younger ones with older homeless young people risks the younger ones picking up inappropriate behaviours such as drug use. In Hobart, Anglicare Tasmania's Accommodation Support Service spoke about the problem of trying to manage households that can include young people from both ends of the youth age spectrum:

... we may get a 13 year-old in, who may smoke tobacco on his arrival. After six weeks in our shelter, despite the fact that we put a lot of care and try to be as protective as possible, quite often, by the time they have spent their time in our service, they have picked up off the 20 year-olds, how to actually inject amphetamines, different manners of taking amphetamines and marijuana as well.⁴¹

It was also suggested that some services manage different age groups reasonably well without the cultural transmission of inappropriate behaviours.

14.53 When asked about the response of the child protection authority to the presence of 13 year-olds in shelter, the Service spoke of being told by the authority:

They are putting themselves at risk, so therefore there is very little we can do.⁴²

14.54 Karinya Young Womyn's Service in Launceston (Tas) offers a 24-hour supported crisis accommodation service to young women aged 13 to 20. The service highlighted some human resource problems and service focus problems with servicing such a diverse age group within a single service that has limited resources. The service pointed out that there are real differences in the:

*... support needs between say a 14 year-old first home leaver and a 19 year-old mother of two recently released from prison whose children are in care.*⁴³

14.55 The service recommended that supported accommodation for under 16s be separate from that provided for over 16s. It further suggested that expecting a sole worker to support these young women to gain income, let alone stable accommodation, was unreasonable, pointing out that a single worker was currently expected to support:

*... up to 10 consumers at any given time (six in main house, four in supported units on same site) ...*⁴⁴

14.56 Karinya Young Womyn's Service also reported problems relating to its lack of authority in caring for under 16 year-olds:

*Issues such as permission for school excursions and medical treatments are raised for us as workers in emergency services where we are not legal guardians.*⁴⁵

14.57 Young people aged 18 to 24 years are often placed in the adult system with people many years their senior. While this may not always be inappropriate, some youth services felt that separate services for this group, particularly young males, should be provided. For example, a drug and alcohol service in Canberra, Directions ACT, highlighted that this group of clients could not access appropriate services:

*If we're going to do something I would really like 18 to 25 year-old male accommodation, so that we at least have a chance to give them a hand at the area that they are at.*⁴⁶

14.58 Shopfront Youth Legal Centre reported that their clients of all ages experience difficulty in finding suitable accommodation. While there are a number of options for those under 18s, Shopfront believes the situation is worse for those over 18 years of age:

When a young person turns 18, the outlook becomes very bleak indeed. There are very few crisis accommodation services which specialise in accommodating young adults ... For most of our clients in their early 20s, the only crisis accommodation services available are men's hostels and women's refuges, which are often inappropriate for younger adults. Most of our clients in this age group resort to sofa-surfing (if they are fortunate enough to have friends with some form of housing), boarding houses (where they are often exploited and usually evicted after very short periods), seedy hotels or temporary motel accommodation paid for by the [NSW] Department of Housing. Most do not have the financial means, stability or independent living skills to obtain private rental accommodation. The Department of Housing waiting lists are impossibly long, even for those on the priority housing list.

There are some very good semi-supported accommodation options for young people with adequate independent living skills. However, getting into these services can be quite

*difficult and, for young people with higher needs, the level of support provided is not always sufficient.*⁴⁷

Young parents

14.59 In many parts of Australia the Inquiry heard about a dearth of supported accommodation services for young parents, particularly pregnant and parenting young women. In Perth, the Commissioners asked a midwife from the Adolescent Mothers Support Service whether she knew of any SAAP services for her client group:

*Not one that springs to mind for girls who are pregnant or have their babies.*⁴⁸

Given that this single worker service saw 230 young women in 2006, the majority of whom were homeless or at-risk, this is problematic.

14.60 A youth outreach worker from Canberra submitted to the Inquiry that limited access to refuges was a major issue for pregnant young women in the ACT:

*We have an increasing number of young pregnant women who are presenting to us with housing issues. Often they are aged between 17-20 which means that they are 'too old' for the youth refuges and it has proven difficult to get them places in 'adult' women's refuges.*⁴⁹

14.61 In Brisbane, a young mother spoke of her experiences:

*Well, when I faced homelessness I found it really hard because being young, I was under 18, so half the people I called couldn't take me because I was under 18 and the other half wouldn't take me because I had a son, so it was like who is going to help me?*⁵⁰

14.62 This particular young woman ended up finding supported accommodation, but she had reached the end of her tenure with her service when she spoke to the Inquiry. She was moving into accommodation with another service that did not offer outreach support. The Inquiry was concerned about this outcome, given that a number of witnesses across Australia had spoken about the vital importance of outreach support for young parents.

14.63 Another young witness in Brisbane believed that the existing supported accommodation services didn't meet the needs of young mothers. She would have preferred a specialist service for young mothers:

*It would actually be a young mothers' youth shelter I reckon, and a good one, not just some dodgy-arsed, you know, bloody thing, where you're too scared to take your child to. You know, something reasonable, and just specifically for young mums ...*⁵¹

14.64 In Sydney, Shopfront Youth Legal Centre also commented on the limited accommodation options for their clients who were parents:

Young parents also have very limited accommodation options. While generally they would be placed on the priority housing list because they have children, waiting lists are still long and, in the meantime, young parents risk having their children removed by DOCS if they are unable to find stable accommodation. There are some very good

*housing programs for young women with children (eg the Red Cross Young Women's Health Program) but for young couples or single men with children the options are very limited.*⁵²

High and complex needs

14.65 Chapter 10 Mental Health and Chapter 11 Alcohol and other Drugs highlighted that many homeless young people suffer from mental illness, have drug and alcohol problems or other high and complex needs. Both chapters also highlighted some of the problems homeless young people with mental illness or substance use problems have in accessing SAAP services. Some homeless young people have behaviours that are difficult to manage, such as a history of violence, current violent and unpredictable behaviour or have significant intellectual disabilities. Some have combinations of two or more of these issues - dual diagnosis. Youth and SAAP services across the country are familiar with the difficulties of accommodating homeless young people with high and complex needs. The Inquiry was told that there is a shortage of places:

*Although many youth refuges do an exceptional job of accommodating "hard core", at-risk young people, there remains a shortage of places for young people with very high needs.*⁵³

14.66 Anglicare WA wrote that:

*In the Perth metropolitan area, there is generally a limited availability of crisis accommodation for young people, especially those with mental health issues. Mental health issues and disabilities can often become too complex for crisis accommodation services, which operate on minimum staffing levels.*⁵⁴

14.67 In part, the shortage of places is due to the policies of SAAP services, which excludes young people with high and complex needs:

*Many young people with these issues are denied access to accommodation due to the exclusion policy of Crisis Accommodation Services.*⁵⁵

14.68 Once in SAAP accommodation, maintaining a place can be difficult for this group of young people. Many refuges have strict policies around drug use, curfews, etc. In its submission Key College, Youth Off The Streets was critical of these policies:

*Often crisis refuges will exit a young person (for poor behaviour, abusing curfew, drug usage etc) and tell them not to refer themselves for two months. When they do refer themselves after two months, they are often told day after day they can't be accommodated. It seems there are objections by youth workers (mainly women). It seems these youth workers feel threatened by these young people. We acknowledge these kids can be extremely difficult.*⁵⁶

The Commission found that, in the main, SAAP services are accessible and some are appropriate for high needs young people. However, the SAAP service system has not been funded with adequate staff and resources to safely manage much of the high needs and unpredictable behaviours. Many of the exclusions are based on an individual

assessment and an attempt to ensure existing residents and staff are safe. At times, there can be contradictions between legislation and policies on occupational health and safety and general access. It seems ludicrous to the Commission to blame SAAP services when government departments have similar policies. We heard evidence from NSW that the State Housing Authority has the ability to evict people for anti-social behaviour and across the country schools suspend or expel students with difficult behaviours. It is essential that service be supported in identifying when the entry of a particular client may pose a danger to others. However, the NYC believes that some intensive models that can respond to the high and complex needs presented by some young people should be funded. The Commission suggests that such models should be funded with a package of funding from SAAP as well as from the state departments of health and the Commonwealth.

14.69 SAAP services are often the first point in the service system that identifies a young person's mental illness or drug and alcohol issues. However, SAAP workers' skills and knowledge are not always recognised by health services. The Youth Accommodation Association (NSW) told the Inquiry that:

... SAAP services which could be the first point of call for a young person who has an undiagnosed mental health illness, are actually not getting a level of professional recognition when we refer to health.... we set up an assessment with the mental health team, and they go and present to mental health, and mental health says well that young person wasn't demonstrating those kind of behaviours, or thoughts or issues that day that turned up to see the psychiatrist, so I actually don't think they have a mental health issue. And, yet we are the agents, we're the first kind of point of call agency where that young person is constantly presenting, and often daily presenting with serious dual diagnosis issues and remains undiagnosed and unsupported by the health system.⁵⁷

14.70 The issue of high and complex needs has been the subject of investigation and the development of assessment tools. A national research and development project by John Thomson from Thomson and Goodall Associates P/L entitled 'People who are assisted by SAAP services and require a high level and complexity of service provision: An enhanced assessment and measurement framework'² (2003) developed some instruments for measuring the intensity and multiplicity of needs. The Coordination and Development Committee of SAAP (CAD) will be conducting further research on high and complex needs in collaboration with Mission Australia and the NSW Department of Community Services (DOCS). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has been engaged to do this work – to develop an operational definition of high and complex needs, design a data collection tool based on the form used by Thomson Goodall Associates in 2003, and then collect data on SAAP clients from SAAP agencies, analysing the data and producing the findings. Potentially, this work will yield clear and more sophisticated evidence on the needs of homeless service users and the proportions of SAAP clients with high and complex needs.

Length of stay in SAAP

14.71 Many services strongly advocated to the Inquiry that the length of time young

people require in the system should be determined by the needs of the young person not on the administrative necessities of the relevant government department.⁵⁸

14.72 Despite this predominant view, the Inquiry was told that some state and territory departments with responsibility for SAAP put in place targets and funding systems that restrict support periods in crisis accommodation and medium term accommodation.⁵⁹ For example, in Queensland, transitional housing for young people is for up to 12 months (although this is targeted only to those with low to moderate needs).⁶⁰

14.73 These limitations have not always been in place. The Inquiry heard from a SAAP service manager in Victoria about the length of time that a young person might previously have stayed in a SAAP service and how that duration had changed over the life of the program. The manager advised the Inquiry that in the early years of SAAP there were no target lengths of stay and that young people left a service when they were ready. In the 1990s, targets led to an average stay of 26 weeks. The support period was further reduced in this decade as a result of a:

*Radical shift to targets and duration of support of 13 weeks for young people...*⁶¹

14.74 The submission pointed out that in spite of the imposition of this 13-week target, SAAP services had not been given additional resources to assist workers in realising the program's duration of stay ambitions. Additional funding was not the main concern, however. The submission questioned the appropriateness of the targets themselves, suggesting that there was pressure on services to move young people. This pressure was considered to be out of step with notions of the state having a duty of care towards vulnerable young people:

*Regardless of strong advocacy from within the sector it was not possible to persuade DHS [Victorian Department of Human Services] to review the doubling of targets for youth services [through the reduction of duration of stay from 26 weeks to 13 weeks] or consideration of the support periods required for a comprehensive case managed response for at risk homeless young people.*⁶²

14.75 The pressure to move young people out of SAAP contrasts with young people in family situations spending longer periods in the family home:

*Curiously this reduction of duration of support coincides and is at odds with what is naturally occurring in the community for young people to remain until their mid 20's within the family home, further disadvantaging the situation for homeless young people and confirming their "disconnection" with the broader community.*⁶³

Human resources

14.76 The Inquiry was told of staff turnover and vacancy rates, which are now very high throughout the non-government human services sector, particularly SAAP services. Despite wages rising faster than the indexation of grants, pay scales have fallen behind competitive industries, such as the public sector. The relatively low pay has made it difficult for services to find appropriately skilled and experienced staff. The high vacancy rates and turnover have serious consequences for service provision.

14.77 The Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations told the Inquiry that:

*SAAP agencies are often competing for quality staff and can not match the level of salary provided to positions of equal duty in government departments. Current funding levels also leave agencies with limited resources for staff development.*⁶⁴

14.78 Concerns about the SAAP sector's human capacity were widespread. In Geelong, the manager for housing and homelessness for Barwon Youth, told the Inquiry:

*It is becoming increasingly hard [to find staff] and it is predominately because the wage rates within this field have dropped so dramatically behind all other professions. Most of our best and brightest young staff we have here spend about two or three years getting their stripes out there and they're off and working for the Education Department, Department of Human Services, wherever, anywhere [except] for an NGO because they get paid half as much again for doing the same work.*⁶⁵

14.79 Similarly, Anglicare NT told the Inquiry:

*Anglicare in the NT is an organisation that has had a really solid history of good staff retention in general, but is starting to move into significant periods of difficulty around staff recruitment and retention, and the drift is across to government departments. More so than to other NGOs. We just cannot compete with the salary structures. We can't compete with the general conditions, and we can't compete with the security of tenure now, either. So it does have major ramifications in terms of the type of service we can provide on the ground to homeless young people, and those things are linked, because at the end of the day, no matter what is happening around the system we know you get better outcomes when you have better workers on the ground.*⁶⁶

14.80 The manager of Family Access Network (FAN) in Victoria wrote to the Inquiry about being faced with a decreasing pool of workers in an increasingly complex system and of her service's efforts to attract and retain staff:

*FAN has attempted to address this by offering a range of options/activities/portfolios and fostering a learning environment where innovation, best practice and research is valued and supported.*⁶⁷

14.81 The manager applauded the rise in professionalism in the sector, but felt that when the sector's challenges were matched with poor levels of pay, the result was a workforce that was increasingly skewed towards recent and new graduates:

*A healthy sector is a diverse one, which encourages the involvement of newly graduated workers, facilitates their growth and retains the experienced workers adding to the resilience and practice wisdom, which ultimately enhances the range and scope of service responses for vulnerable and at risk young people.*⁶⁸

14.82 High staff turnover may also affect the quality of service provision, and not just because experienced staff find higher paying jobs elsewhere. Another consequence

of high staff turnover is that disadvantaged young people may disengage from a service when they have to develop relationships with new staff. A young person in Brisbane told the Inquiry:

I think one of the big drawbacks of the youth system in Queensland is that there are so many youth workers out there that are so good and helped me so much and I have seen the work that they do, and it's incredible, but I've had so many workers leave and you get one worker, and you know three months later they're going to be gone and what's the point of a relationship and working with that person when you know they're going to leave anyway. I got to a point where I didn't want to see any youth workers any more, because of the fact I know they are going to leave. That's lie, but I didn't want that to happen on such a regular basis, and so I decided to stop building those relationships.⁶⁹

14.83 The industry and staff resourcing issues are long overdue for redress and need to be in the context of planning the implementation of a long-range homelessness response. While the extent of the putative deficit is now quite large, a serious examination of the issues needs to be undertaken. Similar issues are evident in the Care and Protection area, the effects of which have been referred to in Chapter 9.

Indigenous young people using SAAP services

14.84 The Inquiry was told that there are few Indigenous specific SAAP services around and that this had remained unchanged for a long time.⁷⁰ There are even fewer SAAP services specifically for Indigenous young people. One example, operated by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-op (VACCA), is the Kurnai Homelessness Program, which provides a culturally appropriate accommodation support service for 15-25 year olds who are homeless or at risk of being homeless in the Victorian Gippsland region.⁷¹

14.85 Those homeless Indigenous young people who access SAAP services mostly use the youth SAAP services or Indigenous specific SAAP services for adults. VACCA, in their submission, told the Inquiry they believe:

... that there are insufficient youth homelessness services in place and we have particular concerns about whether current services are culturally relevant.⁷²

14.86 In Townsville, the Inquiry heard from a youth shelter that targeted Indigenous young people but also accepted non-Indigenous youth. However, the witness from this shelter suggested that Indigenous young people are less likely to use the shelter than their non-Indigenous counterparts. She told the Inquiry that:

... when an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child does walk through the door, they usually look at the shelter as the last resort.⁷³

14.87 There are several factors that influence access to SAAP accommodation by homeless Indigenous young people. VACCA wrote that:

Anecdotal evidence suggests that:

- Indigenous young people may find accessing mainstream homelessness services as problematic because those services may not appear to meet their cultural needs and*
- Many may prefer to 'loungesurf' rather than access services and therefore may have temporary living arrangements with family, kin or friends.⁷⁴*

14.88 In remote areas in central Australia the Inquiry was told that language barriers limit access to the only youth refuge in Alice Springs:

*The only youth shelter in town accepts single young people aged 15 to 18 ... but for young people who don't speak English or English is their third or fourth language those sorts of places can be very intimidating, so they will usually end up in a town camp. The town camp is like the fallback place.*⁷⁵

14.89 Further, there is evidence that Indigenous young people prefer to be part of a group and may be reluctant to use accommodation that is targeted at individuals⁷⁶ as is the case with most youth SAAP accommodation services.

Rural services

14.90 For young people in country areas, accessing SAAP accommodation usually means travelling to a large regional town or capital city. UnitingCare Burnside highlighted the problems of accessing SAAP Accommodation in rural NSW. For example:

*... if a young person is stranded in Wellington in the late evening in need of short term housing they are unlikely to be able to find any assistance apart from sourcing their own bed for a night. The nearest services are in Dubbo and buses are not operational after business hours.*⁷⁷

14.91 The CEO of the Queensland Youth Housing Coalition told the Inquiry there were only two youth specific SAAP services west of the Great Dividing Range in Queensland. The majority of services were on the eastern seaboard meaning that a young person who is:

*... homeless in Charleville, Longreach, Winton, you name it, anywhere west of the mountains, [has] to come into the eastern seaboard or go to Mt Isa ...*⁷⁸

14.92 Requiring young people to move to regional centres or capital cities takes them away from any social support they may have left in the community, including school, TAFE or employment. North East Support and Action for Youth told the Inquiry that:

*... if we ever do find a bed in Shepparton or Wodonga or perhaps in Melbourne, that then takes that young person way away from their social support, their family and their own safe environment.*⁷⁹

Outer metropolitan

14.93 Similarly in outer metropolitan areas such as Campbelltown in South-Western Sydney SAAP places are few requiring young people to travel extensively. To quote UnitingCare Burnside:

*When there are limited refuge spots available, often they are far removed from the local area and require the young person to leave their other support systems and carry the expense of travelling to the city. This restricts opportunities for casework and engagement with local services.*⁸⁰

Findings and Recommendations

14.94 The extraordinary position of SAAP is that it is a program that has been subject to increasing long-term demand for its services, but it has been forced to operate in an environment where affordable public housing options for people have been locked in a steady state 'no real growth' pattern. Transition into the workforce for homeless people, even as the Australian economy has improved, has remained problematic. To deal with the complex multiple problems that a significant number of homeless youth have and to seriously support these young people into the workforce, will require new linkages between specialist services, SAAP and employment programs. It will also require a major reconfiguration of how high-need young people should be supported by incorporating specialist support and employment initiatives together with supported accommodation. A lot of the criticism that SAAP has fielded over the past decade, has been one-dimensional, and not based on convincing evidence. More is now known about the problem of homelessness than 20 years ago and in Australia, there has been a vigorous attempt to create a range of innovative responses on the ground, yet this has happened largely in a social policy environment where investment in social programs has been extremely constrained. The problem of homelessness is complex, affecting a diverse population and to address the problem in a way that sets the ambitious long-term goal of eliminating the problem in its current form, will require the exercise of complex thought, working simultaneously with multiple factors and on multiple policy settings. It will require significant new social investment and not simply reallocations of funds already being expended on homelessness.

14.95 In order to do this, a discourse about actual need and the comparative measure of that need within and across jurisdictions will have to be brought to the forefront of policy decision-making. To some extent, SAAP has been configured by the historical funding provided under the special purpose programs category and by a relatively unsophisticated approach to planning and resource distribution for much of the past 30 years. Only by comparing current levels of service provision to community need can the scale of the supported accommodation response be calculated, planned for and implemented. Chapter 24 discusses some of the issues for this bigger picture policy agenda.

Recommendation 14.1:

The NYC Inquiry recommends the needs of homeless young people be documented at the community level, where a community is taken to broadly correspond with Local Government Areas (or clusters of smaller LGAs) boundaries, using ABS homelessness data, SAAP client data, and consultations with local stakeholders to draw on local knowledge.

Recommendation 14.2

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Commonwealth and state and territory governments expand supported accommodation, using an agreed geographical template, to ensure that every community has sufficient resources to adequately respond to homelessness and the needs of young people who become homeless.

Recommendation 14.3:

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the next review or evaluation of SAAP be required as part

of its brief to examine the profile of community capacity for supported accommodation in all jurisdictions and report on the community level gaps between client need and program capacity.

14.96 Currently, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program is operating at capacity and the current level of turn-away rates indicates real expressed unmet demand. While there is no simple way to calculate how much to expand SAAP accommodation to reduce demand because an increased supply of supported accommodation will contribute to increased demand for services in circumstances where the size of the homeless population (about 100,000 men, women and children on a average night) is much greater than the number of individuals and families who can be accommodated on a night (approximately 12,000). The most recent SAAP evaluation canvassed several options for a more adequate funding for SAAP. If the program remained in its present form but received additional funding to ensure service viability, and a realistic indexation of costs, then this would require some 20 per cent of additional funds. Adding in growth as well as cost maintenance would yield an estimated increase of some 40 per cent. The NYC considers that the most rational way to address such issues is against a template of community need.

Recommendation 14.4

The NYC Inquiry recommends increased funding for SAAP to address the gaps between client need and serviced provision capacity.

Recommendation 14.5

The NYC Inquiry recommends that funding for supported accommodation services include adequate provision for indexation in order that direct service provision capacity is maintained.

14.97 The problems of human resources management is a major issue. All tiers of government need to consider how community services can be maintained when their own practices and pay allow them to recruit staff from community services agencies with more attractive salaries and working conditions. These matters need some redress and are similar to issues that plague the state care and protection systems.

Recommendation 14.6

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the funding and resources provided for supported accommodation be increased in line with salary levels equitable with other comparable human service positions, working conditions, occupational health and safety, staff turnover and the training and professional development of staff in the homelessness service system.

14.98 Additional capital funding is needed for some new crisis services for various target groups, including purpose built youth accommodation services but also additional funds to support young people in these facilities including for young parents and their children. In rural areas, there is often no crisis accommodation leading to about one-quarter of homeless people sleeping rough⁸¹. Youth refuges have been criticised as too costly or an inappropriate model for many young clients, however, an argument for a broader range of youth crisis responses is not an argument against a 24-7 youth refuge.

There is a case for 24-7 youth refuges particularly for young people 18 years and under. Other youth accommodation options and models also need to be available.

Recommendation 14.7:

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the importance of capital funding for properties be recognised and that capital funding for homelessness services be increased to ensure an adequate level of properties for crisis, medium- and long-term accommodation.

14.99 The SAAP system needs to do more work to meet the needs of complex clients. This should not be done in isolation but together with specialist services such as mental health and drug and alcohol services. Several jurisdictions have made progress in how high and complex needs might be assessed, but this has not been translated into a operational national approach. Given the prevalence of mental health and drug and alcohol issues amongst SAAP clients, more training for these specialist issues should be available to generalist workers.

Recommendation 14.8

The NYC Inquiry recommends that appropriate responses and strategies for high and complex needs clients be developed and resourced, that provide lower staff-client ratios, and funds to buy in specialist support, as well as funding for new joined up models that enable access to health, drug and alcohol, mental health, education, training and employment services.

Recommendation 14.9

The NYC Inquiry recommends that more training on mental health, drug and alcohol and suicide prevention be available to generalist workers in supported accommodation.

14.100 Support needs to be given by SAAP services to enable them more effectively and culturally appropriately with Indigenous young people. Also, funding for Indigenous specific SAAP services needs to be considered where this is appropriate and a practical possibility. Indigenous people including young people continue to be over-represented in SAAP services.

Recommendation 14.10

The NYC Inquiry recommends that working with at-risk and homeless Indigenous young people be adopted as a priority within a National Homelessness Action Plan.

ENDNOTES

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