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There is no agreed common national approach for ensuring that communities have sufficient capacity to respond to homelessness and related issues. Different programs and departments use different geographical boundaries and community agencies often complain that combined funding is positive but encumbered with onerous financial accountability requirements to the different departments that dispense funds. The idea of ‘communities of services’ implies active community building with some resources devoted to facilitating better coordination of local systems. Informal youth networks exist in places, and some of them have survived without funding for many years. The Victorian School Focused Youth Service and the Queensland Youth Support Coordinators program have invested resources to build cooperative networks on the ground. The NYC, reiterating the stance taken in previous reports on the issue of community coordination, suggests that the best means of building cross-sectoral communities of services be investigated and trialled so a broader national initiative can be developed in the future.

Chapter 21 | Community Coordination

21.1 One issue is whether services are in place and whether a community has sufficient youth services of various types to meet the needs of homeless young people. At the time of the Burdekin Report a major concern was the development of an adequate supported accommodation response however some attention was given to the challenge of coordination – or ensuring that services work together efficiently.

21.2 Burdekin's considered view on the basis of the evidence from youth services was that:

... youth services throughout Australia – having experienced at least five years of operation in an essentially uncoordinated environment – are now ready to accept coordination mechanisms which, while they may involve radical changes to individual services will result in a more efficient and rational distribution of services according to need. Perhaps more importantly, the urgency of the problems faced by our homeless children demand it.¹

21.3 In order to operationalise what 'coordination' could mean, Burdekin went on to specify some of the requirements of coordination.

Coordination mechanisms must be adequately funded for each region, and cooperation with the relevant mechanism must be a pre-requisite for funding approval. The tasks of each regional coordination mechanism should include:

- Raising community awareness of the existence and needs of homeless children and other disadvantaged youth and stimulating community initiative and involvement;*
- Linking of services;*
- Monitoring needs in the region;*

- *Establishing regional referral and data collection systems;*
- *Involving agencies in policy development;*
- *Facilitating regional consensus on service aims (consistent with national and state objectives) – including by promoting awareness and discussion of those objectives; and*
- *Supporting local coordination efforts.*²

Coordination at this time was constructed among SAAP services linked with some other specialist services. Victorian regional coordination and networking amongst SAAP services, which continues to the present day, impressed the HREOC Commissioners at the time, but there was little else in the way of exemplars or models. The issues discerned earlier are still extant.

21.4 The Inquiry was told that the navigating the sector is difficult. In Geelong (Victoria), a health sector worker admitted that she found locating the right service a real challenge when working outside her own field:

*It is often even confusing to me as to who to contact ... for kind of crisis accommodation and that type of thing. So integration in that regard I think is really important ...*³

21.5 Cheryl Axleby described what Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth and Family Services could achieve through relationships with other services. In this instance, the discussion concerns strategies for dealing with Indigenous adolescent clients with mental health issues:

*We've got a partnership with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. ... we involved the CAMS workers to come into our programs and talk about mental health issues, to talk about counselling for sexual abuse type issues as well.*⁴

*... We consult with our CAMS agency and get a commitment from them to work with this young person. We have a priority of service that was part of the agreement of getting our young people through the system. There are on average six to eight week waits, even for a person who has suicidal tendencies. We have been able to negotiate that with CAMS. We have been building these relationships and partnerships so we can get better services for our young people.*⁵

21.6 In Sydney, the Inquiry heard from the Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (Sydney West Area Health Services), which offers an inpatient detoxification service, about the positive referral relationships it had formed with refuges:

*I guess one of the things that we've set out to do is to make very strong connections with youth refuges. So we have - - a lot of our young people for instance, don't go to rehab, they go into medium care youth services and we work with those services and support the young person.*⁶

The service also maintains strong referral relationships with rehabilitation services for those young people who want to take that path. There are, however, young people who don't want to take that step.

21.7 Repeatedly, the Inquiry heard about the absence of robust, proactive coordination between services and across disciplines. In some cases this meant that, while services existed and workers did their jobs well, young people were not helped as effectively as they might be:

I guess my thoughts around that would be in some cases very much because services operate, again in silos, there's not necessarily a lot of interaction particularly across portfolio areas, so if you work in a SAAP service and part of the SAAP sector and if you work in Reconnect then you are more likely to see it as part of your youth sector and they're different. The politic of that in the ACT is that they operate in those sectors and don't necessarily do a lot of collaboration across the two, but that also varies from service to service. So I guess the short answer would be that in some cases, individual services are doing fantastic work and it's really having a significant impact. Across the broader sector, there's not enough collaboration and I guess working together to a common goal around supporting young people to not fall through the gaps.⁷

There was a widespread recommendation from the field that services need specific, targeted resources to coordinate cross-sector service provision.

21.8 The development of 'early intervention' in terms of Reconnect and other programs as well as SAAP and aspirations to achieve a 'whole of government' response as well as a 'continuum of services' raises the issue of coordination at several levels. One is how policy decisions and initiatives flowing from strategic policy decisions might be coordinated at the highest levels of the Federal Government between Commonwealth departments. Secondly, there is the issue of coordinating between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. While SAAP continued as a joint program in the past decade or so the idea of joint program initiatives between a Liberal Federal Government and state and territory Labor governments was discouraged and generally unwelcome. Thirdly, there is the problem of coordination on the ground in communities where young people and their families live. At this level, the various social programs have to work as well as possible for homeless young people.

21.9 The issue of coordination within the Federal Government and between the Commonwealth and the states and territories is dealt with in Chapter 24, where one proposal is a call for a long-term strategic plan on homelessness with the appropriate structures and processes, as well as political commitment to achieve objectives and targets that will effectively, to all intents and purposes, eliminate youth homelessness over 25 years. However 'youth homelessness' is the intersection of two policy areas – youth policy and homelessness policy. As well as attending to strategic actions on homelessness policy, there is also a need to reform the structures and policy processes for youth policy at Commonwealth and state levels.

21.10 Coordination at a community level presents a number of problems that have apparently been unresolvable since the Burdekin Report. Some services receive funding from different Commonwealth and state government departments for different components of their total service capacity to assist homeless young people. Each source of funding has different accountability requirements. Competitive tendering may be necessary when opening up new funding opportunities for a number of potential providers,

but when applied as a modus operandi for all government funding, it tends to create a culture whereby cooperation is discouraged and unrewarded.

21.11 In many areas of Australia, youth services get together in semi-formal inter-agency networks to share experience, discuss issues and build relationships that foster linkages between them. Agencies at the community level probably do this better than could be expected on the basis of the lack of coordination between sectors and departments higher up.

21.12 The House of Representatives Report into Aspects of Youth Homelessness published in 1995, the year before a change of government federally, took considerable interest in the possibilities of cross-sectoral community coordination.

Most regional areas have an inter-agency forum of some kind, coordinated by a variety of government or non-government agencies. There is little consistency across the country and there has been no attempt to determine 'best practice models'. The Committee gained the impression that successful regional coordination depended largely on the vision of particular individuals, combined with a sense of community cohesion amongst the welfare sector, as well as the development and support of senior administrators in key Commonwealth, State and non-government agencies.⁸

In 2007, it was relatively easy to come across a loose regional or community network but rare to find a network which has been sustainable for a long period of time or constituted itself as a formal collaboration. Alan Morris and the House of Representatives committee in 1995 were impressed with the Hunter Regional Strategic Plan for the Provision of Youth Services (1994-1997) but there is little evidence that the impetus provided by community-wide planning has developed into any kind of sustainable structure or development process.

21.13 One network that has done so is BATForce in Geelong (Victoria). A notable feature of this network is that it has existed for more than 20 years and, has 200-plus member organisations, including schools and community agencies. The network has received some government funding over the past 16 years mainly for project work that involve local research and cross-agency planning. BATForce describes itself as:

... the peak youth affairs body of the Barwon Region, strives to improve opportunities and choices for all young people, 10-25 years, by maintaining an informed impartial open network of youth, community sector agencies and schools, which advocates for the interests of young people and the network⁹.

Its objectives are:

- *To ensure that all youth, community sector agencies and schools and individuals within these organisations have access to, and are encouraged to participate in, an informed, impartial, open network.*
- *To ensure that all youth, community sector agencies and schools and individuals within these organisations act collaboratively in the development of policies, planning and the provision of services.*

- To raise awareness and advocate for the interests of young people and the service network
- To balance the competing demands of youth, community sector and schools, with a commitment to best use of resources, to produce the best possible outcomes for young people.¹⁰

21.14 Various members and individuals come together under BATForce to collaboratively plan and take action on behalf of young people in the Barwon sub-region. The work being done on a common assessment and referral process was relatively atypical when compared to the level of cooperation in other areas:

*This is a significant process at the moment because we're looking at a common assessment referral process just to try and stop the referral merry-go-round that happens with so many clients. As you can well imagine, we are often dealing with stressed clients, and the last thing they need to do is to be sent to three agencies and tell that story three times over. So if we can have at least the basic information available across all the agencies, then hopefully the clients don't add to their stress.*¹¹

21.15 Time for Youth in Geelong (Victoria) advised the Inquiry that while co-location had worked well in its region, it was not a complete answer to the challenge of community co-ordination:

*... the co-location of youth services around the youth precinct has been a real plus for young people because they can come in, with homelessness issues, as they do, but there are just tremendous links within this precinct for mental health services, the Clockwork health services, to the City of Greater Geelong, to support recreation services by youth workers, and indeed for the peak agency, BATForce, as well as diverse employment and training services. And then beyond that, each of those agencies has an extensive network of services. But, I would be telling fibs if I said we had this integration together within the Barwon Sector. There is a lot of networking and a lot of good relationships between the agencies and between agency workers, but in terms of integrated planning among the key agencies, particularly in the youth services area, it just doesn't happen.*¹²

21.16 Another example (circa 1994) was the Keeping in Touch with Schools (KITS) project led by Kathy Desmond and developed by the Homelessness Support Steering Committee which involved schools and community agencies¹³. The project was auspiced by the Eltham Community Health Centre and supported by the Shires of Eltham and Diamond Valley. Funding for the project came from the Victorian Department of Education and the Office for Youth Affairs. The project developed an exemplary strategic plan for how the community of agencies and schools would go about supporting homeless students in the area. The process was community development but the community was essentially a 'community of services'. Strong on community building, the project suffered initially from a lack of workers to work directly with at-risk students in schools. One of the learnings from this project was that community coordination also required a capacity to undertake practical support with young people and their families.

21.17 Regarded as a pioneering exemplar of both the Victorian School Focused Youth Service and as one of the notably successful pilot projects in the Prime Minister's Youth Homelessness Pilot, KITS contributed to the development of the Reconnect program model.

21.18 The Victorian School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) was established in 1998 following the suicide prevention taskforce, but the new program was always regarded as more generic than the issue, which served to release program funding. It is the only example of a government program specifically designed to facilitate coordination and collaboration between schools and agencies.

21.19 The aim of SFYS is to develop an integrated service response for young people who are at risk of developing behaviours that may make them vulnerable to self-harm, disengagement from school, family or community or who are displaying behaviours which require support and intervention. Some 41 worker-facilitators are deployed throughout Victoria with the aim to:

- *Facilitate and strengthen collaborative structures and mechanisms between schools and the relevant youth and community services that support young people including welfare, health and mental health agencies.*
- *Provide linkages for schools and agencies which have a client base of young people and which directly support young people.*
- *Improve linkages, cohesiveness and integration of service provision for young people displaying "at risk" behaviours who require support and intervention.*
- *Purchase services to meet gaps in the current service system as identified at the local level with the secondary benefit of creating systemic change and/or the establishment of collaborative work practices.*

The outcomes sought by following these objectives are:

- *A significant improvement in addressing the needs of "at risk" young people as a result of functioning collaborative structures and mechanisms between schools and relevant community agencies.*
- *A significant improvement in the current service system as a result of the identification of gaps and subsequent service development and/or purchase.*¹⁴

21.20 Brokerage funds are available for local projects by agencies and schools with a view to achieving measures of 'systemic change' and improved outcomes for at-risk young people. SFYS is an example of an innovative program operated for nearly 10 years as a joint program by the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Human Services. Its recent transfer from human services to education seems to this Inquiry to be problematic and place the long-term future of the program in some doubt.

21.21 School Focus Youth Service provides much of the practice experience on community coordination of youth services and youth support. The involvement of schools, and the emphasis on links and co-operation between schools and community agencies, is a major strength, which distinguishes this initiative from other youth services net-

works which tend to organise apart from the education system. The program has probably always been too stretched in terms of the number of schools and agencies a worker was expected to work with and would have needed some 70 workers to achieve realistic community-based coverage. Also, facilitation of initiatives and relationships but not so much new structures and sustainable community processes was what this program appears to have done well. The name seems an unfortunate choice, being somewhat misleading. Nonetheless, the SFYS program is an innovative example based on recognition that community building requires resources.

21.22 During the hearings, the development of Headspace was drawn to the NYC's attention. Headspace is funded by the Australian Government under the Promoting Better Mental Health – Youth Mental Health Initiative. The Headspace *raison d'être* was stated as follows:

The Communities of Youth Services strategy is focused on building the capacity of local communities to identify early, and provide effective responses to young people aged 12-25 with mental health and related substance use disorders. It will require the reform of local service systems, planning and local implementation of community awareness campaigns, and service provider education and training.

21.23 Annette Jarvis from the Riverina Division of General Practice described what a consortium of agencies in the Riverina area centred on Wagga Wagga had undertaken under the program umbrella of Headspace. The consortium received \$35,000 to develop a proposal for major funding. She described:

... one approach to deal with youth in terms of their mental health, co-morbidities, homelessness, education and other things that are dealt with up to the age of 24. So what we've been doing is actually working on this idea around a 'community of youth services', and that means that youth are able to enter the service through any organisation that they would normally feel happy to access. However, once they are in the system, they are then able to move around within that system and get the help that they need and they would be case managed by the most appropriate provider who is the lead case manager.¹⁵

Some of the features of this model were:

- A coordinator linking all the agencies together;
- A consortia responsible for governance;
- Monthly or bi-weekly case management meetings;
- Young people as health promotion officers;
- A distinctive logo and identity;
- A community of services website;
- Common assessment tool used by all agencies; and
- A youth card like a Medicare card for young people.

Other service providers in Wagga Wagga independently talked about the 'community of services' concept being developed under Headspace providing convincing evidence

of genuine collaboration.

21.24 It is too early to know if the cross-sectoral 'community of services' concept will achieve sustainable collaboration and coordination at a community level. Headspace is funded from mental health funds and has raised the issue about services working in close co-operation. However, sustainable cross-sectoral coordination has not been achieved with funds from one sector or department except on a single project basis. Other feedback on Headspace suggests that not all projects are as broadly oriented as the services in Wagga Wagga, preferring in some cases a narrower mental health or drug response orientation. Given that all sectors of activity benefit, this raises the issue of how cross-sectoral coordination funding might be packaged for communities with buy in from several departments. Building 'communities of services' is a long-range task that needs to be thought of as community infrastructure and receive development as well as maintenance funding.

21.25 The notion of 'communities of services' as suggested in this chapter, raises the long-range issue of building infrastructure. The 'communities of services' concept will involve supporting cooperative organisation amongst services and community organisations. The potential role of peak bodies in assisting that self-organisation and development should be recognised and supported as part of the funded process of community building. Departments have sometimes been ambivalent about peak bodies, particularly when disagreements have arisen, however, the history of Government to non-government relations has more often been cooperative. A mature approach would be to foster the self-organisation of service providers at the community level, but also at other levels within the states and territories and across the nation. The NYC's suggestion is that consideration be given to resourcing peaks in the homelessness field to play a more prominent role in the building of the proposed 'community of services' infrastructure. Another way would be for states and territories to fund positions in regions or even sub-regions for experienced practitioners to take on roles as 'SAAP Networkers' (to use a Victorian term) or a service and community development. It is in the interest of the departments, which often have small staff teams, to facilitate as much professional development, service provision development and cross-service cooperation as possible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

21.26 The problem of building 'communities of services' remains. Regional constructs have been used to provide a degree of support to services from departments. However, bureaucratic constructs are not communities that young people and their families identify with or navigate with a sense of familiarity. The closest boundary-to-real-life communities are Local Government Areas. Some LGAs, such as Brisbane, may seem too big but others are too small. However, LGAs mostly provide a more human level on which to coordinate and build actual sustainable local 'communities of services.' The refocusing on 'communities of services' will provide a way to pay closer attention to 'need' but it is also likely to yield efficiencies over time as services are invested with more responsibility for working together to respond to issues.

Recommendation 21.1

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Commonwealth Government, together with the state and territory governments, develop a 'community of services' model to support community level coordination and cross-sectoral collaboration across all issues affecting young people. This would need to involve all community sector stakeholders, including schools, in a sustainable network of youth services.

Recommendation 21.2

The NYC Inquiry recommends that the Commonwealth Government in cooperation with state and territory governments undertake a community youth coordination model research and development project. The project would:

- Survey comprehensively all initiatives on coordination of youth services;
- Undertake model development workshops with agencies and schools;
- Develop a theoretical model for a sustainable 'community of services';
- Consider how recurrent cross-sectoral department funding could be applied to a national network of LGA-based 'community of services' approach;
- Advise on the budgetary implications of developmental funds and the recurrent funding that would be required to support a viable 'community of services' network at the local level.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1989) Our homeless children, report of the national inquiry into homeless children, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
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- 5 Ibid.
- 6 G. Pringle, Youth Drug and Alcohol Service, Sydney West Area Health Services, Sydney Day 9, 17-04-2007.
- 7 J. Irwin, Anglicare Canberra and Goulburn, Canberra Day 11, 19-04-2007.
- 8 House of Representative Standing Committee on Community Affairs (1995) A report on aspects of youth homelessness, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, p. 371.
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- 11 M. Douglas, Barwon Youth, Geelong Day 1, 26-03-2007.
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- 13 Desmond, K. (1994) KITS Strategy Plan, Eltham, Victoria: Eltham Community Health Centre.
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- 15 Annette Jarvis, Riverina Division of General Practice, Wagga Wagga Day 10, 18-04-2007.