

Chapter 2: Responding to Youth Homelessness in the Covid-19 World

Physical Distancing — Social Connecting: Youth and Family Practice in the Covid-19 Crisis

Sandy Meessen, Team Leader, The Geelong Project, Barwon Child Youth and Family, Kate McGrath, Senior Early Intervention Specialist, The Albury Project, YES Unlimited, Dr Tammy Hand, University of South Australia, Associate Professor David MacKenzie, University of South Australia

Since earlier this year, the Covid-19 Pandemic has impacted on countries around the world, spreading rapidly in many places and producing an alarming death toll for particularly vulnerable groups in society. The national response to the Covid-19 crisis has involved shutting down restaurants and cafés, not allowing people to congregate at events such as conferences or sporting venues. Mid-March 2020, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), followed shortly after by New South Wales (NSW), declared states of emergency. At around this time, orders were issued for people to self-isolate for 14 days if they have the virus. Social distancing was promoted to limit the contagion. On 25 March 2020, major sections of the Australian economy were shut down and Australians everywhere urged to 'stay at home' unless obtaining food supplies, requiring medical services, exercising, or engaged in essential work or study.

These necessary measures not only have affected businesses all over Australia, but especially have impacted on the work done in the human services sector. This includes the work we do in communities implementing the 'Community of Services and Schools' (COSS) Model of early intervention.¹

The Covid-19 Crisis and the COSS Model

The Geelong Project is expanding to seven schools in Geelong. *The Albury Project* is one of two pilot projects in NSW and has just completed its second screening for risk in the Albury schools. The challenge for both community collectives is how to operate despite restrictions on face-to-face contact. This article is a report from a discussion amongst COSS Model

workers in Victoria and NSW as we all attempt to rise to the challenge.

A seminal innovation in COSS Model is population screening for risk using a series of validated indicators on the Australian Index of Adolescent Development (AIAD) survey instrument, combined with local knowledge from schools and a brief screening interview. The purpose of the population screening is to identify young people at-risk so that youth and family workers (the COSS early intervention workers) can intervene supportively to resolve issues before the onset of full-blown crises. As such, this is a new way that

data is being used in a real-world collective impact model, the COSS Model, to inform practice and address the social and educational outcomes for vulnerable young people, including the prevention and early intervention of youth homelessness.²

If data from the AIAD and local knowledge (where available) suggests that a young person is vulnerable or at-risk, then support and intervention can be delivered pro-actively and before full blown crises have developed. This methodology allows risk to be rigorously assessed and a pre-crisis response appropriately delivered.



Both *The Geelong Project*, led by Barwon Child Youth and Family (BCYF), and *The Albury Project*, led by YES Unlimited, had completed the administration of the AIAD Surveys to the total student populations in February–March of this year just as the Covid-19 Pandemic was beginning and Australian governments moved in response to the crisis. Across these two sites, there are 10 secondary schools and approximately 7,300 students. The students' answers to the AIAD Survey questions were analysed by Upstream Australia (the bridging organisation that provides the systemic backbone support to the COSS sites and advances the COSS implementation and development work³ to identify which young people may be at-risk of a range of factors.

Then the Covid-19 crisis in Australia began to ramp up. This included social distancing measures, schools were systematically limiting the non-school employed people that were able to enter school premises, and there were associated changes to face-to-face practices that YES Unlimited and BCYF would usually undertake when working with young

people. In hindsight we were lucky that the in-school survey-related tasks had already been completed by this stage — another of the Australian COSS sites was not so lucky, having to postpone the date for their AIAD survey implementation until a time when students are back on campus.

This left us in an unusual and uncomfortable situation. We now had lists of names of students from each of the ten schools — students who potentially needed support. The usual next step would be for all of the AIAD-identified at-risk students to engage in a brief screening interview with a member of the local COSS collective to talk with the young person about what is occurring for them within the school, home, and peer environments, to ascertain their level of risk, and to find out how we can support them and their family. These screening interviews are usually undertaken face-to-face on school grounds and the various support work interventions put in place post-screening interviews are also usually undertaken face-to-face in a variety of locations — hence the unusual and uncomfortable situation.

So, what were we to do?

A decision was taken to convene a teleconference. On Thursday 9 April 2020, Upstream Australia hosted a teleconference with workers from the three funded Australian COSS sites. Altogether 21 people joined that conversation. The main purpose of the teleconference was to discuss the changes in practices required due to Covid-19 especially with regards to population screening and how support work can be carried out to vulnerable and at-risk young people.

We don't claim to have all of the answers to these practice dilemmas, however, like so many others, we are working to respond as swiftly as possible but also appropriately. The question is how this can meaningfully be done. Below we share some of our practice changes and reflections for how we are working to best support vulnerable and at-risk young people in this time of crisis.

Screening Interviews

Changing our way of screening young people identified by the AIAD survey as at-risk, from face-to-face in the school environment to the virtual space in the home environment has been a necessary and immediate change we have needed to adopt. The way we are looking at facilitating screening in the virtual space is via phone calls, FaceTime, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger. The COSS workers are all experienced youth and family workers and thus can utilise their professional judgement about conducting these interviews in either small regular sessions or in one larger session pending on how the young person is engaging and feeling being asked personal questions. This virtual screening component is in collaboration with the relevant state Departments of Education and partnering schools.

When conducting virtual screening, COSS workers are mindful of the physical environment within which the young people are located. COSS workers ask certain questions to determine the young person's comfort and safety before getting into more in-depth conversations.



Early Intervention and Support Work

Across the sector, service delivery during Covid-19 appears to focus largely on 'essential' services such as Specialist Homelessness Services. However, early intervention prevents the need and demand for more 'essential' services in future, and so to us, it makes sense to continue to run early intervention services, although in a different way. We very quickly put our heads together and asked ourselves: 'what would it take to remain socially connected with and support young people to thrive in this time?'

To ensure that service delivery to support young people continues, meetings and consultations with key stakeholders and partner organisations are now being undertaken virtually, using applications such as Zoom or Skype Business.

Support work with young people and their families also continues in different ways. For instance, COSS workers are connecting with young people using electronic communications. However, we are acutely aware of the digital divide and thus acknowledge that some young people and families do not have ready access to computers, smart phones, and/or internet. To ameliorate this, where possible lead agencies are facilitating access to mobile phones and internet dongles to clients.

To keep young people feeling connected to the community and the support agencies, BCYF and YES Unlimited are developing a suite of online resources for young people to access, such as mindfulness activities, Covid-19 information, connection to activities, fitness apps, links to virtual museum tours etc. Such resources are also being sent to young people individually where appropriate. Our usual face-to-face drop-in programs with young people have also been moved to online. For example, YES Unlimited has created a 'Virtual Chill Out Space', operating from The Hive Facebook page every weekday afternoon. This online drop-in session, which has thus far been very popular, includes various activities such as online Kahoot Games, connecting people through House party applications and Zoom. To increase

the fun, there is a regular Kahoot every Wednesday, where the winner gets a large pizza of their choice delivered to them at a time of their choosing. This online drop-in centre has gained local media interest.⁴

The types of support work offered to families has changed. Given that so many people have lost their jobs, COSS workers are spending increasing time supporting parents and young people to navigate the Centrelink processes and advocating on client's behalf more frequently. COSS workers are also accessing supermarket vouchers and assisting with home delivery of food supplies to COSS young people and their families. The frequency of these types of support acts for COSS clients is unusual but useful and eminently justifiable under the circumstances.

While group work programs cannot be offered as an in-person experiences, group spaces are being offered using virtual platforms such as Zoom. There is also the option of running modules with young people individually if that is what they would prefer.

Online Schooling

Schools will be teaching online from Term 2. However, a number of COSS clients do not have access to appropriate IT equipment to aid their studies. As such, COSS lead agencies are in the process of liaising with the schools and funding bodies to assist with the provision of IT resources, so that young people can remain engaged in their education.

In certain cases, COSS workers are liaising with the partnering schools in identifying students that are at-risk and eligible to attend school physically in Term 2 as a protective factor.

Family and Domestic Violence

We are expecting, and already beginning to see, an increase in family and domestic violence at this time. This is worrying. The isolation and social distancing measure imposed by Covid-19 are not ideal for young people who experience family violence. COSS staff in one State have added an additional family violence questionnaire (from the MARAM framework) for workers to ask when safe to do so, if they suspect family violence is occurring. When it has been assessed that there is a risk

of family violence, COSS staff refer appropriately to Child Protection and/or other appropriate agencies. Whether the Care and Protection system responds to these notifications is variable and out of our control, however, what is constant is that the COSS work remains engaged with these young people and vulnerable families notwithstanding.

So, what does this mean for the future?

Despite the speed at which these changes have been implemented, we are also, nevertheless, acutely aware of the potential ethical ramifications for online and virtual practices. In response, policies have been written and staff training undertaken. Ongoing conversations and reflections on these practices continue.

We are constantly learning more and more from, and being inspired by, the young people with whom we work, especially at this time. We have asked ourselves the question, 'is this move to the virtual world more uncomfortable for us or the young people with whom we work with?' and wonder how our practices will change in the time after Covid-19 restrictions.

In human relations, the richness of face-to-face conversations and interactions cannot be replaced by e-mails or video chats, however, after the Covid-19 crisis has passed, we may find that telecommunications do help us operate more efficiently in various innovative ways. It will be interesting to see how this plays out.

Endnotes

1. For more details see MacKenzie D and Hand T 2019, 'Place Matters... Place-based 'collective impact': A New Service Delivery Paradigm', *Parity*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 4-5, and MacKenzie D 2018, *Interim Report: The Geelong Project 2016-2017*, Melbourne: Swinburne University and Barwon Child Youth and Family Services. <https://apo.org.au/node/133006>
2. MacKenzie D and Hand T 2019, 'Data Matters: Using data in a collective impact research and development project and the backbone role of Upstream Australia', *Parity*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 16-17.
3. Ibid.
4. O'Sullivan J 2020, 'The Hive Youth Resource Centre hosts virtual 'chill out' sessions to keep social connections during Covid-19 crisis', *Border Mail*, 1 April 2020. <https://www.bordermail.com.au/story/6706190/albany-youth-centre-a-hive-of-virtual-connection-during-coronavirus-lockdowns/>