



Youth Shoalhaven Position Paper-

Homelessness

January 2014

On census night 2011 the Shoalhaven LGA recorded 375 homeless people.

Young people aged 12 to 24 have the highest rate of homelessness of any group in NSW with 39% of the state's homeless population under the age of 25. Based on these figures it is estimated that on any given night in the Shoalhaven LGA there could be 150 young people aged 24 or under that are homeless.

Areas with large indigenous populations and lower socio economic profiles, such as the Shoalhaven, often have higher rates of homelessness.

Homeless young people are found in boarding houses, supported accommodation, living with friends and relatives (often as 'couch surfers'), living in improvised dwellings or 'sleeping rough'.

The 2008 National Youth Commission report '*Australia's Homeless Youth*' recommends that "the needs of homeless young people be documented at the community level... using ABS homelessness data...and consultations with local stakeholders to draw on local knowledge." With representatives from 24 youth services across the region **Youth Shoalhaven** is uniquely placed to document the needs of young people in our area. **Youth Shoalhaven** believes that homelessness is a significant problem in the region, and is calling for a coordinated response from business, all levels of government and the community sector to provide better outcomes for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Causes of homelessness

The causes of homelessness often include:

- Relationship issues and family conflict (including family and domestic violence).
- A lack of affordable housing (this also forces people into inadequate, inappropriate or overcrowded dwellings).
- Financial issues caused by housing stress (high cost of rents compared to income), or other economic burdens such as unemployment.
- Having nowhere to go once exited from care or custodial services.
- Health and wellbeing issues.

Cost of homelessness

Homelessness has many economic and social costs, both for homeless people and the wider community. Being homeless places people at great risk, as homeless people are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in society, and are burdened by much higher rates of poor health and wellbeing, and are more likely to be in contact with police and other services.

Recommendations

As noted above there are many causes of homelessness, and the response should include multiple strategies. **Youth Shoalhaven** recommends:

- **Well resourced Youth Centres staffed by Youth Workers trained to identify homelessness risk**, take steps to prevent homelessness, and support young people that are homeless.
- **Adequate accommodation for young people in need of crisis/ mid-term/ and longer term housing needs, with a strong focus on transitioning young people to stable, independent housing.** Crisis accommodation is essential to ensure young people are safe; however crisis accommodation alone is generally unable to provide an exit from homelessness. The focus on prevention of homelessness is legitimate, however there needs to be a range of accessible housing options for young people who do become homeless.
- **Accommodation places specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.** Indigenous young people have an increased risk of homelessness.
- **Accommodation services are tied to education, training, and employment**, to help young people develop skills required to break the cycle of homelessness.
- **Better access to Dual Diagnosis public Mental Health and Alcohol & other Drug services for young people.** Those who are young and/or homeless are more likely to have mental health and alcohol & drug issues simultaneously, yet young people often need to access a number of different services to address these issues separately. This creates barriers to access and reduces consumer compliance. Treating health issues in isolation also reduces the effectiveness of health interventions.
- **Young people have reasonable access to services, particularly young people in the southern Shoalhaven and in outlying areas.** Many young people in the Shoalhaven live away from major service hubs, and can find it difficult to access treatment. Every effort should be made to allow and encourage these young people to access services. Young people in the southern Shoalhaven urgently need better access to homelessness accommodation and health services. A lack of accessible services can make it more difficult for young people to exit from the cycle of homelessness and it is not always possible for young people in the south to access services based in the north.

This paper was prepared by the Youth Shoalhaven Health & Wellbeing sub group.

Sources;

- Policy Paper: Youth Homelessness, *Youth Action*, August 2012.
- Homelessness in New South Wales fact sheet, *Homelessness Australia*, 2013
- *Australian Bureau of Statistics Census*, 2011
- Australia's Homeless Youth, *National Youth Commission*, 2009
- The role of non-specialist youth services in addressing youth homelessness in NSW, *Youth Action*, 2012