

Stand up for Our Rights — a youth empowerment project for children and young people in out of home residential care in Ballarat.

Project overview

In 2021 Youthlaw and Ballarat Community Health, in partnership with the Central Highlands Care Services Alliance applied for and secured funding to commence an exciting innovative project to assist & empower young people in residential care in Ballarat.

The Out Of Home Care Network funds this project and specifically Equity Trustees, the Gandel Foundation, the Barr Family Foundation, Sidney Myer Fund and the Jack Brockhoff Foundation

The project is funded for 3 years and the service will commence from June 2022.

Research that informed our project.

- Young people in residential care overwhelmingly report lack of control, knowledge and trust. Three recent reports of the Commission for Children & Young People (CCYP), *As a good parent would* (2015), *In our own words* (2019) & *Out of Sight* (2021) have documented & highlighted this as a very substantial issue.
- Young people report that in residential care assistance from professionals & services are fragmented, often unreliable or non-existent. (CCYP reports as above).
- Young people often feel frustrated and angry within residential units. They recognise that they sometimes vent these feelings against staff and into damaging behaviours and actions, (CCYP reports as above).
- Victimization of young people residing in residential care including sexual exploitation (internal & external to the unit) is a significant and concerning issue identified by providers, government and young people with care experience. Currently residential units rely on staff and police to identify and address potential situations of exploitation and victimisation. Young people need independent advice and assistance to consider, disclose & address such situations, (CCYP reports as above)
- Young people in residential care are vulnerable to engaging in criminal activity or in relationships with people involved in crime. Young people need to be able to discuss these situations confidentially and receive information that will assist them to make decisions to address these situations, (CCYP reports as above)
- Police involvement in the lives of children in residential care is high. They need to have access to independent advice to ensure their rights are respected and to assist them to make disclosures and make decisions, (CCYP reports cited above & VLA Care not Custody Report 2018).
- Young people in residential care want to discuss their concerns, complaints and information about their rights in a safe and confidential environment, (CCYP report *In our own words* 2019)
- Young people in residential care often have multiple legal issues that are not being met. They are also not knowledgeable about the law and their rights (VLA-Youthlaw legal project 2020 & CCYP *In our own words* (2019) report
- Young people leaving care often leave with inadequate support and preparation. They are highly vulnerable to legal problems with tenancy, debt, partner violence & criminal charges. They experience high levels of homelessness, mental ill health, financial insecurity & engagement with the criminal justice system. CCYP reports above, CCYP report Keep Caring

(2020) & Sentencing Advisory Council, *'Crossover Kids'* reports (2019). The project will prepare care leavers, provide secondary consultations and link them to legal services.

What we will do

The project will test and evaluate an innovative approach to build the capacity of young people in residential care to protect & assert themselves & make informed decisions. It is a strength-based approach, building knowledge & resilience & other protective factors.

The project will be delivered in partnership with Ballarat Community Health, Central Highlands Care Services Alliance, Child and Family Services (CAFS), Catholicare, Berry St and Victoria Legal Aid. We will be assisted by a steering committee of local stakeholders.

The project will assist young people in all residential units in Ballarat. At the time of the funding application, there were 13 units with 33-bed capacity.

The project team will comprise a community lawyer (0.8FTE) and a Project officer (0.6FTE). They will be located at Ballarat Community Health at their Lucas site, together with another Youthlaw legal service.

The Project officer responsibilities will include:

- Project co-ordination
- Assist the lawyer with client intake and contacting clients & other activities , referral to external service systems (legal & non-legal)
- Development of strong referral pathways with key stakeholders.
- Ensuring data for the evaluation is being collected & entered
- Assist the project to develop resources, tools and communications to build client engagement with the service.

The lawyer responsibilities will include:

- Legal information, advice and some court representation & warm referrals as appropriate to Victoria Legal Aid & private practitioners.
- Providing legal education to the young people in the residential care houses/units and to staff in the units.
- Broader advocacy to support clients in daily decision-making within the unit, with the provider, and to Child Protection.
- To raise & contribute to problem solving in regard to systemic issues with the unit staff, the providers, Child Protection & other stakeholders

The underlying values & approach to be taken by the project will be:

- Strength based and empowerment with the aim of clients developing knowledge, confidence and skills to assert & protect their rights and know where to get help in the future.
- Trauma informed
- Culturally respectful , safe & respecting self-determination of our First peoples

- Respectful of diversity of cultural background, identity and intellectual and physical differences.
- To work closely and respectfully with the providers of residential care, unit staff, child protection and other staff in the Department of Family, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and key stakeholders & service providers, to achieve the objectives of the project.

How will we know that we made a difference?

We have engaged a highly experienced external evaluator Emma Pritchard to assist us with the evaluation of the project. We will be evaluating the project and the outcomes for the young people participating in the project.