



BoysTown



BoysTown's Response to the Discussion Paper on 'A National Quality Framework to Support Quality Services for People Experiencing Homelessness'

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Introduction

An examination has been undertaken of both the literature review prepared by Urbis on quality frameworks in homeless services and the Discussion Paper prepared by the Homelessness Working Group. BoysTown provides crisis and short term accommodation services to family groups in Western Sydney. In addition BoysTown delivers a domestic violence program that involves the provision of crisis accommodation to women and children leaving situations of domestic/family violence. Altogether over 120 families and 250 children are accommodated each year in these programs. Through Kids Helpline, BoysTown also delivers 1,480 counselling sessions to children and young people about homelessness issues. Our commentary on the previously mentioned documents is based on our work with families and young people experiencing homelessness. We specifically address both the framework required for the implementation of quality standards in services for those experiencing homelessness and the specific standards required to break the homelessness cycle that many families and young people currently experience. Our remarks are centred on the key principles required in an effective quality assurance system that will contribute to the breaking of the homelessness cycle. Implementation issues are not covered in this report. BoysTown looks forward to providing further feedback about implementation and other issues once the Information Paper is released later this year.

About BoysTown

BoysTown is a national organisation and registered charity which specialises in helping disadvantaged young people and families who are at risk of social exclusion. Established in 1961, BoysTown's mission *is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.* BoysTown believes that all young people in Australia should be able to lead hope-filled lives, and have the capacity to participate fully in the society in which they live.

BoysTown currently provides a range of services to young people and families seeking one-off and more intensive support including:

- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for five to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues;
- Accommodation responses to families experiencing homelessness and women and children seeking refuge from Domestic/Family Violence;
- Parenting Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children;
- Parentline, a telephone counselling service for parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory;
- Paid employment to more than 300 young people each year in supported enterprises as they transition to the mainstream workforce;
- Training and employment programs that skill approximately 6,000 young people each year, allowing them to re-engage with education and/or employment, and
- Response to the needs of the peoples of the remote Indigenous communities of the Tjurabalan in Western Australia.

Framework for a Quality Assurance System

In the review by Urbis of contemporary legislative and policy frameworks for quality assurance systems, several models were identified for consideration. BoysTown strongly advocates that the Commonwealth Government adopt the following framework for the introduction of Australia's quality assurance system:

1. *The introduction of a National Charter of Rights for Homeless People and Children enshrined in law.*

It is proposed that this Charter provides homeless people, families and children with the same rights as provided by the *2001 Housing (Scotland) Act* to Scottish citizens, in that people experiencing homelessness have the right to advice, information and temporary accommodation for a reasonable period as well as the right to review decisions that impact on their homeless state.

BoysTown believes that the provision of shelter to families and children is an inherent human right. This right is contained in both the international Charter of Human Rights and the Charter of the Rights of the Child. The Australian Government is a signatory to both of these international treaties and consequently should support a rights based approach in responding to homeless issues.

In spite of past Government policies and practice it is estimated that current services responding to those experiencing homelessness, funded through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)/National Partnership Agreement (NPA) can not meet demand for crisis and temporary shelter and that over half of the number of people referred to funded services for accommodation are turned away from these services each night.¹ BoysTown believes that this situation will not change unless Government, through legislation, recognises that this situation is not acceptable and that comprehensive remedial action must be undertaken.

The provision of a legislative base to any subsequently introduced quality assurance standards will enhance the prospect of industry compliance.

The introduction of National legislation will also ensure consistency of standards across States. This will assist the consistent provision of services and reduce compliance costs currently experienced by national providers of services to people experiencing homelessness.

2. *The introduction of formal National Accreditation and Registration for Service Providers.*

BoysTown believes that national legislation establishing the right of homeless people, families and children to shelter should be backed up by a national accreditation system. This system should include both funded and unfunded crisis and temporary accommodation services including boarding houses. We note the industry concerns

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2009. Demand for SAAP accommodation by homeless people 2007-08: summary. Bulletin no. 71. Cat no. AUS 114. Canberra: AIHW.

Viewed 14 April, 2010, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/aus/bulletin71/aus-114-10773.pdf>,

outlined in the Urbis report about this initiative and in particular the view that an accreditation system may act as a disincentive to current providers of homeless services causing some to leave the industry. This concern is outweighed by the high vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness, particularly children and young people and the need for the community to ensure that special protection is provided to them. As noted in the Urbis report the highest proportion of the homeless population is now the 12-18 years old group – 21% of the homeless population. In recent times the age profile of people experiencing homelessness is trending down in years². The principle of ensuring the special protection of vulnerable youth is a core commitment in the Charter of the Rights of the Child and consequently it is incumbent on the Commonwealth Government to introduce a National accreditation system to meet its responsibilities under this Charter.

3. Review and Complaints Mechanisms

Legislative definitions of the rights of homeless people need to be backed-up by the introduction of National review and complaints procedures. These procedures provide the opportunity for homeless people to enact these rights. These procedures need to have a legislative base to ensure compliance.

Quality Assurance Standards

BoysTown supports the key characteristics of quality service provision outlined in the Discussion Paper. However BoysTown also believes that additional characteristics need to be recognised in an effective quality assurance system for homeless services. Our thinking on this issue has been influenced by recent work undertaken by FEANTSA, which is a European federation of homeless services³. These additional characteristics are:

1. The Physical properties of buildings used for services responding to homelessness, particularly accommodation services

Buildings used for homeless services need to be fit for purpose. This requires the development of standards concerning the minimum requirements of buildings used for accommodation and other services and responses to homelessness.

2. Safety

People experiencing homelessness experience a range of risks to their personal safety on a daily basis. Furthermore staff in homeless services generally experience a high risk work environment. This is particularly acute in services supporting women and children escaping experiences of family/domestic violence. Risk management plans need to be developed and continually reviewed to ensure that both the physical environment of homeless services and their work activities are conducted in a manner that reduces risk to both clients and staff.

² Urbis, 2009: Quality frameworks for Homeless and Related Services – Literature Review and Environmental Scan, 7

³ FEANTSA, 2009: Quality in social services: The perspective of social services in working with homeless people

This issue given its importance to clients and staff needs to be highlighted in any quality assurance standard system.

3. Staffing Levels

Consistent with the comments on safety, organisations need to ensure that adequate staffing levels are in place to ensure both safety and service integrity.

4. User involvement in planning and evaluation

This quality service characteristic may already be covered in the statement outlined in the Discussion Paper on the client's participation in decision making. However the scope of this quality service characteristic is unclear in the Discussion paper and may be interpreted as only referring to that individual's personal circumstances. Clients of homeless services have a right to participate in the services planning and evaluation processes. BoysTown ensures that in all service and program evaluations, that our service users are actively involved in the development and implementation of the evaluation.

5. Case Management

BoysTown strongly believes that the provision of case management services to all individuals experiencing homelessness is an essential strategy in achieving the Government objective of reducing homelessness by breaking the cycle. All individuals including the children of families need to have an individual case plan. This needs to be supported by Commonwealth and State Governments by ensuring that all homeless individuals have the opportunity to assess specialist counselling, mental health, trauma, drug and alcohol and family support services.

BoysTown suggest that the Victorian Government's Homeless Assistance Service Standards and in particular those outlined in Section 3, are a solid foundation for any new national quality assurance standards to be developed in relation to case management. However it is strongly recommended that case management needs to be a service provided for all homeless individuals including the children of families from when the experience of homelessness commences.

6. Post Placement Support

It is BoysTown's experience that the provision of ongoing support to people exiting homeless services, particularly those providing crisis and temporary accommodation, is critical in diverting people from further periods of homelessness. Services need to be resourced to deliver a continuum of care to homeless people.

7. Advocacy

Unfortunately there appears to be social stigma placed on people who are experiencing homelessness. All services have the responsibility to engage with the community in a dialogue that provides accurate information concerning the reasons for homelessness and how the community can engage in preventative actions to reduce its incidence.

Conclusion

BoysTown wishes to thank the Homelessness Working Group for the opportunity to provide feedback on the development of quality assurance standards for services responding to homelessness. In brief due to the vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness and their special needs, BoysTown advocates for a quality assurance system that is grounded in National human rights legislation. Furthermore this paper identifies seven additional quality service characteristics that we suggest needs to be incorporated into a quality assurance system for homeless services.