

Support for people exiting institutional care: Summary of the Homelessness Action Plan evaluation findings

The Homelessness Action Plan (HAP) Evaluation Strategy captured evidence of the effectiveness of different service approaches used by HAP Projects. This evidence note is a summary of the evaluation findings for projects that provided services to people exiting institutions and Out of Home Care.

Key points

- Clients of HAP projects who were exiting institutional care (including correctional centres, juvenile detention or Out of Home Care (OOHC)) benefited from accessing accommodation, intensive tailored case management and support for up to 12 months (longer in some instances).
- Case management based on a staged response worked best because the intensity of support could be reduced as independent living skills increased (with the capacity to increase support again as necessary).
- The involvement of Aboriginal workers in mainstream services assisted engagement of Aboriginal clients.
- For people leaving custody generally, support should ideally commence three months prior to leaving the institution.
- For young Aboriginal people leaving care or custody, it is important to establish links with kinship networks.
- Young people leaving OOHC benefited from having a long-term leaving care plan that provided a supported, progressive transition to independence.
- A holistic approach to case planning was effective in assisting with housing stability as well as education and employment opportunities.
- Projects that sought to address the risks of both issues of homelessness and re-offending needed to ensure that service approaches incorporated strategies to address all key risk factors.

Description of service approaches

Four HAP projects were included in the extended evaluation. Two of the projects, based in Northern NSW, targeted young people – Young People Exiting Juvenile Justice Centres North Coast; and Young People Leaving Care and Support North Coast. The other two projects targeted adults – Targeted Housing and Support Services for Women Leaving Custody in Western Sydney; and Sustaining Tenancies for People Leaving Custody in Broken Hill.

All four projects sought to prevent homelessness, with the three leaving custody projects also seeking to reduce rates of re-offending. All projects provided intensive tailored case management and support for up to 12 months and had access to flexible brokerage funding.

The issues

The evidence base around what is effective in reducing rates of homelessness among vulnerable population groups (such as those leaving custody and OOHC and transitioning to independent living) is emerging and currently largely descriptive. However, research indicates there are recognisable links between having suitable, stable and supported housing arranged prior to release from custody or leaving care and facilitating successful resettlement or transition to independence.

There is some evidence that women are at higher risk of homelessness than men post-release, although all groups benefit from non-housing assistance such as financial counselling, employment services, family reunification and specialist health services. For women leaving custody who have children in care with other family members or who are in OOHC, case planning needs to identify the support networks required to enable restoration, where appropriate. Stable housing can play a crucial role in this process.

Aboriginal people are over represented in custodial populations and face a higher risk of return to custody than non-Aboriginal people. Effective responses to Aboriginal homelessness require culturally appropriate approaches and involvement of Aboriginal organisations in planning and implementation.

For young people leaving care the evidence suggests that housing is a critical component. Financial assistance, reliable social relationships and intensive client centred case management can facilitate a successful outcome.

Findings

Of the 175 clients assisted across the projects to June 2012, 86 were young people and 89 adults. Of the 55 women supported through the Western Sydney project, 36 percent were Aboriginal women, compared to 90 percent of the 34 people, primarily men, assisted through the Broken Hill project.

For the young people leaving Juvenile Justice settings, 75 percent of the 27 young people assisted by this project were male with 56 percent from an Aboriginal background. Of the 59 young people supported through the leaving care support service project, there was an even split between male/female and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal backgrounds.

The evaluation found that although each project differed in target groups and settings, the benefits identified across the four projects by key stakeholders and clients included:

- reduced homelessness through access to housing (primarily social housing with partnerships developed between auspice organisations and community housing providers)
- improved emotional well-being and social integration
- reduced substance abuse and improved physical and mental health
- increased living skills including literacy and numeracy, budgeting and household management
- family reunification for young people leaving care
- restoration of children who had been in OOHC for some women leaving custody
- increased confidence and capacity to access mainstream services.

Due to the short time frame of the projects it was not possible to assess whether the incidence of re-offending had reduced. However improvements in behaviours linked to re-offending, including anger management and reduced drug use, were noted by respondents and some adult clients completed parole orders for the first time ever.

Benefits reported by service providers included service integration and better understanding of the client group across the service system, stemming from case coordination processes and improved referral pathways.

Success factors

The success of the projects related to the multi-component design of the service approaches. While each element was found to be important it was the combination of elements that offered the best potential for positive client outcomes. The key success factors included:

- access to accommodation that could provide a stable foundation for clients to re-establish themselves
- case planning approaches with in-built flexibility which included activities that contributed to job readiness such as learning to drive
- an awareness of local employment opportunities. For example, the Broken Hill Project developed an innovative social enterprise called 'Choppa Weed' that provided men with work experience in gardening and maintenance because of the lack of other employment opportunities in the area
- for clients exiting custody, provision of support and commencement of intensive case management at least three months prior to release. This enabled caseworkers to build relationships with clients prior to release which allowed them to support clients through the often stressful period immediately after release. This approach relied on knowing clients' planned release dates
- for young people leaving care, strong caseworker engagement and support over 12 months which helped the young people consolidate skills and learn how to recover from setbacks
- working with Aboriginal staff helped Aboriginal clients engage better. Three of the projects had Aboriginal staff and the youth projects created Aboriginal trainee positions to increase the number of skilled Aboriginal workers in their region.

Challenges

The major challenges common to all projects were the lack of available and affordable housing, limited access to specific client services (such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation services) particularly in regional areas and shared difficulties recruiting and maintaining staff to support client needs.

The projects had small sample sizes and, without being able to analyse the outcomes over an extended period of time, it's not possible to determine whether the positive client outcomes would be sustained after the clients exit the projects. For the Corrective Services projects, the evaluation identified that issues of monitoring and data collection were a challenge.

Projects which aimed to reduce re-offending and homelessness noted the complex histories of the client group and the challenges of negotiating the service system post-custody. Intensive case management with capacity to facilitate multi-faceted support was identified as helpful in addressing this challenge.

For further information on the HAP Evaluation Strategy please visit www.housing.nsw.gov.au