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Bright Futures: Children's Specialist Support Service

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Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) received funding from the Department of Human Services to provide a Children's Specialist Support Service in the North and West Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. This was a part of a National initiative to address the needs of children in the homelessness sector. MOSS is one of five agencies across the state to provide this service (including an indigenous specific program provider).

Children's Specialist Support Service (Bright Futures) is based on a model developed by MOSS that originally grew out of the recognition of the gap in the sector for children accessing homelessness support services with their families. Children represent a significant proportion of people accessing homelessness support services. In 2006 34 per cent of people accessing homelessness support services were aged between eight and eighteen (*The Road Home* White Paper on Homelessness,

2008). This model reflects MOSS's commitment to children and young people who experience homelessness.

Since May 2010 Bright Futures has been providing enhanced case management and therapeutic group work to children and young people who are accessing homelessness support or family violence services with their families. In the 10 months of operation the program has had 46 referrals, with 23 of those moving through to enhanced case-management. The program has also run 6 therapeutic groups during the second half of 2010 and beginning of 2011, providing support for over 50 children.

Bright Futures aims to address the impact of homelessness and the associated trauma on children. It aims to provide intensive support focussed on the child's individual needs, to facilitate linkages to appropriate health, recreational and educational services, to support the child to build positive relationships with family and peers and to advocate on the rights of children to access to services within the community.

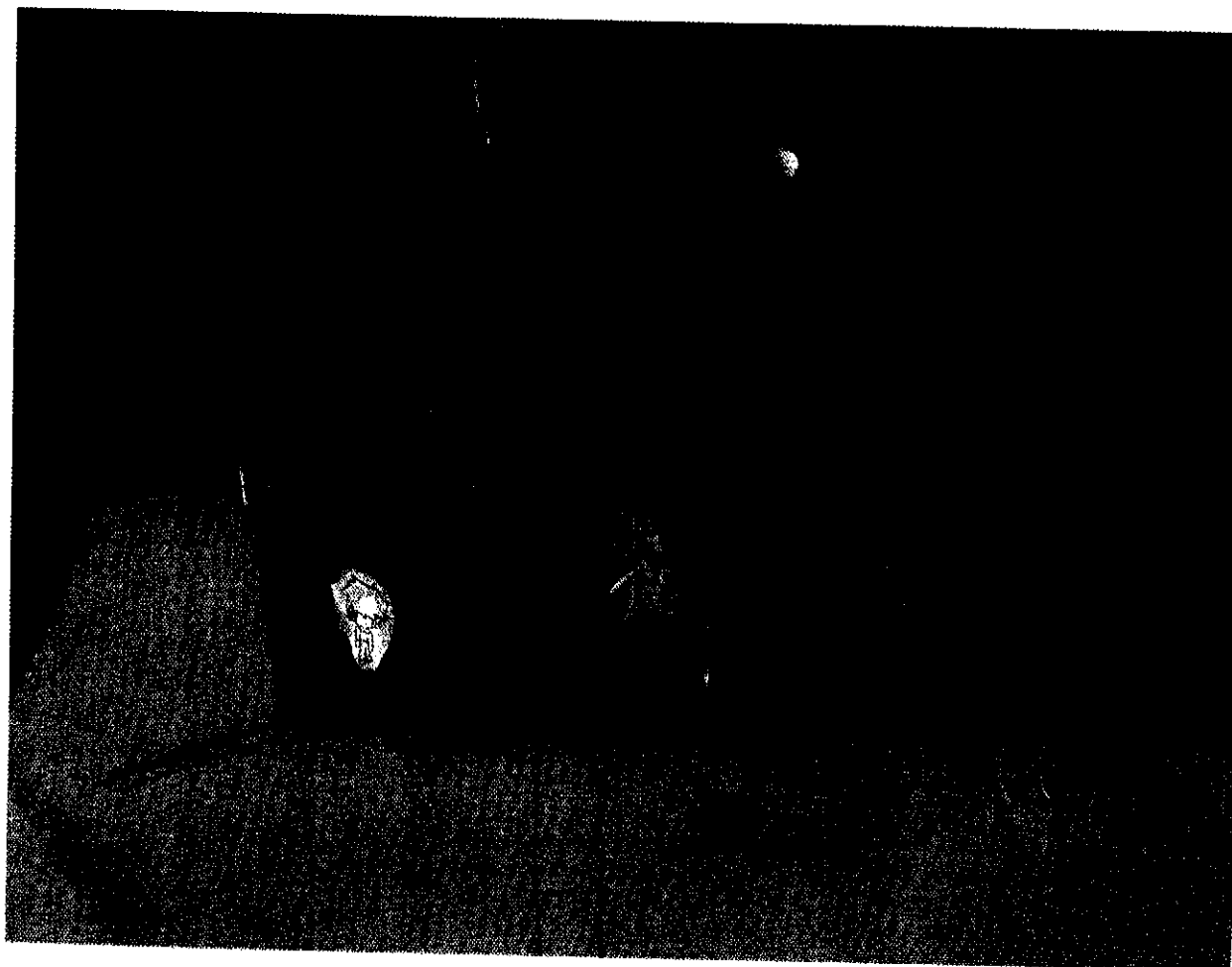
Enhanced Case Management

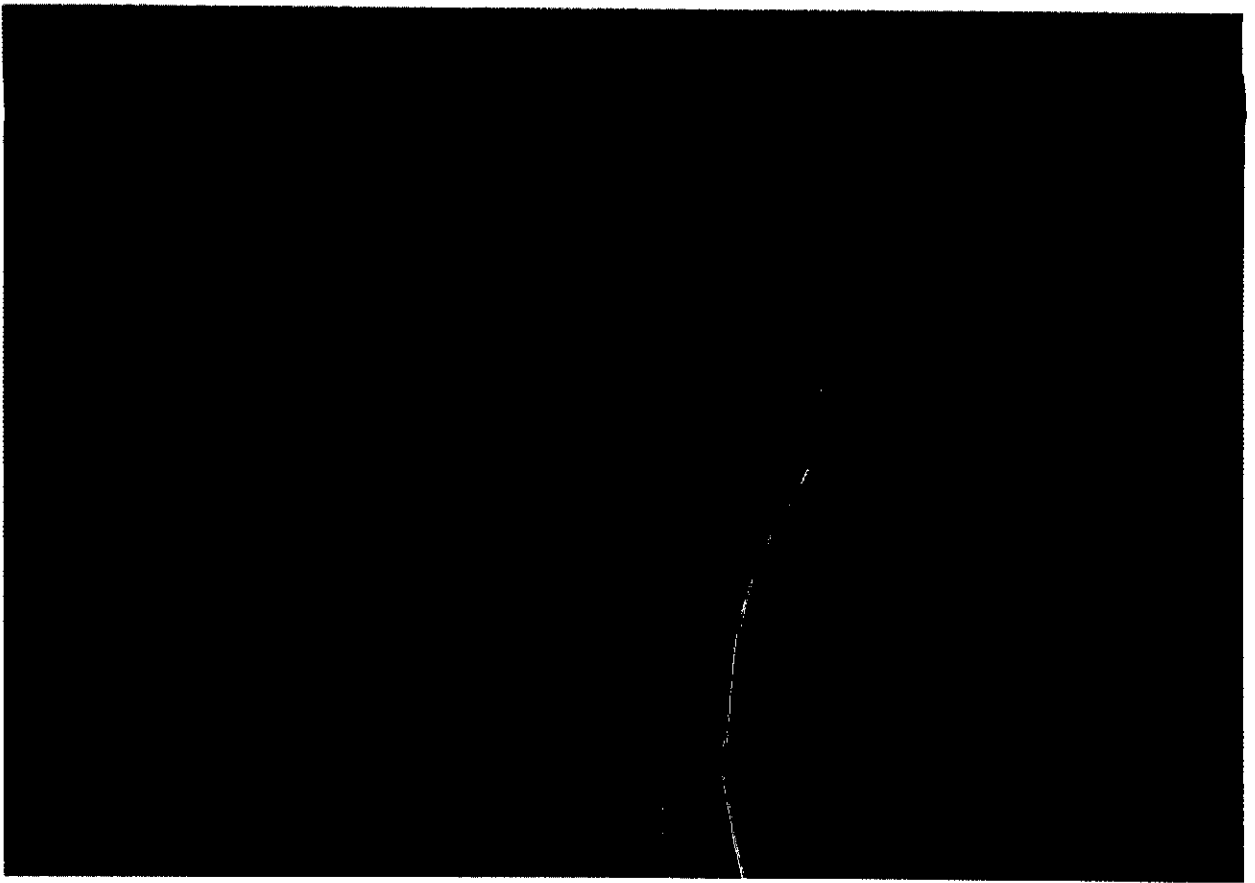
Case management provided by Bright Futures is referred to as enhanced as it provides intensive support to children accessing the service. Workers provide outreach support to children where ever it is necessary. They are also being flexible and see them as often as required. Support provided to children is child focussed and flexible to ensure that the needs that children and families place priority on are addressed first. A range of therapeutic and creative tools and techniques are used with children to engage and work with them.

Principles of Enhanced Case Management

Early Intervention

Bright Futures has a strong focus on early intervention to address the impact of trauma on children and to attempt to reduce further trauma. Children are supported at the time of crisis as well as beyond this to minimise the impact on their mental and physical health and to maximise their potential for the future.





Flexible response and support period

Support needs of children who are homeless are extremely varied. Therefore it is essential that the program is flexible. Support periods are generally three months, however given that many families are in crisis at the point of referral this may vary.

Flexibility in support periods ensures that workers are able to effectively engage with the child, that a thorough assessment is conducted and that appropriate and sustainable links are put in place. It means that each individual child's needs are addressed appropriately.

Flexibility in the model ensures that children are supported in a range of locations including their own home or transporting children to the Children's Room at MOSS. For children who whose families are transient or are in crisis Bright Futures utilises school spaces to facilitate a stable and calm environment. Flexible working hours are also important when working with children as there are times when visits have to be after 4.00pm.

Child focused

Bright Futures works with the child and their family to build a case plan. The work that Bright futures do is based primarily on the priorities that are expressed by the child. Workers endeavor to give children the space to express themselves and the impact that transience or homelessness has had, and give them a space away from their everyday lives.

Therapeutic focused intervention

Enhanced case management provides children with therapeutically focused support to help them to make sense of their life

experiences. The aim of this is to help children to be 'service ready' i.e. have experienced a professional support relationship for when they gain entry to other specialist services like specialist counseling. It helps children to learn about confidentiality and privacy as well as boundaries and relationship building. This also helps children to engage and trust other professionals that they may encounter down the track. In some cases this kind of support can reduce the length of time that children may need to engage with tertiary services.

Workers from the Bright Futures Team all have specific skills and qualifications that enable them to be able to undertake therapeutically focused work. They also engage in ongoing training to ensure that they provide a high level of support for children.

Skill Sharing

A major component of the Bright Futures Model is co-case management. This is where the referring agency continues to work with the family while the Bright Futures team works with the child. This allows skills and knowledge to be shared between agencies and workers, and build on workers capacity and confidence to work with children in the future.

Another major component is to effectively network with key agencies within the homelessness and family violence sectors as well as with Indigenous agencies. This is to ensure that workers are aware of emerging issues and themes, as well as giving them an opportunity to share with other agencies their experience of working with homeless children.

The Enhanced Case Management Model

The Bright Futures model consists of the three streams; however this article will only focus on stream One and Two:

Stream One: Assessment and Case Planning

Stream Two: Enhanced Case management

Stream Three: Group Work

Stream One: Supported Assessment and Case Planning

In this stream, Bright Futures offers limited supported case management response to children in collaboration with the referring agency. Bright Futures enhanced case managers will work in close partnership with the child, parent and referring agency to conduct a thorough assessment and develop a comprehensive case plan for individual child. The main aim of Stream One is to ensure that children's needs are being met by generalist support services. Another aim of Stream One is to build the referring agencies capacity and confidence in assessing and attending to children's needs. This support generally lasts one to two sessions.

Referral and Support Process

The referring agency will contact Bright Futures team and have a brief discussion about the child they wish to refer. Once the referring agency is able to identify the needs of the child, Bright Futures will request that the referring agency complete a referral form. Once the referral has been

received, Bright Futures will discuss this as a team and then request that the referring agency make a time for Bright Futures and referring agency to meet with the child and family to undertake an assessment (Assessments could take up to two home visits to complete depending on individual circumstances).

Bright Futures will then write up the assessment and develop a case plan in conjunction with the child, parent and referring worker. If the referred child is assessed as not having significant complex needs, a copy of the assessment and case plan is provided to the referring agency. The referring agency is able to contact Bright Futures for further support if required.

If however the child is assessed as having significant complex needs they will be offered enhanced case management support.

Stream Two: Enhanced Case Management Support

In this stream, Bright Futures provides enhanced case management which entails meeting children on a one on one basis. Support is offered to children with significant complex needs that are not able to be met by the referring agency.

Enhanced case management of children will occur in close consultation with the child, parent and referring agency. The aim of enhanced case management is to provide support and assist the child to contextualise and cope with their life experiences in their time of crisis, providing strong links to key and local government services. Bright Futures also acknowledges the vulnerability of children experiencing homelessness. As such, flexibility is an important aspect within the work and support is offered on an outreach basis, in homes, schools or other suitable and safe locations.

Eligibility and Period of Support

Bright Futures is able to support children aged between nought and eighteen years who are accompanying their families within a homelessness support or family violence funded service. The support period for enhanced case management is up to three months. However, Bright Futures can be flexible and acknowledges that for some children it may take more time to build rapport, especially if families are in crisis at the time.

Team Case Management

MOSS uses the team case management model throughout the agency. All team members of the Bright Futures team share responsibilities, provide input into the case plans and provide on-going support of children.

Benefits of Bright Futures

Some of the benefits of the Bright Futures model include flexibility of the program offering outreach supported case management service to children and families who are accessing the service.

Another benefit is that Bright Futures works

within a team case management model which allows each worker to contribute their various skills, experience and knowledge, which benefits clients as they have access to the range of skills and knowledge.

Bright Futures has a strong advocacy role, especially around children's educational needs. Bright Futures also aims to strengthen communication between, child, parent and the education system, helping to create and form links which are then able to be maintained by parents, children and schools.

Bright Futures has a big focus on capacity building within the sector. In the process of completing assessments and case plans in the Stream One component, workers from generalist support agencies are able to gain further knowledge about assessing and working with children.

A Case Study

Sally is an eleven-year-old Indigenous girl whose family has a history of being transient. Sally has been to seven schools so far, she is currently completing grade six. Due to the transience Sally had missed over two years of schooling and was behind her peers academically. Sally generally attended school between two to three times per week.

Sally's house was overcrowded and she had none of her own space. Due to the overcrowding in the home Sally lacked awareness of personal hygiene and this impacted on her social interactions, confidence and self-esteem.

Due to having so many services and workers involved with her family, Sally found it difficult to trust workers.

When the Bright Futures team first began working with Sally, she presented as slumped over, with her arms always crossed. She also gave very brief one word answers to the workers. She had no friends at school and spent lunchtimes alone. In class she would isolate herself from the other kids and she would refuse to engage in new activities as she was worried that she would not be able to complete them.

Taking into account that Sally had a been in contact with so many services and workers, the Bright Futures team decided that the best way to build a positive relationship with Sally was to visit her weekly at school. While workers focused sessions on building confidence and self-esteem, they gave Sally the opportunity to decide how long she would see the workers for and what activities she would do during the sessions. At the end of the sessions the workers would play a game with Sally to end the session on a fun note.

After a few sessions, Sally began to open up a little bit giving more than one word answers. She also smiled and laughed more. Sally began to stand up tall and no longer sat slumped over. Sally began to engage in spontaneous conversation with the workers, something that she had not done before.

Sally had also been involved in the Bright Futures therapeutic arts group on a few occasions. In the past she had sat on the outside of the group always reluctant to

engage in activities. Sally is currently participating in group again and this time around is much more engaged with the activities and the other children.

At school Sally joined a sports team which had an extremely positive impact on her social networks. Since joining the sports team Sally has made some friends and no longer sits alone during lunchtimes. Academically she is more willing to try new things, and although she is still behind her peers, she enjoys going to school and attends school every day.

On top of meeting with Sally weekly, Bright Futures also facilitated links to educational support, a community sports team and to community mentoring. Bright Futures was also in weekly contact with the school and other services involved ensuring that things were going smoothly for Sally.

Sally has progressed so much that she no longer needs to see workers weekly. She has asked to see workers fortnightly and only needs to see them for half the time that she wanted to see them previously.

Where to From Here?

While this program is a great first step in acknowledging the needs of children within the homelessness sector, there are still gaps for children and families in accessing services.

To access Bright Futures families need to be linked in with a homelessness support or family violence service. However Bright Futures has been contacted by a number of families who wished to self-refer and the team has not been able to take these children on as they were not yet linked with homelessness support or family violence services. In these cases Bright Futures has had to refer these families back to entry points, so referrals can be made to generalist homelessness support services that in turn refer to Bright Futures. This has meant that there has been a significant time between the crisis and when children's needs are actually met. Bright Futures has also referred these families to other relevant services outside of the homelessness support and family violence sector i.e. where there has been violence but the family owns the home.

As mentioned previously, the Bright Futures program covers the whole of the North West Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. The program can only offer enhanced case management to 18 children at any one time, which means that at times there can be a significant wait to access Stream Two support.

There are significant wait lists for children to access other supports in the community like counseling and mentoring as well as access to educational support. This means that Bright Futures has to hold clients for a longer period of time until they are able to access these services.

The Bright Futures program is an innovative and creative way of working children to ensure that their needs are met. It gives children a space to have their voices heard and a space away from the more difficult circumstances in their lives. ■