

P A R I T Y

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# Funding the Future

## The National Partnership Agreements

 national  
shelter



# Part 2: The NPAH in Practice

## Directly Addressing Children's Needs Through the NPAH: Bright Futures — Children's Specialist Support Service — A National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness Supported Program

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### Background

In 2009 Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) was successful in receiving funding, under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), to implement the Bright Futures — Children's Specialist Support Service. Bright Futures (BF) works in the North and West metropolitan region of Melbourne and is one of five child-focused homelessness support programs funded under the NPAH until 30 June 2013.

These five programs (based at MOSS, Bethany, Hanover, Junction Support Services and Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative) provide a direct response to addressing the needs of children within the homelessness sector in Victoria. They sit within the NPAH Families and Children's Initiatives, assisting children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with additional support to maintain contact with their school. When the NPAH funding runs out in June next year these five programs will be at risk of closure, cutting off the only child focused homelessness support response in Victoria.

### Aims of the Program

There is a growing acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of homelessness on children. In the Commonwealth Government White Paper *The Road Home*, the huge emotional cost to children whose families struggle with homelessness was reported and stated that children *must be addressed*

*by a specific focus on their needs'* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008:11).

Children living in homeless families are among the most vulnerable in our society and represent a substantial proportion of people using Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS). They have a diverse range of needs, unique to their own experiences of homelessness and stage of development. The early years of a child's life are critical to their emotional, physical and psychological development. Successful negotiation of these stages of development depends upon a safe, secure and supportive environment. Negative experiences in these early stages of development impact on a child's ability to reach their potential and make full use of opportunities available to them as adults.

Bright Futures is therefore providing a new service delivery initiative encompassing enhanced case management and therapeutic group work with specialist children's workers not previously evident in the Victorian Homelessness Service System. The program aims to engage directly with children affected by homelessness, in order to address the complexity of their experience during the time of crises and lessen the impact of homelessness in the long term. Bright Futures works with children to build their resilience and develop effective coping strategies, thereby preventing them from re-entering the homelessness service system as adults.

The program aims to effect a reduction in homelessness at three levels:

- To improve the support outcomes for children accessing the homelessness and family violence service system to decrease the

impact of trauma on both their immediate and long term emotional and physical wellbeing. As an early intervention and prevention response, Bright Futures aims to have a longer-term impact on breaking the intergenerational cycle of homelessness apparent in many families and reduce the likelihood that children will become dependent on the support system as adults.

- To enhance the capacity of individual workers and services to meet children's support needs within a systematic, family-oriented case management framework.
- To significantly contribute to the national discussion regarding the best configuration of available children's resources within the SHS and family violence sectors to achieve improved outcomes for children and ultimately relieve the burden on the support system in coming generations.

The Bright Futures model relies on collaborative partnerships by requiring co-case management and co-facilitation of groups between referring services and the Bright Futures program. This approach intends to improve service delivery to children and families and enhance communication (and an understanding of children's needs) between services and across systems. This has been an ongoing issue for the sector, as it is often anticipated that workers assess and respond to children's needs within families but are regularly under-resourced to do so with the multitude of complexities within (homeless) families.

Bright Futures has also been active in the homelessness sector by sharing tools and creative approaches to working with children. Program staff have facilitated trainings and numerous presentations at homelessness and family violence services, forums and the National Homelessness Conference.

## Addressing Educational Needs

The impact of homelessness and family violence on disadvantaged families greatly disrupts a child's ability to attend school on a regular basis and often leads to multiple changes in schools. Children who change schools regularly can fall through the gaps of the education system, with academic and learning delays often left undetected and undiagnosed until they are difficult to reverse. This can lead to children receiving an inconsistent and interrupted education, creating an adverse learning environment and limiting their potential for personal development.

The Bright Futures model considers the holistic needs of the child, taking into account the value and impact of education and school on their world. Bright Futures works across the homelessness and education sectors. By supporting families to maintain contact with the education system through liaising with schools, improving dialogue and understanding between family and teachers, ensuring children have the resources to attend such as books and uniforms, and visiting children on a regular basis at their school Bright Futures works to keep children in school and regularly attending. When families move areas due to locations of Transitional Housing Management (THM) and Office of Housing (OoH) properties, Bright Futures attempts to support children to manage another transition in their lives.

## Demonstrated Program Outcomes

Bright Futures and Bethany (who cover the Geelong and Warrambrook region) have partnered with the Borderlands Cooperative to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs. Phase One of the research has been completed and included focus groups and individual interviews with children, families, stakeholders and staff. Feedback informs us that the programs are having a positive impact on the children and families who have received support.<sup>1</sup>

## Secondary Consultation

Both programs provide secondary consultation to staff throughout the sector. This is reported to be purposeful, collegial, and supportive as well as strengthen program knowledge and build sector capacity. One stakeholder reported that by bringing concerns or cases to the team for consultation, 'it started getting us thinking about the broader picture within the home'.

## Assessment, Intake and Case Planning

During the initial intake phase with families, the programs have shown to be thorough, in approach to understanding the holistic needs of the child, while also building rapport with the parents. Parents noted the modelling behaviour of the staff and reflected their own learning from the process. One mother stated that her daughter 'can tell me how she feels... angry or disappointed and instead of telling her to go to her room, I listen to her... it's ok for her to express her feelings... I am glad that she's learnt how to express herself... she's better than I was at 14 years... I hope she enjoys her childhood more than I did'.

## Enhanced Case Management

When a child takes part in the enhanced case management stream of the program, workers visit them at home or school on a weekly to fortnightly basis. Children reported that they valued the 'special relationship' they had with their workers. They felt acknowledged, cared for and cared about. Some children talked about sharing their feelings with someone. For one child there was 'no wrong answer'. Several implied that support for their parent was given and that this was of great value to the child.

Parents have recounted the sincere relationships developed between workers and their children. They reflected that they felt 'the workers had time for us...' and engaged in a particularly respectful way of talking to all family members. They understood that the programs expected family members to actively participate in the process. Their children loved the contact and looked forward to it. They noted an improvement in parent and sibling relationships, and their own improved parenting skills. Parents appreciated that their children were given specific support in the school system (such as liaison with the school and brokerage) and linked into particular activities in the community. The programs brought an increase in play, which frequently then engaged the whole family. Children's self-confidence was also often noted to have improved.

Parents' relationship to the service system also shifted through their engagement with the programs. Some reported that they had an enhanced belief that the helping system can be supportive and safe, and therefore the positive experience with the program could be transferable to other programs. Some parents reflected that they had found a place in the 'system', being actively engaged and aware of their role in addressing their children's needs.

Feedback from external stakeholders supports parent and child reflections on the program. One stakeholder reported the positive changes she noted in a family she was working alongside Bright Futures with. 'Things have changed for these kids.... Certainly from the beginning, they were very

needy, with lots of acting out behaviour, especially from one of the boys in particular. Just being naughty — hitting his brother — refusing to do what his mum said... drinking from the baby's bottle.... And through the program, it felt like at the end, he'd changed totally... he was a lot happier — he wasn't doing the bottle stuff... he wasn't wetting himself... he had changed a lot — and mum is finding it a lot easier to deal with him'.

## Therapeutic Group Work

The Bright Futures therapeutic group work model is unique to the homelessness sector. The group program increases reach and up-skills the sector in engaging therapeutically and creatively with children affected by homelessness and family violence. Bright Futures' groups use an integrative approach to working with children including art and music therapy, games and activities, discussion and play. Many children benefit greatly from group work as groups can provide a safe space within which children can connect with others who have had similar experiences, feel empowered and gain mastery over experiences by working with them through creative processes, have fun and be recognised as unique individuals.

Children have reflected that the group helps to build confidence and self-esteem, a sense of personal wellbeing, care for each other, ways to express and regulate their emotions and the opportunity to have a positive social experience. As one participant has stated 'we can get to know each other better and move on'.

The group work program encourages capacity building and inter-agency collaboration within the sector. Homelessness and/or family violence services refer children they are currently working with into the program and participate in pre-group training, preparation and co-facilitation to build their skills and confidence in developing and facilitating groups with children.

Charles believed that for her...  
 [Bright Futures] was a place where everyone is in the same situation... we could talk about what was happening in our family... in our life... and maybe at the start it was a little bit embarrassing, but then I felt more comfortable to talk here... to talk about my stuff... it was a really comfortable place for me... all of our thoughts counted... and we all had a turn... and [could] all could speak freely'.

## Moving Forward

The Bright Futures program, along with Bethany, Harover, Junction and GEGAC, are directly addressing the needs of children in the homelessness sector and encouraging collaborative practices within which to think about and respond appropriately to children. Such an approach aids in the long term sustainable reduction in the number of



A Conversation Piece #1 — Claire Fitzgerald

people who are homeless. By applying a model which values early intervention and prevention, these programs are working to directly alleviate some of the stress and anxiety for children and families experiencing homelessness and are showing to have an overall positive impact in the now for the future. With workers directly addressing issues around schooling, social isolation, health needs, emotional wellbeing and family dynamics children are being given a greater chance of breaking the homelessness cycle and overcoming personal and systemic barriers to reach their full potential.

Locating these programs within the homelessness sector has shown to support the aim of the NPAH to have a better connected service system. Bright Futures is known and recognised in the North and West Metropolitan Region as a referral option for children within families experiencing homelessness. Sector workers also utilise the service for additional support

for their clients through secondary consultations and developing their own skills in working with children through attending the training programs and presentations facilitated by Bright Futures.

Systemically these programs are able to inform the sector as to the impact of homelessness on children and consider more effective ways of supporting our most vulnerable. They bear witness to the current experiences of children affected by homelessness and living within the service system. They therefore also provide a platform from which children can be heard and considered, something which has been shifting in the sector and has further potential.

When considering how the sector can move forward in addressing children's needs these programs are demonstrating an effective, replicable model. They are in need of ongoing funding, possibly being scaled up to increase reach. Without a commitment

to funding beyond 30 June 2013, families will need to be informed that their support periods are only guaranteed until June 2013. Workers and families are therefore left in a state of insecurity until the future of the programs can be confirmed — this results in another layer of anxiety for families already experiencing so much transience, stress and uncertainty. Without the continuation of these child-focused services the needs of children will fall back into the housing system, again marginalising children with inadequate support as clients in their own right.

Children in the sector will once again be silenced, only to be heard when they're old enough to have a voice. ■

**Footnote**

1. The evaluation interim report has been authored by Helen Goodham, Tracy Castello and Jacques Boulet at the Borderlands Cooperative.