

Office of the Guardian
for Children and Young People

**Are we teaching children and young
people in state care to be homeless?**

**Amanda Shaw
Senior Advocate**

June 2010



Government
of South Australia

Children and young people are brought into the care and protection system through no fault of their own and have experienced abuse and neglect. Collectively, it is our responsibility to ensure that each child is provided with care, stability, security and safety to ensure their physical, cultural, emotional and social development.

The challenges facing care and protection agencies are well documented. There are increasing numbers of child abuse and neglect notifications, increasing numbers of children in state care and little choice in out of home care options.

It is a sad reality that some children and young people in state care are homeless; some use (what was called the) Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services and some do not have safe, secure and permanent placements. Actual numbers are difficult to report but the monitoring of the circumstances for children and young people in care by the South Australian Guardian for Children and Young People provides anecdotal evidence of homelessness.

Early in my career I met a number of young people under the guardianship of the Minister who were temporarily accommodated in SAAP services. Additionally, CREATE's *Report Card 2009*¹ shows that more than a third of young people leaving care at the age of 18 years are homeless at some point within a year.

When talking about placement instability, professionals talk about a child having frequent moves, changes of schools and few significant connections with family, friends and community, such as teachers, sporting clubs and local doctors. The child is at risk of becoming a young adult without a sense of belonging, identity and self worth; a young person who has experienced trauma twice over, before being in care and while in care.

When we fail to provide a safe and permanent placement, and expose children and young people to insecurity we are teaching them to always be prepared to move, to not collect personal possessions, to not build friendships, to not identify trusting adult relationships, and to not 'put down roots' anywhere. For some children and young people the cycle of placement change is abhorrent and there is little focus or learning on how to mend damaged relationships.

Recently I met a seven year old who has already been in seven placements since coming into care. *Anna* (not her real name) has

¹ McDowall, J.J. (2009) *CREATE Report Card 2009 – Transitioning from Care: Tracking Progress*. Sydney: CREATE Foundation.

lived in more houses than I have in my thirty-odd years. Listening to her story I thought about the number of adults that have come into, and gone from her life. And I wondered what impact this would have on her ability to form trusting relationships. In Anna's case I heard that she too easily attaches to adults with whom she comes in contact. In comparison, I have also met *Alex* (not his real name) who has also had an extraordinarily high number of placements for his years in care and he has developed an anxiety about being introduced to new people and new environments.

I think about Anna's and Alex's futures and am troubled by thoughts that if we can only provide unstable, inappropriate or temporary placements, how much harder it will be for them to avoid homelessness in their adult years. The relationship between being in care and homelessness is complex. I am not suggesting that being in care directly leads to homelessness. However, the inadequacies of the care and protection system often amplifies the familial and social issues that previously affected children and young people and are associated with them being in care, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unmanaged mental health issues and homelessness. Preparing children and young people for life beyond care requires more than finding them somewhere to live.

But let's start with finding somewhere to live. The media frequently reports on the competitive and expensive housing market facing us all. We all know about the low vacancy rate in rental properties and limited stock of affordable housing. For most of us we'll be able to navigate these difficulties, sometimes with help from family and friends but also buoyed by our own access to resources such as employment, education and financial management. But it's unlikely that we'll be able to say the same for Anna and others with similar experiences, if we continue to fail her.

We also hear a lot about Generation Y young adults remaining in the parental home until cementing their independence in their mid- to late-20s. However, young people leaving care do so at age 18 years. There are some post care support services available but that is not the same as having the opportunity to retreat to the family home. Through monitoring the circumstances of children and young people we know that successful transitions occur; the young person has a stable foster family and can remain in the home beyond 18 years or the young person has been engaged in their transition to independent living and has established their own home. But these are young people with stability, connections, identity and a sense of belonging.

What this may mean for Anna bothers me. We need to make sure that Anna does not become another statistic; one of the 33 per cent of young people that experienced homelessness within a year, as reported by the CREATE Foundation. During her time in care Anna

needs to be supported to develop significant connections with individuals and groups. She must feel a sense of belonging and have a network of people that will see when Anna faces struggles and rely on them to rally around her.

In South Australia, the statutory child protection agency has two policies to achieve the successful transition to independence². In addition, formalised agreements between various government departments have been implemented to promote support and specialist services to children and young people in care³. For Anna this means that from age 15 years she should be engaged by her case worker to commence planning for transition. This will include developing a formal plan, accessing tools and resources to help build her skills for independence and if necessary, Anna can receive some level of support until she is 25 years old. The post-care support and services will aim to strengthen her connections, access services for housing, health and education, develop life and parenting skills, build financial management ability and cement her identity.

However, what we know is that not all young people are engaged in developing leaving care plans. Furthermore, we also know that not all children and young people have a case worker allocated. If Anna doesn't engage to develop a learning care plan and continues to endure placement instability, who will work with her to do this. She will likely age out of care with few significant personal and community connections, lack the ability to secure and maintain stable housing, have limited educational attainment and few employment prospects. This is not the life I want for Anna. I met her and I know she has dreams for the future.

When a child is entrusted into the care of the state we must ensure the development of the child's identity, continuing relationships and develop strategies that promote permanent placements. These actions will encourage a sense of belonging and a safety net around the young person as they move to establish themselves independently; safeguarding them from homelessness.

This article first appeared in 'Out of Sight: Young People, the Hidden Homeless', *Parity*, 23 (3), 34-35

² In 2007, Families SA introduced the Transitioning from Care (Metro) Policy and Post Care Policy.

³ Government of South Australia (2005). *Rapid Response: Whole of Government Services – a Framework and Action Plan*. Department for Families and Communities.