

## 16.0 Conclusion

*A key strength described by Youth Service Providers was the ability of staff to develop positive relationships with young people that are built on trust and open communication.*

*The majority of Youth Service Providers acknowledged that their approach was client-centred and strengths-based.*

This report forms part of YACWA's Homeless Youth Suicide Prevention Project. This project is a Community Action Plan that aims to develop specific intervention strategies for vulnerable groups, increase awareness of risk factors, encourage collaboration and enhance access to support services.<sup>29</sup> This report was undertaken to develop best practice principles and bring together existing resources to support Youth Workers responding to young homeless people at risk of suicide. The findings of this report were constrained by the lack of reported research into suicide prevention specifically within young homeless populations, both internationally and within the Australian context. The majority of available evidence identified is from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. There are limitations resulting from a lack of generalisability of suicide prevention strategies for this demographic as identified in the literature. Homeless young people are a diverse group, and what has proven effective in one population group may not be effective in another. Currently, there are no reliable figures on the incidence of suicide amongst homeless young people in Australia. This is a key barrier to determining the true extent of the problem. Consequently, this report has aligned the risk factors for suicide to what is known about young homeless people, making apparent the reality that young homeless people are far more likely to experience many of the risk factors for suicide than other young people, making them a vulnerable group.

A suicide attempt may be a sign of the early stages of a mental illness, and promptly connecting the person to appropriate support services may reduce the development of a mental illness.<sup>119</sup> A number of factors such as waitlists, admission criteria and young people refusing support has meant that it is not always possible to promptly connect a young suicidal person to mental health services. Therefore, prevention strategies need to include a focus on improving access to mental health services. Having mental health professionals working within or alongside services that provide support to young homeless people may be one strategy to overcome access issues. Another strategy is encouraging greater collaboration between services, especially those working in the same geographical area. Services that work in partnership are able to provide more sustainable outcomes for young people through addressing multiple needs in a coordinated way, creating stronger referral pathways and use limited resources more efficiently.

Youth Workers are often the first point of contact for a suicidal person and play a fundamental role in connecting them to an appropriate mental health services. Given that it is not always possible to connect young people to mental health services, the initial point of contact between a young person and a Youth Worker may be the best, if not the only, opportunity to provide support. It is recommended that Youth Workers are able to utilise brief interventions, such as the safety plan described, as a strategy to help keep a young person safe until they can be connected to appropriate support.

A key strength described by Youth Service Providers was the ability of staff to develop positive relationships with young people that are built on trust and open communication. The majority of Youth Service Providers acknowledged that their approach was client-centred and strengths-based. These factors reflect best practice when working with young homeless people and should also be reflected when responding to suicide. When working long-term with a young suicidal person it is useful to be able to understand and address suicide from a recovery perspective as it provides insight into the young person's journey and how to encourage hope as well as individual responsibility.

Given the crucial role that Youth Workers play in identifying young people at risk of suicide, they need to have access to suicide specific training, such as ASIST training, to provide them with the skills and confidence to effectively respond to a young person at risk of suicide. Youth Workers can benefit from suicide intervention training that is more specific to the needs of young homeless people, given their complex needs. It is recommended that Youth Service Providers support Youth Workers to undertake ongoing professional development, and where available, suicide prevention or mental health training that is specific to the needs of young homeless people.

Working with a young person who is suicidal is likely to be challenging and Youth Workers need to be properly supported in order to respond effectively. The support offered to Youth Workers should include access to supervision and de-briefing, personal counselling and opportunities for self-care. It is recommended that where possible Youth Workers are provided with support through their place of work. It is acknowledged that the youth work sector operates with limited resources; therefore, it is inevitable that not all of these options will be available to all Youth Workers. Where supports are not available, a Youth Worker may wish to utilise the online tools provided throughout this report that promote self-care strategies, personal reflection and peer de-briefing.

Looking to the future, there are many changes taking place in both the homelessness sector and the mental health sector. Thoughts are shifting toward greater collaboration between services and working from a recovery-focussed perspective. How these changes impact the community in the long term is yet to be seen. YACWA and their member organisations are an integral part of a broader network that provides valuable support to vulnerable young Western Australians. Recognition for this work via adequate resourcing is integral to creating better outcomes. Equally important is a commitment to consistent reflection on youth work practice through evidence-based, theory-led and practice-driven approaches with the aim of the young person's recovery.

Such a commitment will continue to ensure that young people who are homeless and the sector that supports them are resilient in finding 'their happier place' within our State.