

MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

29th July 2020

Innovation through crisis: supporting the increasing needs of young people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19

This Homelessness Week (2-7th August 2020), with the theme of ‘Everybody needs a Home’ Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) reflects on rapid service innovations achieved through COVID-19 and prepares for record numbers of calls for support as pressures on vulnerable young people increase.

While COVID-19 shutdowns ground the country to a halt, calls for support to BYS doubled. Given the importance of maintaining connection with young people experiencing homelessness, the service adapted swiftly by developing new flexible access pathways including electronic, phone based and virtual support.

While face to face services were largely suspended, the Fortitude Valley Hub remained open and young people continued to be supported in BYS owned shelters, transitional properties, and community housing. Virtual support that might have taken a significant amount of time to set up, was live within days.

Staff turned to web-based platforms to continue group programs and delivered wellbeing and food packs directly to young people and young families isolated at home. Mobile phones and data packs provided a lifeline to young people unable to afford devices or shut out of free public Wi-Fi zones during the lockdown.

BYS saw an increase in access to new virtual counselling services, and a successful trialling of tele-health medical consultations presented excellent insights into how to break down potential barriers to care into the future.

“At the peak of the pandemic, we saw not only an increase in demand but also the severity of the situations experienced by young people accessing our services.” BYS CEO Annemaree Callander said.

The pandemic presented challenges as well as great opportunities for innovation and growth and young people have responded well to the leap to virtual connection.” She said.

Young people appreciated the phone/online support they received during this time. “I still got to see one of my workers socially distancing in the community which was vital for my mental health as I was isolated from most supports at the time.” A young person said (BYS Annual Survey 2019/2020).

On any given night, 4,454 young Queenslanders are homeless (2016 ABS Census). They are couch-surfing, sleeping rough or moving between emergency shelters and hostels. At a time when home was a refuge for so many, those with no safe place to sleep experienced new challenges and even greater risks to their safety and mental health.

Young people are set to be disproportionately affected by the economic downturn. As the situation continues to unfold, BYS will continue to adapt to the needs of the most vulnerable in our community - ensuring that young people do not slip through the cracks when they need support more than ever.

Every year 1500 young people come to BYS in crisis. Half are homeless and most are also experiencing a range of other complex issues and barriers such as:

- *70% have experienced family violence*
- *55% have a diagnosed mental health issue*
- *20% have no source of income*
- *51% are disengaged from education or unemployed*
- *32% have current legal issues*

Since 1977, Brisbane Youth Service has been working to create new futures for vulnerable and at-risk young people (aged 12-24 years), providing free, confidential services including: crisis and transitional housing; emergency relief; medical clinic and mental health services; street outreach; specialist young women's services; and parenting and family assistance.

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For further information, all media inquiries, high-res imagery, and filming opportunities please contact:

Emily Nunes

Marketing and Communications Coordinator

Brisbane Youth Service

P: 0481 558 783

E: enunes@brisyouth.org