Sustaining Young Tenancies: An Innovative Program to Prevent Homelessness

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How can we better sustain the tenancies of young people living in social housing?
This was the question posed by Brisbane Youth Service (BYS), and social housing providers from the *Under 1 Roof* consortium in 2015. Housing providers were clear that there was a gap in the service system regarding support for young tenants in social housing. They believed young people's tenancies were at greater risk of failure than other cohorts overall, putting young people at increased risk of homelessness, and suggested that the perceived likelihood of tenancy failure negatively affected allocation of available properties to young people.

BYS established a working group consisting of Bric Housing, Brisbane Housing Company, and The Department of Housing and Public Works (HPW), as well as The Department of Communities and the Queensland University of Technology. This group met regularly over a period of four months, providing advice and feedback regarding available practice evidence and frameworks to inform service model design. In December 2016 BYS submitted a proposal to HPW focused on improving outcomes for young tenants. Tenancy sustainment and Housing First principles were central to the proposal.

In August 2016, the pilot Sustaining Young Tenancies (SYT) project was funded by HPW. The first tenant was referred and supported in September 2016. Program design and development continued alongside tenancy support, in an environment of practice reflection and learning.

How is SYT different from other services?

SYT offers housing specific support to young people once they have achieved a social housing tenancy. This sets SYT apart from most other services, which focus on getting young people into housing, but offer little housing related support thereafter.

Collaborative, transparent and non-adversarial partnerships between SYT and housing providers lie at the heart of the model. Housing providers informed the service model design by identifying what works well or otherwise when working with support agencies. They identified frustration with what they experienced as previous adversarial relationships with support agencies, as well as poor communication, and support periods being closed prematurely.

The relationship triangle between young people, housing providers and SYT is the shared space that is critical to continued positive tenancy outcomes. From housing providers' perspective, a lack of engagement from young people and limited life skills often contribute to tenancy failure. SYT support facilitates young people's engagement with housing providers, educates them about housing processes (such as inspections and reviews), teaches them about tenancy rights and responsibilities as well as providing practical support in other life domains. The goal is that ultimately young people will be able to navigate on their own behalf as regards their housing and other systems.

What are the core elements of the SYT model?

Integration
The SYT model invests heavily in the partnership between support staff, young tenants and housing providers. A collaborative framework needs to be deliberately actioned day to day to reinforce and strengthen project integration.

Referral, service delivery tools and shared housing and support protocols help to enable a wrap-around approach and keep each party connected to the objective of sustaining tenancies. The scope and complexity of the work requires consistent and transparent communication strategies to identify issues and progress toward solutions.

Strategies that support regular and purposeful communication with the relevant housing provider have been key to the program's success. A shared housing and support plan is developed and reviewed via regular engagement, with roles for young people, support providers and the landlord, as needed.

Early Intervention
Early intervention prior to housing crisis offers the best opportunity for sustained tenancy outcomes. SYT actively encourages housing providers to refer young people from sign up, regardless of presenting indicators. Initially, referrals were few and at the crisis end of the spectrum. It took some time to establish trust with referring agencies and to promote the activation of early intervention referrals at sign up or before behaviour agreements, notices to remedy or to leave.

Housing providers can find it challenging to identify potential tenancy issues prior to the tenancy being at risk. Tenancy management is often structured around responding to breaches of a tenancy agreement so that the landlord will simply not be aware of potential issues until a young person is experiencing housing crises. Referral of young people who are already at immediate risk of eviction can limit available interventions to support tenancies to end well and divert exits to chronic homelessness.

Mobile Support

SYT provides assertive, outreach based support to tenants. Case management is focused on facilitating young tenants' experiential learning. It occurs alongside young people in their homes and as they negotiate the systems most important to their success. Mobile support allows staff to work with young people as they transition between tenancies as well as to participate in education and training, and formal (for example, specialist mental health) and informal (for example, sporting clubs) support networks.

Brokerage

Brokerage is critical for this target group. Young people often begin tenancies without capacity to manage the financial costs of their tenancy, including furnishing their property, paying essential bills or buying food. Brokerage assists with transition from crisis to stability, alongside planned support. Brokerage also assists young people to access education and training and other specialist services if required, including medical and mental health services.

Needs based support

Support periods ending prematurely contribute to tenancy failure. SYT provides support in accordance with needs and strengths of young people, allowing for flexible support that focuses on outcomes rather than number of support periods (throughputs).

Planning for independence

SYT has a focus on ensuring that young people transition and exit from the program well, continue to be able to sustain their tenancy and do not become homeless. If a young person is unable to sustain their tenancy,

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wherever possible, SYT works to ensure they have other appropriate housing.

Tenancy outcomes are affected by outcomes across psychosocial domains in a young tenant's life, including social connection, relationships, health and wellbeing, and the ability to navigate systems. The SYT team has recorded significant improvements in young people's tenancy outcomes alongside positive changes in their mental health, wellbeing and relationships. Sustaining tenancies has involved strengthening young people's ability and confidence to manage future crises without formal support. For some, this involves facilitating young people's improved connection and improved skills to self-manage informal supports

Transitions focused work takes time to manifest results and can be challenging to deliver. The SYT team assists young people to consider changes they have made, every six weeks. A standardised tool guides the reviews, which are facilitated informally. These tools assist to keep the work focussed and clearly understood. This helps the young person to acknowledge the change that they are achieving over time and prepare for independence from formal support.

The SYT project has established tools to support the case management process with young people and housing partners. A screening assessment and progress reviews have been integrated into case management practice, providing the backbone for shared housing and support plans. The tools help young people to set goals and acknowledge the change that they have made. They also enable housing providers to inform and acknowledge progress from their perspective. Housing providers offer regular feedback on their assessment of how the tenant is going at that point in time.

Working alongside young people

SYT's approach to working with young people is a critical success factor in the program.

SYT is a voluntary service; this differentiates it from other services and empowers young people, many of whom have previously only experienced mandated services and case management. Young people interviewed for the program evaluation have indicated that SYT being voluntary gives them a sense the service is there for them and works to support their best interests. This contributes to young people's positive attitude towards SYT and its case workers and facilitates engagement.

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SYT employs a holistic and relational approach to working with YP, with a strong focus on guiding therapeutic relationships and role modelling. Key elements in the working relationship between SYT and YP are persistence, reliability, intimacy and respect. Young people interviewed for the evaluation frequently identified their relationship with the SYT workers as one of the best aspects of the program, as it gave them someone trusted to turn to for the advice and support that was generally lacking in their lives.

The vast majority of tenants who are referred to SYT are enthusiastic about receiving support. For some, a referral initiated by their landlord, or shame about the state of their tenancy can be obstacles to be overcome. SYT uses a model of persistent and respectful outreach. This is a critical success factor in engaging young people either at intake or when they disengage from the program.

SYT uses a model of case management which is strengths focused, goal directed and regularly reviewed. Regular review of case plans against goals allows support to be responsive to young people's changing needs. Regular review of goals and progress allows young people to reflect and acknowledge their progress and growth helps them to take responsibility for their actions and the solutions to the challenges that present in their lives.

Outcomes Achieved

Early findings from an evaluation of the SYT program, which is currently underway, indicate that as a result of working with SYT, housing providers are more likely to allocate housing to young people. The majority of young people are now referred to SYT at intake into housing or at the first sign of trouble, facilitating early intervention.

At 12 months of operation, 91 per cent of young people participating in the SYT project have sustained their housing or have moved to more appropriate accommodation; they have improved their communication with housing providers; have increased confidence in their abilities to manage their housing and lives; and are better able to navigate the system. At the end of the support period with the SYT program housing providers rated 77 per cent of young people's tenancies as 'doing great' or 'doing well'. Those who noted concerns and gave lower ratings indicated that the overall situation was generally better than it could have been because of the SYT program involvement.

As part of a psychosocial evaluation when finalising support, SYT young people identified most change in the areas of life skills, mental and emotional wellbeing and in meeting basic needs (housing and financial stability). These were closely followed by improved connection with formal or informal supports and participation in employment, education, other meaningful activity. Young tenants identified the following aspects of SYT as most helpful to them: learning about tenancy; learning to negotiate systems; mobile support from workers; connection to others and the professionalism of the program.

While it is too early to draw conclusions about the long-term impact of SYT on outcomes for young tenants, the available evidence indicates that SYT fills an important gap in the delivery of homelessness prevention and early intervention services for young people and contributes towards breaking the cycle of homelessness.