How it is: Young People’s Advice for Reducing the Pressures of Homelessness and Mental Ill Health
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Introduction
This paper presents findings from a research project that investigated the experiences of people who have survived both mental ill health and homelessness. The aim was to improve services and supports for consumers of services who are experiencing this difficult double-whammy. People were invited to participate in the research project based on their lived experience, and were asked their advice for how to prevent homelessness (Pryor 2011).

This paper is also a companion piece to a paper entitled ‘Young People’s Tips for ‘Turning off the Tap to Youth Homelessness’ (in this edition of Parity) and provides stories of direct experiences told by young people. The focus is on the responses of young people aged 15-24 years whose advice spans the spectrum of need, including advice for intervening early and preventing homelessness, supporting people in crisis, and once they are stable, supporting people to stay well and housed. Together, their responses offer sound advice for services working to support young people experiencing homelessness.

Project Overview
This project sought advice from people from each of Tasmania’s three regions, including a mix of males, females, ages, cultures and family circumstances. Of the young people interviewed, approximately half were female, and two had Aboriginal heritage. Three had experienced child protection services, four had been hospitalised for mental ill health, and four had been incarcerated in youth detention.

Young People’s Advice
The following stories provide detail about the experiences and advice of young people who have experienced the double difficulty of both mental ill health and homelessness. To shed light on possible gender differences, findings are presented from the perspectives of males and females. For anonymity, names have been changed.

How it is for Young Men
Mack felt his family didn’t want him. At an early age he began spending time with his mates who were ‘like family’, and began getting into trouble with the law. He spent some time at a youth detention centre and was released with nowhere to go, so stayed at a friend’s parent’s house – until his friend was killed. At the time of his interview, Mack was sleeping on friends’ couches and getting food from a women’s refuge who knew him from earlier, when he had stayed there with his mother seeking refuge from domestic violence. Mack was not receiving formal help of any kind, was too young to receive Centrelink benefits, and was not attending school or training.

If Mack could choose to live anywhere, it would either be with his aunt or in a house for young people. He said he’d ‘like a house as a base, but with freedom too’. He said he’d need an income, and would prefer to share a place as he would ‘need a bit of help with food’. If he had a choice about what he did with his time, he’d like to be ‘doing some boxing, get a job, or do a building apprenticeship’. He said he couldn’t do a building course at present
because he had no way of getting to the training venue. Asked what was missing in his life, he said ‘a house is missing; probably one to share’. Mack described the kind of place he’d like to live in:

A big building – really big, so all the homeless people could have their own little place. Downstairs, a cooking area maybe... We’d always have something to eat, something to do. You’d have to ask the people – it depends what they want to do... Definitely make it furnished. Always have something to eat.

Cade chose to be homeless rather than live at home with his mother and sister, which he had found very difficult. His father had left home early in his life, and without support his mother’s mental health deteriorated, meaning she didn’t cope well with single parenting. He said that he grew disrespectful of his mother, and used to stay out all night. He stayed with his aunty for a short while, but she had her own family problems going on, so he had to leave. He eventually succeeded in gaining stable accommodation for up to two years through a youth service that also helped him with vocational training. At the time of the interview he had no furniture, but was working on getting some. For him, being out on his own was much better than being at his mother’s place.

Cade hoped to own a house one day. He said he’d love to live in the bush and have a big shed ‘for projects like fixing up cars’. He expected to be a mechanic one day, and said he would love to be a father when he was ready. Asked about what he currently needed, he said that transport was a big barrier for him – without parents to help, getting to school was a problem. He also said he’d like to see his Dad.

Chris said he became homeless when he ‘didn’t feel at home anymore’ in his family’s home. His father had depression and committed suicide when Chris was young. Some years later his mother got a new partner and after that, home didn’t feel the same anymore. He spent more and more time with friends, and began a new life that included criminal activity. He had been incarcerated twice, and both times was released with nowhere to go except back to his family home. On both occasions Chris did not want to leave the detention centre, because he liked it there – he was better off in there because he knew what he was doing, where he was going to sleep, when was going to be fed, could have a shower, and had somewhere to put his clothes –‘it’s just easier’.

Chris said more youth shelters are needed. He described his perfect youth shelter, which sounded a bit like the youth detention centre – ‘There’d be meals, the youth would help do jobs, there’d be clear structures, a timetable, a program of classes, spaces for outdoor activities, indoor activities, games and learning’. Chris said that he’d want strict rules: ‘10 warnings, and then you have to go to another youth shelter’. He’d want ‘records kept of wrongdoings, and punishments dealt out’. He’d like there to be ‘schooling, horticulture courses, woodwork, metalwork, and training for work’. Asked what else young people needed, he said:

I’d set up like drop-in centres – more of them so you can have a shower and wash your clothes. [So you can] charge your phone and go. Because they’re the most important things when you’re homeless... Food’s the most important thing too...
[And] they need storage lockers so you can keep your stuff there throughout the day because you know if you’ve got to go to town and stuff you don’t want to be lugging around all your clothes, your tent, all that sort of stuff... [And] I’d build more youth shelters... [and] I would buy apartment complexes. I’d make sure [homeless people] were on a Centrelink payment, and I’d have them [apartments] out for rent for people in crisis. Cheap, you know your $80 a fortnight sort of thing. Small, but still something, you know. Once they’re in there, they have to see mental health psychologists and drug and alcohol counselling and you have to engage in that weekly... Have more doctors and psychologists available. And just have more people that want to help.

How it is for Young Women
Kayla became homeless when she left her family home. Her stepfather had been abusing her for years, and her mother hadn’t been standing up for her ‘because she had her own problems going on’. Kayla had stayed in a range of accommodation places, mostly in a caravan at her aunt’s place, and had participated in a range of courses. She said she had some mental health issues, including ‘battles with depression’. Kayla had recently secured public housing – her first stable secure home for many years. Now that she had housing, she felt that one of her biggest risks was the possibility that she’d get sick of living in the one place. She said she felt like a nomad and that it might be hard to stay in one place for a long time. Kayla said she would look after her flat well and pay her bills, and if she did that, she expected she’d be able to keep her flat for as long as she wanted it. When asked what homeless young people need she said:

A worker on your case, a worker that pops in every week, just make sure you’re doing good and make sure you’re doing the stuff you’ve got to do, getting to your appointments and all that... [And] they need more shelters for young people. And more for them to do – activities – like things to keep them off the streets – community stuff.

Katie became homeless when she couldn’t live at home anymore. She was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder when she was young, and as she grew older, she realised she couldn’t live at home with her family because of her relationship with her Mum. She didn’t realise how bad her situation was until she broke down at school and told the school counsellor about her home life. The counsellor told her that she had a lot to deal with and it was then she realised that her mother’s mental health issues were having a big impact on her. In planning to leave home, Katie learnt that she couldn’t get UTLAH payments (the ‘unable to live at home allowance’) from Centrelink until she’d already left home. She also learnt that there was very little youth accommodation available. She said that she was looking forward to being eighteen years old, when she’d have more housing options – ‘people will take you seriously then, and you can actually apply for a place through a real estate agent’. Asked what she thought was needed, Katie said:

[Youth homelessness is] more of a problem than you think... It would be helpful if [Centrelink] had more people on staff but as well as that, I’m not sure if this is the correct term, but maybe like have a ‘halfway house’ [for young people], which is what [the shelter] was for me... Right now we need a quick fix, because we need
cheap accommodation that can be built within a short period of time for young people. We need cheap apartments, to build as much accommodation with as little space possible... [And] definitely get information out there to young people. Maybe start having some people going around to the schools, maybe around grade 8, grade 9 when people are sensible enough to actually stop and listen. Maybe even have the [school] counsellors assess children who have the antisocial behaviour. Have teachers watching out for kids and when they see someone struggling, asking ‘why?’

Michelle never really had a home. She never knew her father, and her mother was using drugs and sometimes in jail. She lived in foster homes growing up, and moved in with a boyfriend at a young age. Living with her boyfriend didn’t go well, and after a series of traumatic experiences, Michelle broke down and was supported by the mental health system, which she said ‘saved my life’. After a series of hospitalisations for psychosis and detentions for offences, Michelle moved in with a boyfriend and fell pregnant. She said that time was the happiest of her life, until anxiety and other mental health issues overcame her again. Her boyfriend left her, taking their baby with him. The baby went to live with Michelle’s ex-boyfriend and his family in rural Tasmania. At the time of the interview, Michelle was living in a temporary women’s shelter awaiting public housing; she hoped she would be able to live nearer her son. Asked what homeless young people needed, she said:

Mental health issues are really bad. They [people] need help. Rather than having to cope with multiple workers, link a support worker to the person, and get the worker to link in with the services [rather than have the young person having to do that]. Make sure it’s a good fit, person to person. Like a friend to talk to, to encourage them. That would make the world feel smaller. If I could have given myself advice when I was younger, I would have told myself to stay in school — I would have told myself that all the time — and try and stay a bit more stable — so that I could’ve got to know people around me and felt a bit more comfortable... Talking to someone would’ve helped. I’ve spoken with lots of people about it, but talking more to one person, more often, for longer, and see what their professional opinion is — see how they can help without medicine. That’s the only thing I haven’t tried yet — things different to medicine and drugs — the drugs have got me into trouble.

Conclusions
These stories from young people tell us ‘how it is’ for young people who live with both mental ill health and homelessness difficulties. Their advice highlights the importance of raising public awareness and providing community education, the role schools have to play in preventing homelessness, the importance of youth-friendly services and programs, the need for more youth-specific mental health services and more youth-specific housing and homelessness services, the potential benefits of workforce development and cross-fertilisation of services, and the importance of providing opportunities for young people to be socially and economically engaged in their community.

The lived experiences of Mack, Cade, Chris, Kayla, Katie, Michelle and others provide rich insights and assist us to develop whole-of-population approaches to prevent and reduce youth homelessness in Tasmania and beyond. If we take their advice, we can improve
services and supports for young people who find themselves in the difficult double whammy of mental ill health and homelessness.

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