



Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly 2025

29-30 April 2025

Final Report
April 2026



Hosted by:



Premier Partners:



Council to Homeless Persons is the peak body representing organisations and individuals in Victoria with a commitment to ending homelessness

Our vision is to end homelessness in Victoria. We work towards this goal through leadership in policy and advocacy, building the capacity of Victoria's homelessness sector, and working in partnership with people who are or who have been without a home.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the land and waters on which we live and work. CHP's office is in Collingwood, on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations. CHP's work is focussed across all Victoria – the lands of many different Aboriginal people across thousands of generations. CHP acknowledges the pride, strength, and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we pay our respects to Elders, past, present, and emerging. Always was, always will be.

Recognising Lived Experience

Council to Homeless Persons thanks people with lived experience of homelessness who bravely share their perspectives to inform our work. Their knowledge and expertise are vital to understanding homelessness and what it takes to end it. We must hear their voices and act.

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Introduction

Council to Homeless Persons hosted the Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly on 29 – 30 April 2025. The two-day event brought together nearly two hundred Specialist Homelessness Sector representatives, academics and lived experience experts to inform the development of a new Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria.

The Assembly commenced with a half day of panels exploring current challenges and best practices for youth homelessness responses across a range of specific subject areas, followed by a half day of workshops in which Assembly attendees identified the key features required of a path forward to reform.

Panels

In a powerful opening to the event, the Assembly's MC Brea Dorsett shared her own experiences of navigating the homelessness services system, then facilitated a plenary panel of young lived experience advocates, who frankly and generously told the room what it was like to be homeless at a young age.

Arlo told us that while they found life-saving support, many other young people don't. "I found an incredible worker who taught me the skills to survive. She saved my life," they said. "But it was all luck. **There are incredible people working within this system that doesn't work.**"

Haley, a peer worker at Melbourne City Mission (MCM), said she now helps other young people after she received crucial support when she needed it. "I work in the same building that changed my life five years ago," she said. "[Peer workers] saw me as a human being, not a statistic."

Haley added that, while young people should be listened to, the burden should not be put on them to fix the system.

Through the rest of the afternoon, the Assembly heard expert insights from frontline practitioners, researchers and sector leaders on key areas for reform.

The importance of investing in prevention and early intervention came through loud and clear throughout many sessions. On the panel 'Prioritising Prevention: Turning off the Tap', Upstream Australia's David McKenzie spoke of the success of place-based responses and how we need to build an 'ecosystem' of support around a young person:

"Because of a departmental system that is inherently siloed ... cooperation works better on the ground," he said. "**We need to hold ourselves accountable for a reduction in homelessness in a particular place.**"

Throughout the panel 'Youth: the overlooked face of family violence' we were reminded that family violence is the key driver of youth homelessness. Ella, a lived experience advocate at Bridge It, spoke about the complexities of experiencing family violence. "**I didn't know that I was being abused ... I thought it was normal**", she said.

She reminded attendees of the reason we need to deliver a compassionate and human response. “The only thing that makes me feel okay is laughter. [Sometimes people are] thinking like a practitioner instead of like a human.”

Other panels emphasised the need for increased collaboration, service-linking and data-sharing; discussed the restrictions of a competitive funding model; called attention to self-determined Aboriginal housing solutions; and highlighted the importance of trauma-informed accommodation.

Workshops

Day Two’s Workshops focussed on six key system areas:

- prevention and early intervention
- family violence and youth homelessness
- crisis accommodation
- supported housing models
- transition programs and pathways to independence
- health and holistic care.

Each workshop followed a consistent structure, encouraging participants to build shared understanding, define system success over five years, identify scalable best practices, and assess risks and enablers for change.

While perspectives varied, there was strong alignment on key priorities, including the need for earlier intervention; youth-specific and culturally safe services; integrating systems across housing, health, education, and justice; and clearer pathways through an often-fragmented system. Expanding youth-led, wraparound housing models and redefining success around empowerment and independence were seen as key to long-term outcomes. Central to all recommendations was the need to embed youth voice and co-design at every level of service design and delivery.

The importance of place-based responses was a recurring theme across discussions. As a Steering Committee, we endorse this recommendation while also noting that more needs to be done to establish a shared understanding of what is meant by “place-based” responses. Place-based responses are community-based infrastructure that must be invested in and maintained. They should work from the ground up, empowering local organisations to integrate and collaborate, and for the local community to take responsibility for outcomes.

It was clear throughout the Assembly that youth homelessness cannot be addressed in isolation from the broader systems that shape young people’s lives, including education, health, justice, and family support. Addressing it requires not only targeted service responses, but also a shift in how we design, fund, and govern systems to better reflect the realities of young people’s experiences.

The insights and recommendations shared by participants in the Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly, summarised in the following pages, provide a strong foundation from which the sector and the Victorian Government can now develop together a new Youth Homelessness Strategy.

This needs to be the start of a conversation between the Government and Victoria's Specialist Homelessness Sector, involving voices from every region of Victoria, and especially those of young people with lived experience of homelessness.

Victoria's Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations must also be formally consulted and supported to lead recommendations in regard to ending Aboriginal youth homelessness, consistent with the principles of self-determination as articulated in *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*, the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework.

The sector is ready for bold action. Through this important and long-overdue work, together we can ensure every young Victorian can access the opportunities they deserve.

As Council to Homeless Person's CEO Deborah Di Natale observed at the end of the Assembly, "The brilliant young people who spoke [at the Assembly] told us they felt 'lucky' to have found a compassionate support worker or the right service to help them. **We need to build a system that's not based on luck, but one that instead gives every single young person who comes to us the support they need and the opportunity to thrive.**"

Thanks to all the attendees at the Assembly, especially those with lived experience of homelessness, for sharing their insights. Thanks also to premier partners MCM and Homes Victoria, whose sponsorship made the event possible.

The Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly Steering Committee



Key Themes

Throughout the Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly's workshops, seven key themes emerged consistently in participants' recommendations.

These cross-cutting insights offer a foundation for shaping a Youth Homelessness Action Plan that is purpose-built, place-based and system-aware.

Key themes

1. Purpose-built system for young people, with youth voice at all levels

Across all workshops, participants described a strong and consistent vision for a youth homelessness system that is designed with and for young people, not adapted from adult models. The need for a system that is relational, trauma-informed, culturally safe, and guided by youth voice was raised repeatedly - not only as a design principle, but as a condition for lasting impact.

Success, as defined in these discussions, extends far beyond housing stability: it includes safety, identity, empowerment, and a sense of belonging. Systems must move away from adult-centric definitions of success.

We must ensure that young people help shape service design and governance through place-based, community-driven models that reflect diverse identities and lived experiences.

2. Shift from crisis-driven responses to earlier, more proactive support

A core theme throughout the Assembly was the need to shift from crisis-driven responses to earlier, more proactive support. There were calls for stronger foundations in schools, families and communities, with prevention efforts embedded at key life transitions. This includes life skills education, stigma reduction and stronger mental health supports before crisis hits. The homelessness sector must work with schools, families, and communities to identify risk early, and embed housing-informed supports into mainstream systems such as education and health.

Participants emphasised that prevention is not a single intervention point, but a sustained and coordinated effort across systems that builds capacity before a crisis occurs. Short-term options too often leave young people in limbo. A reformed crisis system should include integrated case management, planned transitions, and links to long-term housing and care.

3. The importance of place-based approaches

The importance of place-based approaches came through strongly in every session. While systemic reform is needed, participants were clear that implementation must reflect the unique needs, strengths, and capacities of local communities. What works in a metropolitan context may not be suitable in a regional or remote setting. Supporting flexible, community-informed models - including those led by Aboriginal organisations and culturally diverse groups - was seen as essential to delivering relevant, sustainable outcomes.

4. Responses must reflect the complex and intersecting experiences of young people

There was also a strong call for services and policies to reflect the complex and intersecting experiences of young people, particularly those who are Aboriginal, LGBTQIA+, neurodivergent, or from CALD or regional communities. Participants highlighted that these young people are often least well served by generic systems, and most likely to face exclusion, mislabelling, or gaps in care. Embedding culturally responsive, place-based approaches was seen as essential to ensuring relevance and impact.

Young people need access to care that sees them as whole people. This includes mental health, addiction, physical and spiritual wellbeing, delivered in ways that are accessible, youth-specific, and culturally safe, such as through outreach and telehealth.

Current family violence frameworks and responses are inadequate for adolescents and young people. Participants spoke of the need to create developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed responses to family violence for under-18s, embedded in youth services and co-designed with those with lived experience.

5. The system must provide continuity and integration

The importance of continuity and integration was raised in every session. Whether in health, housing, or transition support, participants described a system that too often ends abruptly, relies on individual champions, or forces young people to start again when moving between services. There was consensus that models are more effective when they offer long-term, consistent support with clear pathways forward - especially during life transitions like leaving care, exiting the justice system, or navigating family violence. Housing, health, education, justice, and welfare need to be connected through shared systems, data, and values to ensure young people aren't lost between services.

Programs and approaches like Youth Foyers and Housing First show what's possible when housing is paired with wraparound support such as life skills, education, employment, and therapeutic support, tailored to local needs. Young people need options that are flexible, tailored, and connected to education, work, and community.

6. Workforce development and system alignment

Workforce development and system alignment were recurring priorities. Participants described the need for a well-supported, youth-skilled workforce that can work across sectors, recognise trauma, and respond flexibly. Alongside this, they pointed to a need for structural reform - including funding models that support innovation, coordination, and sustained relationships rather than short-term outputs.

Staff burnout, short-term contracts, and rigid eligibility rules undermine outcomes. Investment is needed in workforce development, structural enablers, and flexible funding to support relational work.

7. Reframing public narratives about youth homelessness

Finally, the Assembly highlighted a desire to reframe public narratives about youth homelessness. Many participants spoke to the stigma that young people face and the way assumptions (e.g. about maturity, risk, or responsibility) shape their treatment in services. There was a shared aspiration to shift this narrative: to build a system that recognises young people's agency, centres their voices, and invests in their potential. Achieving this will require not only better services, but also broader cultural and policy change, informed by young people themselves.



Assembly Recommendations

Across six subject-specific workshops, participants identified what success looks like, system enablers for success, barriers and challenges that must be overcome to ensure reform is not undermined, and opportunities for system change.

Prevention and early intervention

What does success look like?

A successful prevention and early intervention system for youth homelessness should take a multi-layered, youth-centred approach. Some current prevention strategies already focus on strengthening schools as early touchpoints, fostering community collaboration, and explicitly teaching young people life and resilience skills. Future prevention strategies should continue to build on these foundations and prioritise them. This also includes improving public understanding, addressing cultural stigma, and conducting outreach to vulnerable groups at key transitional life stages.

Youth-centred models are seen as effective due to their flexibility, use of embedded youth workers, and therapeutic, place-based approaches. Integrated, place-based services, such as one-stop models like MCM and Headspace Frankston, respond to local needs and build trust through consistent support.

Critically, the system itself should be intentionally redesigned to better meet the developmental and relational needs of young people, who are often navigating services not originally built with them in mind.

System enablers

- Improving access to and coordination between sectors like mental health, AOD, youth justice, and homelessness.
- Emphasis on family-inclusive practices that promote healing and understanding.
- Tools such as risk screening models, data from school and hospital attendance, and brief interventions are vital to identifying emerging issues before they escalate.
- Evidence-based programs that demonstrate flexibility, place-based delivery, and sustained support.
- Systems that empower youth, guarantee housing stability, and integrate lived experience, equity, and collaboration into design and delivery.

Barriers and challenges

- Competitive and siloed funding models.
- Fragmented service systems.

- Lack of political will and system-level accountability.
- Dominant narratives that position young people as problems to solve, rather than individuals with strengths and potential.

Opportunities for system change

- Promote cross-sector collaboration and workforce development.
- Scale-up place-based models supported by long-term funding.
- Reframe public narratives and elevate youth voices at all levels of policy and service design.
- Build integrated responses across health, education, justice, housing and welfare systems.
- Ensure accountability is paired with stable investment and a shared commitment to treating youth not as problems to fix but as capable individuals who need strengths-based support.

Family violence and youth homelessness

What does success look like?

Family violence is the leading driver of youth homelessness - yet current systems are ill-equipped to meet their specific needs. Most family violence responses are designed for adults and young people accompanied by an adult, making it difficult for those under 18 or presenting without a parent to access safe, appropriate support. Young people are often overlooked by early intervention services and may be mislabelled as perpetrators due to trauma-related behaviours, further compounding their vulnerability.

A system that successfully responds to the intersection of family violence and youth homelessness would be one that recognises the unique needs of young people. It should be youth-specific, trauma-informed and culturally safe. Young people would not be overlooked or mislabelled but supported through developmentally appropriate responses with safe and accessible services embedded across housing, health and education. Their voices would shape the design of services, and public narratives would reflect their realities. Key transitions should be met with coordinated care, and structural barriers such as ID access and restrictive welfare eligibility should no longer prevent young people from getting the help they need.

System enablers

- Youth-specific, trauma-informed, and culturally safe approaches embedded across housing, health and education.
- Integration of family violence responses into youth services, including tailored risk assessment tools (e.g., age-adapted MARAM), and integrated systems across housing, education, mental health, AOD and disability.
- Localised, place-based models that engage young people in design and decision-making are essential for relevance and impact.
- Safe, accessible, compassionate first points of contact, supported transitions during crises, and coordinated care delivered by a well-trained, youth-focused workforce.

Barriers and challenges

- Adult-centric family violence systems that do not meet the needs of under-18s.
- Limited access to identification documents, income support, or crisis accommodation.

- Services that label trauma-related behaviours as 'problematic' or fail to respond in developmentally appropriate ways.
- Fragmented systems and a lack of coordinated pathways across sectors.
- Underrepresentation of young people in family violence policy and program design.

Opportunities for system change

- Reform policy and funding settings to ensure flexibility, responsiveness, and youth inclusion.
- Centre youth voices and lived experience in designing solutions that address both housing and safety needs.
- Build a workforce capable of responding holistically to the intersection of family violence and youth homelessness.
- Strengthen collaboration across sectors and leverage media and advocacy to shift public narratives.
- Address structural exclusions, such as ID access and restrictive welfare eligibility, that disproportionately affect young people leaving violence.

Crisis accommodation

What does success look like?

Crisis accommodation is widely understood as a short-term, stop-gap solution for young people experiencing homelessness, typically lasting from a few days to several weeks. It includes a broad mix of supported and self-funded options such as motels, youth refuges, rooming houses, NDIS-funded respite, and caravan parks. While these options can provide immediate shelter, they often lack integrated planning for long-term stability, highlighting a significant gap in the homelessness response system. The absence of clear exit pathways and continuity of care underscores the need for a more structured and supportive transition out of crisis settings.

A more effective youth homelessness system would provide more than just short-term shelter – it creates a pathway to long-term housing stability, safety and belonging. It should be youth-led, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate with wrap-around support and continuity of care that bridges crisis and post-crisis phases. Young people would be supported by a well-trained workforce, involved in system design and able to access coordinated services tailored to their needs. The system would be guided by strong models, consistent data, and funding structures that prioritise meaningful outcomes over time-limited responses.

System enablers

- A homelessness response system defined by long-term housing stability, a sense of belonging, and seamless access to culturally appropriate, trauma-informed support services.
- Flexible crisis responses that lead to sustainable housing, integration across services (such as mental health, AOD, education, and disability), and a strong focus on access and equity, especially for First Nations youth.
- Continuity in case management that bridges crisis and post-crisis phases, with empowered participation by young people.
- A coordinated system that prevents homelessness through early intervention and provides a range of stable, culturally safe housing options, wraparound support, and essential life resources such as employment, income, and transport.
- Evidence-based models like Housing First, Circuit Breaker refuges, Foyers, and transitional programs that demonstrate the importance of structured, youth-led, therapeutic frameworks in building effective crisis responses.

Barriers and challenges

- Crisis options that are disconnected from long-term post-crisis support and housing pathways.
- Inadequate or inflexible funding models that fail to support continuity of care.
- System fragmentation, including inconsistent data, referral pathways, and follow-up.
- Workforce burnout among service providers and lack of youth-specific training.
- Limited youth participation in system design, leading to responses that don't reflect lived realities.

Opportunities for system change

- Develop a statewide crisis accommodation framework that links crisis to longer-term housing and support.
- Reform funding structures to prioritise outcomes over program types or time-limited responses.
- Increase youth leadership and co-design in shaping crisis responses.
- Leverage successful models and existing networks to scale what works.
- Support system change through strategic, integrated campaigns (such as Raise the Age).
- Collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and leveraging existing networks offer powerful levers for scaling what works and transforming the youth homelessness system.

Supported housing models

What does success look like?

Youth homelessness programs operate through a range of models such as Youth Foyers, Lead Tenant arrangements, Housing First, and Village 21. While diverse in structure, these approaches share key core features that should be part of any supported housing model: wraparound case management, life skills education, trauma-informed practice and youth-led principles focused on self-determination and resilience. Transition support models, such as step-up/step-down services, allow young people to gradually build independence while learning from setbacks.

Programs are most effective when tailored to local needs, particularly in regional areas, and when they incorporate practical components like education, employment, budgeting, and outreach services into everyday support. Success must be defined not only by access to long-term, suitable housing but also by young people's readiness for independent living, including their ability to manage finances, resolve conflict, and advocate for themselves.

Integrated systems with smooth transitions, shared data systems, and wraparound support help prevent regression and promote sustained independence. Equally important are ongoing mental health supports and culturally inclusive practices that ensure Aboriginal, LGBTQIA+, CALD and regionally-based youth feel safe and supported. Youth-centred definitions of independence - rather than adult-centric standards – should be co-developed with young people.

System enablers

- Offering a spectrum of housing options supported by consistent, place-based collaboration between sectors.
- Smooth transitions and information sharing via integrated data systems.
- Embedding life and vocational skills within these services to ensure readiness for independence.
- Youth-led and culturally responsive approaches drive relevance and engagement.
- Long-term investment, shared accountability, and regular strategic reviews.

Barriers and challenges

- Short-term funding models and cycles, and limited government alignment.
- Undertrained staff in services and structural rigidity.

- Stigma towards young people experiencing homelessness.

Opportunities for system change

- Embed life skills into school curriculum.
- Develop and expand employment pathways through social enterprises.
- Increase youth voice in governance and program design.
- Systemic alignment across government levels, funding reform, and communities of practice, alongside schools as early intervention points, and regular strategic reviews for ongoing system improvement.

Transition programs and pathways to independence

What does success look like?

Youth homelessness services are increasingly adopting diverse, youth-driven models that prioritise autonomy, trauma-informed care, and cultural safety. Programs and approaches like Youth Foyers and Housing First aim to develop life skills and independence through wraparound support. Integrated, place-based approaches ensure services adapt to regional needs, such as incorporating in-reach support services such as budgeting, legal aid, and addiction support. These models prioritise meaningful engagement, flexible delivery, and gradual independence for young people navigating complex challenges.

Success is defined not only by housing stability but also by personal empowerment and system change.

Key indicators include increased life readiness, sustained support before and after exiting services, and equitable access for all youth, including Aboriginal, CALD, and LGBTQIA+ communities.

System enablers

- Integrated, place-based models that provide continuity of support before, during, and after exiting services.
- Best practice in youth-led, co-designed, healing-oriented spaces like hubs or foyers, with embedded peer leadership and coordinated service delivery.
- Long-term investment in purpose-built spaces and flexible, locally tailored implementation.
- Replication or adaptation of successful models tailored to local contexts, alongside improved accessibility and funder engagement.

Barriers and challenges

- Fragmented service systems that don't mirror the complexity of real-life transitions.
- Workforce shortages and under-resourcing, particularly in regional and remote areas.
- Persistent stigma around youth homelessness, which affects both service access and investment.

- Limited engagement from funders in building flexible, youth-informed program models.
- Inconsistent access and inclusion for Aboriginal, CALD and LGBTQIA+ young people.

Opportunities for system change

- Design systems that reflect the realities of youth transitions and mirror real-life independence, rather than rigid service pipelines.
- Build long-term investment in system-wide change through scalable, youth-centred models grounded in lived experience.
- Embedding life skill development in both service delivery and education.
- Increase youth leadership in service design and evaluation.
- Strengthen early intervention through school-based supports and integrated referral pathways.
- Shift public narratives through sustained efforts with education and media to build understanding and reduce stigma.

Health and holistic care

What does success look like?

A successful response to youth homelessness must include integrated, holistic health care that reflects young people's lived experiences and diverse identities.

Services should encompass physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing, offering continuity of care across life stages. Young people define their own health needs, and systems must honour this by embedding trauma-informed, culturally safe, and youth-specific models, especially in regional areas. Health services should be flexible, mobile, and accessible through outreach, telehealth, and drop-in options. Portable entitlement to support is critical to ensure continuity for young people and enable them to remain connected to care regardless of location or transitions in their housing or life circumstances.

System enablers

- Culturally safe and trauma-informed services embedded across the system.
- Flexible, place-based models including outreach, telehealth and drop-ins.
- Portable entitlement to support to maintain continuity of care.
- Strong entry points through GPs, schools, hospital emergency departments, and peer support workers should act as key access points, reducing service disconnection and repetitive storytelling.
- Improving access and equity involves removing waitlists, embedding culturally safe practices, and ensuring consistent, youth-friendly services at every entry point. Cross-sector integration—connecting health, housing, education, justice, and community services—is essential for coordinated care.
- Collaboration through place-based steering committees and streamlined referral systems enhance local responsiveness and prevents duplication.
- Health literacy and system navigation education should start early, supporting young people to understand and engage with services across their life course.

Barriers and challenges

- Long waitlists, staff burnout and high administration burden.
- Data fragmentation across housing, SHS and mental health services.

- Inconsistent access to youth-friendly, coordinated support.
- Over-reliance on individuals to 'champion' integration.
- Poor information sharing between services, causing young people to have to repeatedly tell their story.

Opportunities for system change

- Shift to whole-of-system, outcomes-based approaches sustained by investment, workforce training, sector-wide advocacy and integration that is embedded, and not reliant on individual champions.
- Youth must be central to planning and co-design efforts, ensuring early intervention and continuous support through a whole-of-system, outcomes-based approach.
- Reform efforts are strengthened by current momentum for change, innovative responses inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a growing appetite for sector alignment.

Victorian Youth Homelessness Assembly Steering Committee

Council to Homeless Persons thanks the Victorian Youth Homeless Assembly's Steering Committee for their insight and leadership in developing the program for the Assembly and overseeing the drafting of this report.

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**Together we can end
homelessness.**

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