



Submission to NSW Advocate for Children and Young People

17 November 2023

Introduction:

St Laurence House (SLH) is an SHS provider that specialises in medium-term care for Children and Young people, a service it has provided for over 40 years.

It is our strong view that this medium-term approach delivers measurable benefits over other services at a lower cost.

The purpose our submission is to:

- **raise awareness** of the medium-term model as a cost effective, outcomes-based model.
- **highlight the positive outcomes** for young people when the stability, safety and consistency of care in medium-term models are applied.
- highlight that the **provision of Trauma Informed Care** for young people from trauma and complex trauma backgrounds provides a way forward for healing and moving through trauma with positive outcomes.
- highlight that **stability and consistency** allows young people the opportunity to engage with education, make stable friend groups and participate in community activities e.g., sports teams, choirs etc.

Current Positioning:

SLH is one of only two services in Sydney providing 24/7 fully supported Medium-Term care for homeless young people 13 to 18 years old. There are only five such services in NSW, the other three in the Illawarra. Our refuge in Kingsford provides 24/7 care to 5 clients, and our outreach programme also supports clients through case management after they leave our residence. There are currently 3 residents in this outreach programme, however we could service more if there were suitable properties available.

SLH is differentiated from other services in two key ways. Firstly, the focus is on Medium-Term care for children and young people, which sets SLH apart from the more numerous services offering crisis support. Crisis services do not offer support beyond three months, which is very frequently insufficient to generate real change. Many clients are locked into a cycle of repeated crisis care, refuge hopping and homelessness. At SLH, individual case plans ensure continuity and professional support for as long as it is needed up to the age of 24.

Secondly, SLH has historically catered for Children and Young People (CYP) as young as 13 years. The current contract with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) requires us to service clients from as young as this age. A higher service standard applies to clients under 16, in particular 24/7 staffing levels and adherence to Child Protection Legislation and requirements.

In 2022, SLH achieved accreditation under the ASES standard of excellence. This was completed some two years ahead of the required time frame, and the accreditors particularly noted the high standard achieved by such a small and under resourced organisation. However, achieving this level of governance did require increased costs, particularly through a higher payroll, with this not being reflected in any additional government funding.

What is Medium-Term accommodation and why the sector needs this model:

According to Yfoundations, Medium-term accommodation services provide an important lifeline for young people. However, due to the **current critical shortage of these services**, homeless young people must 'refuge-hop' between crisis services, couch surfing or even sleep rough. In a recent survey, peak body Yfoundations' members identified the lack of medium-term accommodation as the second most urgent issue in the youth homelessness sector – behind only housing affordability.

Medium-term accommodation refers to a supported accommodation service. Children aged 13-16 need to be in a fully supported accommodation environment, whilst those over 16 can be accommodated in a semi-supported model with at least one staff member on call 24/7. These services aim to provide this highly vulnerable cohort with the stability they need to reconnect with family, finish their education and avoid negative longer-term outcomes. They do so by offering young people safe, trauma-informed support and accommodation in a home-like environment.

Medium-term services also link vulnerable young people to other services (e.g., mental health, education). In-house programs help them to develop life skills and transition to independence. However, medium-term accommodation is not targeted at young people with significant untreated mental health and/or drug or alcohol issues. This high-need group require more intensive, specialised support placements, such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, therapeutic residential care, treatment foster care or secure care.

Currently, homeless CYPs can access crisis services through the youth SHS system, which provide 24/7 housing and support. But these crisis services are typically only funded to offer short term emergency accommodation. As a result, homeless young people are forced to 'refuge-hop' between youth SHS services, which are often located great distances apart.

This age group are also eligible for longer-term programs such as Rent Choice Youth and transitional accommodation. However, these programs require independent living skills which many homeless 14 – 18-year-olds have not yet developed. Rent Choice Youth offers subsidised private rent, caseworker support and brokerage to young people who are actively engaged in education or employment. SHS providers also offer transitional accommodation for 16 to 24-year-olds, where young people live in shared or solo accommodation and receive outreach support to sustain their tenancies. While these models are beneficial for many older young people, they are not sustainable for the younger cohort who are not developmentally ready for independent living. These young people need more intensive, medium-term support to continue their education and transition to independence, which is offered through the medium-term accommodation model.

The Going Home Staying Home reforms resulted in a loss of critical medium-term services, with a high proportion ceasing to operate. At present, there are only five medium-term accommodation services for 16 to 18-year-olds in NSW. Two of these are located in metropolitan Sydney and three are in Illawarra. These services currently cover only two of the 15 DCJ districts.

Medium-term service providers achieve positive social connections directly by offering trauma-informed care and support. They also allow young people to stay connected to their school community while also promoting family reunification. This is because homelessness services can often act as respite for parents during times of family conflict, while offering these young people structure, freedom and the chance to receive support.

By keeping young people connected with their school communities during critical developments periods, medium-term accommodation will help avoid negative longer-term outcomes. Investing in these services will therefore produce significant return for the NSW Government. This was made evident by an evaluation by Earnst and Young of Lighthouse Foundation's medium-term accommodation service in Victoria, which found that every extra dollar spent on medium term accommodation delivered a social return on investment of \$3.15. Additionally, for every person that passes through Lighthouse, the state typically saves \$677,836 over 35 years.

How can SLH provide for these vulnerable CYP through their medium-term model of care and support?

SLH has a solid medium-term model of care and support for CYP 13-24 years of age. In order to be sustainable into the future, SLH must grow. The cost of accreditation and governance is virtually the same for SLH as for much larger organisations.

Based on our existing 24/7 residence in south-east Sydney, with its various existing support programmes, we have developed plans for two additional semi-supported dwellings. This would be our "**Hop, Skip and Jump**" program. The service would then comprise:

1. The existing refuge with 5 beds focused on children under the age of 16, fully supported 24/7 by qualified and professional staff.
2. A new residential dwelling with 3 or 4 beds for 16-18-year-olds, semi-supported with 24/7 staff on-call and ongoing case management.
3. A further residential dwelling with 3 or 4 beds for 18-24-year-olds, also semi supported by offering ongoing case management support. This would complement our transitional housing program (STAY) by adding a "share" house accommodation as well as properties provided by St George Community Housing (SGCH) and other community housing organisations, allowing us to service more young people at this vulnerable, yet fairly independent stage of their lives.

The same senior staffing structure would cover all three premises, offering seamless progressive care and increased capacity. As numbers increased there would be a requirement to increase staff numbers marginally through the recruitment of additional case management. The number of clients serviced will more than double but will incur relatively small staffing increases.

The Funding Crisis – SLH shortfall:

Delivering the ASES Accredited level of service has resulted in a cost increase of \$140K annually. Accreditation has been required by DCJ and appropriately provides a significant increase in service level standards, quality and accountability, but again no further funding has been provided to any service provider.

NSW government funding to SLH in FY 2023 comprised \$380K annually.

The quantum of funding was originally established in 2009 and linked to the Government's Support Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP). This amount has since been indexed annually to inflation.

This funding was delivered through the Service Support Fund (SSF). Most other services were funded through Special Homelessness Services (SHS).

In 2012, the Federal Government introduced the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) under the Modern Awards, which would bring pay levels for workers in residential care up to parity with other sectors. The impact over the eight-year period was a 23% to 45% increase in wages. Services funded under SHS received progressive ERO increases, as well as inflation indices. However, there was no ERO increase for SLH as it was SSF funded – the funding provided to SLH relative to their peers dropped progressively each year. SLH had to undertake its own fundraising to support the ERO pay increases and other increases in costs.

In 2019, SLH increased the number of beds in its facility from 4 to 5. Despite the increased service level, no increased funding was received from DCJ.

The proposed Recommissioning process instigated in 2022 was intended to be implemented in 2024 and would involve a full assessment of the funding levels across the service based on service outcomes. This initiative has now been pushed back to 2026, generating a critical funding problem for SLH.

Correspondingly:

- Government support for SLH has progressively dropped from 85% of total costs in 2014 to only 51% of total costs in 2023.
- DCJ funding covered 100% of staff costs in 2014. By 2023, DCJ funding had progressively fallen to only 60% of staff costs.

It is sad to see funding issues prohibit models of care that have proven positive long-term outcomes for CYP.

SLH current situation and moving into the future:

SLH remains committed to a long-term future and to developing our service offering. The substantial benefits of the Medium-Term model are well recognised in the sector, and well recognised within DCJ. An external costing undertaken by the sector's peak representation body YFoundations has recommended government support level of \$820K would be applicable to SLH.

In 2022 a “recommissioning” programme was commenced to evaluate the economic return of various service models. This would have provided SLH the opportunity to have its operating model properly evaluated and properly funded.

However, the new Labor government in NSW has delayed this programme to 2026. Some multi-service operators have welcomed this delay, the status-quo means no service disruption, and DCJ provides almost all of their funding. For SLH, however, the opportunity to redress the unsustainable situation has been lost meantime.

SLH only survives through a very substantial fundraising programme and with the support of committed benefactors who are well aware of the service outcomes achieved. However, these benefactors cannot fund the current expansion from a one refuge service to the required three house refuge.

By being ahead of the game and winning accreditation early, benefits to SLH clients are already flowing. But it is not possible for SLH to span the gap between a poorly funded base position, no ERO support and no funding for the fifth bedroom simply by additional fundraising. A review of the current funding levels from DCJ is an urgent necessity.

Why the sector needs medium-term services such as SLH:

1. Our statistics tell us that 75% of all CYP seek assistance from SLH are because of:

- Relationship & family breakdown
- Domestic and Family Violence
- Previous accommodation ending

CYP need to leave situations that are damaging to them and have poor outcomes. Sadly, within the current circumstances, they can be leaving one set of poor circumstances to join another poor circumstance such as rough sleeping and/or refuge hopping.

2. SLH offers pathways for CYP with complex trauma backgrounds:

SLH fills a vital gap in accommodation for CYP from trauma backgrounds. SLH is not simply a roof over their heads and a warm bed – it is so much more.

Our medium-term model provides the time for a young person to settle into new accommodation, to feel safe within that accommodation and with care provision from consistent staff who become known and trusted by the young people.

Building trust is such an important part of the recovery process and healing from trauma experienced by CYP. SLH offers the time and the space to build trust, offer therapeutic support, and allow the CYP to experience a sense of homelike environment – a safe place to heal.

Respect is also such an important part of the healing process. Again, the medium-term model offers a model where trust is facilitated through longer term placement and consistent staffing.

SLH offers a model of care where services are "wrapped" around the young people, including consistent medical care, mental health support, stable education and interaction with schoolteachers and counsellors. All of these factors build a level of self-respect for young people coupled with a growing sense of hope for the future.

3. SLH facilitates transition between placements:

Allowing CYP to have choice and voice in decisions made about them is so important.

When a CYP wants to move to a different type of accommodation or support service, SLH case managers work with the wrap around model to find all options and best solutions. Accommodation and support remain in place until such time as the CYP has a confirmed placement. A new placement could take days to months to complete, so the CYP is safe, stable, engaging in education and/or work whilst referrals are being made and followed up.

4. SLH encourages CYP goals and Case/care plans:

Medium-term models such as SLH, provide time for CYP to trust and engage with their case worker. Over time as trust and respect build, the CYP start to voice their hopes and goals for the future. Case workers have the time and the skills to work with these CYP to develop the small steps necessary to achieve large goals. Every step in achieving a small milestone toward a larger goal, fosters confidence and belief in self for the CYP. These are small but important steps to gaining independent living skills and coping with the complexities of adult life.

5. SLH offers stability of location and access to community:

Homelessness sees CYP moving from location to location, never building stable friendship bases, never remaining in a school long enough to feel secure and established or attain educational levels required for long term success.

Medium-term accommodation such as SLH allows CYP stability of location – one school, ability to gain parttime/casual employment to support educational goals and learn life skills, join a sporting club or other team/community activity. All things that foster future sustainability, positive self-reliance and ongoing supportive friends and peers.

6. SLH works in a value driven and ethical manner:

Our core values are not a poster on a wall – they are values that our staff live and breathe. They are values that we aspire to role model for our CYP. Over a medium-term stay, these values become important to our CYP as well.

OUR CORE VALUES



SLH through the eyes and words of a CYP:

CYP can be very articulate. Included here is a direct quote from a 16-year-old female who “tells it as they see it”:

“You guys have really shaped me into the person I have become, the special thing about St Laurence house is that I can see the care, love and dedication you put into knowing us and helping us to achieve our goals. You have put really high standards and expectations on what we deserve. Every time I visit the house, I get a sense of belonging and honestly it feels like home. I love and appreciate all what you guys have done for me. Honestly, you’ve saved my life, I will be forever grateful for all staff at St Laurence, because they encouraged me to be the person I’ve always wanted to be. Thank you so much, I can’t even express how immensely grateful I am to all of you ♡”

Case Studies to support the positive outcomes of the SLH model:

Case Study 1 – Benjamin – 24/7 Fully Supported Refuge

Benjamin experienced emotional abuse and neglect in his family home and moved into the safety and stability of SLH at the age of 16 in November 2020. During this time, Benjamin has been working closely with staff to achieve his goals. He started seeing a psychologist regularly to support his mental health and he became more engaged in school, attending consistently and receiving ever-improving report cards. We have also supported Benjamin with emotional regulation and living skills including cooking, cleaning, and budgeting, to prepare him for future independent living.

Benjamin successfully completed his HSC, attaining an ATAR of 87. This allowed him to enrol in Fine Arts at University. Current he is finishing his first year of university.

Benjamin moved from the 24/7 fully supported refuge to a transitional housing property where he has been living independently whilst studying. We continue to support Benjamin through regular case management.

It has been a pleasure to supporting Benjamin to reach his potential and grow into the capable, resilient and thoughtful young man he is today.

Case Study 2 – Sally – STAY Program

Sally experienced family violence in her home growing up before she moved to SLH in 2017 at age 14. Sally lived at SLH between the ages of 14 – 18 where we worked intensively to support Sally's mental health and wellbeing, reduce and reframe the negative impacts of her trauma history, and provide a safe and stable home so that Sally could focus on school.

In 2021, we supported Sally to move into her own transitional property, as we continued to provide ongoing case management support.

Sally has since improved her relationship with her family, and is now working full time, ready to enter the private rental market.

It has been a pleasure supporting Sally to find her own path and reach her potential.

Case Study 3 – Jennifer

In 2018, Jennifer was 16 years old, living with her older sister, single father and grandparents, in their family home in Western Sydney. As a result of her father's gambling and drug addictions, their previously stable home was foreclosed, and the family were evicted. Whilst still attempting to attend school, and her father caught up in his own debts and addictions, Jennifer was forced to squat, couch-surf, and sleep rough, before Link2Home connected her with Caretakers Cottage, and subsequently to SLH.

Then aged 17, SLH supported Jennifer through her crucial HSC year by providing safe and stable accommodation, ongoing case management, and a living skills program filling in the gaps from what she wasn't taught in her family home. After a long period of housing volatility, Jennifer craved the stability and safety that SLH had

to offer. With our support, she was not only able to successfully complete her HSC, find and maintain a part-time job in hospitality, but was accepted into her preferred university to study a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology). Since finishing her HSC, SLH also supported Jennifer to move into semi-independent Community Housing in the local area.

Throughout her time with SLH, Jennifer has improved her relationship with her family, improved her mental health, saved up an emergency fund to hopefully prevent her ever being in a housing crisis again, is working part-time, studying full-time, and living semi-independently (whilst receiving ongoing case management) – all at age 18.

SLH will continue to support Jennifer to achieve her goal of completing her studies, and eventually moving into private rental with stable work to support her.

Case Study 4 – Sam

In 2017, Sam was 14 years old when he was referred to SLH through our local crisis refuge (Caretakers Cottage) as a result of Family and Domestic Violence. Sam had experienced instability at home for some time before he finally made the decision to leave, and as a result, he had adopted a range of maladaptive behaviours that may have helped him cope with trauma. These behaviours manifested both at home and at school and culminated in numerous suspensions and an expulsion from school, several encounters with local police, and several written warnings from the House for consistently breaking rules, putting his only viable accommodation placement at risk.

However, with the long-term support that SLH can offer, Sam was able to significantly improve his quality of life, by making a few changes to his perspectives and behaviours. With ongoing case management, and trauma informed practice, he was able to identify and adapt his problematic behaviours to become less impulsive, rude, argumentative, and disrespectful, transforming into a role model student at school, and a valued member of the house.

Sam is now 17 years old and in the midst of a busy HSC year. His recent half-yearly report saw him rank within the top 5 students in each of his classes, with a 97.6% attendance record. Sam plans to study Computer Science next year [REDACTED], and judging by his achievements thus far, he is well on track.

Upon finishing his HSC, SLH will help Sam find suitable semi-independent accommodation through our local Community Housing partners. We will continue to provide him with outreach case management working towards supporting him to become self-sufficient by securing a stable income and moving into private rental.

References and Acknowledgements:

Yfoundations – Business Case for new medium-term accommodation for homeless young people in NSW (November 2021)

Lighthouse Foundation – State return on investment through Lighthouse Foundation's model of care. (2018)