

**Submission by Yvonne Hughes to the Advocate for Children and Young People's Special Inquiry into children and young people in alternative care arrangements.**

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this Special Inquiry; my perspectives come from both my research and observations as a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney and as an accredited social worker with experience in working with care-experienced young people, including those who have experienced ACAs. I am also a respite carer with KARI and would like to state for the record that none of the issues I am raising involve this agency.

I would like to particularly address items a - d of the Terms of Reference.

Within my PhD, I am looking at intimate partner violence experienced by girls and young women in Supported Independent Living (SIL) OOHHC placements in NSW. This topic is partly informed by my experiences working with this population. I am very concerned about the safety and wellbeing of young people in SIL accommodation. While I recognise that this model of care was designed to provide casework, skills development and financial support for young people transitioning into independence, in practice this is often not the case. The reality is that SIL placements are more like the ACAs described as 'long-term rentals' in the Interim Report (p.7). I have worked with young people in SIL placements whose caseworker has never done a home visit; instead the 'casework' consisted largely of irregular calls with the primary aim of distributing grocery vouchers. I also had a client who was told that, rather than transferring the lease into her name at the end of her SIL term, the agency would be evicting her to use the accommodation for another placement without assisting her to find new accommodation. This again undermines the original intention of the SIL program.

While I cannot comment on all agencies who provide SIL placements, I can identify that the agency responsible for the young people mentioned above did not have any documentation on what the young people were entitled to as part of the SIL program. One young person I worked with was not given any documentation, and her repeated questions on her entitlements were ignored or fobbed off. When I advocated on her behalf, her case manager said they were 'guessing'. This resulted in many issues for my former client, including food insecurity, fears of repeated homelessness and an inability to budget or plan for their future.

I would also like to highlight an issue regarding the placement of young people in hotels. For the record, I do not believe that hotel accommodation is at all suitable for any young person in OOHC. However, knowing that hotel accommodation is currently being used for ACAs, I bring to your attention the following issues and recommendations.

In NSW, hotels require minors to be accompanied, yet in practice older teens placed in hotels as an ACA are not accompanied. In order to avoid violating hotel policies or legal issues, an agency I have worked with used to 'sneak in' young people, pretending staff were staying there too, but as individuals not as workers. One young person I worked with was extremely distressed when a team leader had pretended to be her partner before leaving. This practice is hugely damaging for young people on many levels. It gives mixed messages about how they should behave, what authorities can ask of them, and also establishes harmful standards of relationships, therefore creating a significant threat to their safety in the short term and long term. The legal, practical and ethical issues of unaccompanied older children in hotels also extends to worker safety - if a caseworker registers themselves as the occupant of the room, they are opening themselves up to risk of allegations, particularly as the agency is acting outside of legal channels.

As a researcher in the domestic violence field, I believe that putting young people in the position where they have to pretend to be in a relationship with an older adult - where there is already a significant power imbalance - or face homelessness is akin to coercive control. There is also far more potential for abuse when a minor is not only snuck into a hotel but is 'going along with it'; their perceived complicity will no doubt detract from their credibility should abuse occur and subsequently be disclosed.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) That SIL providers are audited to ensure that they are providing a legitimate SIL service, rather than an ACA.
- 2) That SIL providers have measurable standards of care that include meaningful engagement with the young person and oversight by an independent party.
- 3) That young people in OOHC are provided exemption from regulations concerning 'unaccompanied minors'; should this already be the case, that this is communicated to all agencies as a matter of urgency. The subterfuge surrounding the practice of sneaking young people into hotels replicates abuse, places young people in high-risk situations, normalises coercive control and must be ceased immediately.