

SUMMARY

In Australia, the standard service offer to young people experiencing homelessness provides an immediate response to housing crisis, but struggles to deliver a pathway to sustainable independent living (AIHW 2018; Homelessness Taskforce 2008; Horn 2018 unpub.). Youth foyers address this gap by providing an integrated approach to tackling youth homelessness, combining affordable accommodation with education, training and employment opportunities and other support services.

Education First Youth (EFY) Foyers expand upon the original Youth Foyer concept by prioritising education as key to a sustainable livelihood. As such, EFY Foyers are better understood as a form of supported student accommodation rather than a crisis housing response. The EFY Foyer evaluation finds that the model substantively improves participants' education, employment, housing, and health and wellbeing outcomes, and these improvements are largely sustained a year after exit.

Developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) and Hanover Welfare Services (now Launch Housing), with funding from the Victorian Government, EFY Foyers prioritise education through their partnership with and location on sites of tertiary education institutions, the co-delivered Certificate I in Developing Independence, and the reciprocal 'Deal' agreement between participants and staff. As part of the Deal, young people agree to participate in education and five other EFY Foyer service offers. In return, foyer staff agree to provide participants with accommodation, opportunities and inclusion in a learning community for up to two years.

The EFY Foyer model is founded on a capabilities approach. This provides conceptual leverage in articulating the multi-dimensionality of homelessness and developing appropriate solutions. The capabilities approach measures human development not by the level of material resources accumulated, but by people's substantive freedoms, or real opportunities, to pursue lives of value to them (Sen 1999; 2002). The primary focus is therefore on what people have real opportunity to achieve with the resources available to them, rather than the resources themselves or the paths chosen. EFY Foyers seek to expand young people's capabilities in two ways: by creating mainstream opportunities aligned with their goals and by developing the resources and skills needed to make the most of them.

An Advantaged Thinking practice approach operationalises the relationships necessary to enable core components of a capabilities approach: agency and substantive freedom.

It does so by orienting practitioners to working with and promoting young people in a way that recognises and invests in their aspirations and talents.

While interest in youth foyers from government and advocates has grown in Australia, rigorous research on their effectiveness has lagged (Steen & MacKenzie 2016). The EFY Foyer evaluation was designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the model and its impact. This five-year longitudinal study of the three Victorian EFY Foyers conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Launch Housing is the first to follow a population of foyer participants from entry through exit and beyond.

This report describes the outcomes of 162 EFY Foyer participants who exited between September 2013 and July 2017, making them eligible for a twelve-month post-exit survey. They represent 98% of participants who exited after a three-month trial period. Outcomes were estimated using mixed effects regression models to adjust for survey attrition over time. This produces a conservative estimate of EFY Foyer impact.

At entry, EFY Foyer participants are committed to pursuing education, but have struggled with homelessness

The EFY Foyer model targets young people aged 16 to 24 experiencing or at risk of homelessness who are committed to pursuing education and training, but hindered by a range

of personal, social and economic factors. They are more likely to be enrolled in education or training than the broader cohort of young people seeking Specialist Homelessness Services, but otherwise report similar experiences associated with homelessness. About 74% had experiences in state custody or supported care, including 33% from out-of-home care. A third did not feel safe in their homes and over half had lived in three or more places in the year prior to foyer. About 70% reported moderate or serious symptoms of mental distress.

EFY Foyers have a sustained impact on participant outcomes

The EFY Foyer evaluation finds that the model substantively improves participants' education, employment, housing, and health and wellbeing outcomes, and these improvements are largely sustained a year after exit. This is the first foyer evaluation to present rigorous evidence of sustained impacts after exit.

Education: strong gains in qualifications and continued participation in education and training after exit

EFY Foyer enabled participants to pursue the education qualifications necessary to sustainable employment. The percentage who had completed at least Year 12 or a Certificate III increased from 42% at entry to 67% at exit and to 75% a year after exit. By exit, about 30% of participants had completed an education qualification higher than at entry, and a year later about 46% had done so.

Of those who had not completed a higher education qualification, 70% were still enrolled a year after exit. In total, about 70% of participants had either achieved a higher qualification or were still enrolled a year after exit.

These figures do not include qualifications attained below Year 12 or a Certificate III, such as the Certificate I in Developing Independence, completed by 76% of participants. Guided by the goal-setting and planning in Developing Independence, EFY Foyer participants were able to pursue courses aligned with their aspirations, including short courses to improve their employability and courses opening new pathways.

Employment: improved confidence in career management capability and transferable employability skills, with some gains in employment

EFY Foyer staff created opportunities for participants to find internships, work experience, mentors and jobs aligned with their goals and plans. Participants left foyers more confident in their capability to manage their careers and in their transferable employability skills in self-management and planning.

In the year after exit, about 85% of participants worked or studied. The percentage of participants employed, including in part-time or casual work, increased from 19% at entry to 31% at exit and 36% a year later.

Housing and living skills: improved independence and better conditions in a tough housing market

EFY Foyer developed participants' living skills and supported them in accessing decent housing by sourcing references and connections to real estate agencies, financial support for bond and rent, and family mediation services. As a result, participants gained and maintained substantially improved housing circumstances after exit in spite of a tough housing market.

Participants showed large improvements in their housing independence at exit that further improved a year after exit. The percentage living in their own place (renting or owning) increased from 7% at entry to 43% at exit, and to 51% a year later. Meanwhile, the percentage sleeping rough or living in crisis accommodation, treatment centres or detention declined from 32% at entry to 3% at exit, and to 2% a year later.

Housing stability and conditions also improved. About 60% of participants reported that they lived in one or two places in the year after exit, compared to 44% in the year before foyer entry. Almost all participants reported living in housing that met community standards and where they felt safe. Though crowding improved at exit (82% uncrowded), more participants reported crowding a year later (72% uncrowded).

EFY Foyer participants' confidence in their housing and financial capabilities increased markedly by foyer exit. However, a year later, confidence in financial capabilities had declined to entry levels. Participants were a bit more than 'somewhat confident' in their capability to pay rent and bills on time, plan and stick to a budget, save money, and navigate potential problems and support services. Confidence in capability to manage housing also decreased

a year after exit, but remained better than at entry. On average, participants were a bit more than 'somewhat confident' in their capability to find and apply for good, safe accommodation; sign a lease; access people or services for help; and have enough money to afford accommodation.

Participants may have learned to budget under the conditions of foyer's subsidised rent, then found they had less money to spare and fewer options in Melbourne's high-cost housing market. In response to alumni feedback, EFY Foyers now employ a Transitions Coordinator to aid participants in budgeting and planning for their transition out of foyer from six months before planned exit up to a year after exit.

Health and wellbeing: improved physical and mental health for some participants

EFY Foyers provide a safe and nurturing space to live, workshops on health topics, and opportunities to take up activities promoting wellbeing, such as sport, cooking, arts and other hobbies. They also offer referrals to counselling and health services.

Self-reported physical health improved only slightly on average. Participants aged 21 and older were especially likely to report improved physical health, having entered with much worse health than younger participants, then reaching parity by exit.

Mental health improvement depended on time spent at foyer, with participants staying between a year and two years most likely to improve. Differences by length of stay persisted a year after exit.

Social connection and civic participation: some difficulty sustaining connections after exit

Young people's sense of social support improved while at foyer, but dropped slightly after exit. Many interviewees spoke about how the foyer community felt like a family, but distance could make it difficult to maintain foyer friendships and sense of community. Currently, alumni can interact on social media and visit foyers when they wish, but this is largely ad hoc and informal. An EFY Foyer working group is developing a formal approach to keeping alumni connected.

Participants' civic participation, as measured by how often they used community facilities, remained modest and unchanged while at foyer and declined after exit. Civic participation was the last service offer developed and was given little attention until recently. While some participants took full advantage of opportunities to engage with local communities, others were focused on completing their education or finding work.

Prevent youth homelessness by investing in capabilities

The Education First Youth Foyer evaluation provides strong evidence that early, integrated investment in young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness supports sustained improved outcomes. Policy-makers must recognise that these young people are navigating a key phase of their life without the immense and varied support traditionally provided by families. To prevent chronic homelessness and social exclusion, government must step in to provide the stability, integrated support and mainstream opportunities that enable these young people to reach their potential.

Extract from the full report

Marion Coddou, Joseph Borlagdan & Shelley Mallett 2019, *Starting a future that means something to you: outcomes from a longitudinal study of Education First Youth Foyers*, Brotherhood of St Laurence & Launch Housing, Melbourne.