

Supporting positive leaving care and transition experiences

A report on the FACE TO FACE 4th National Forum – *The Superhero's Journey*

Sharyn Low

In August 2005, FACE TO FACE convened a national forum in Brisbane bringing a unique perspective to the discussion of better outcomes for young people as they leave care.

FACE TO FACE is a national partnership forum of consumers, governments, carers and service providers involved in the out-of-home care sector for children and young people. The partnership is convened by CREATE Foundation and supported by a National Steering Committee of stakeholder representatives from States and Territories.

The principles of FACE TO FACE – collaboration, participation, partnership and learning – provide a framework through which to seek a range of innovative solutions to known issues within the care system.

This forum, *'The Superhero's Journey' – Supporting positive leaving care and transition experiences*, was the fourth in a series of forums that bring together stakeholders from across States and Territories.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 199 people participated in the forum. Of these, there were 32 young people, 16 carers, 104 non-government service providers (includes CREATE staff), 34 government service providers and policy staff and 13 'other' presenters.

PROGRAM

The program involved:

- young people's stories;
- snapshots on leaving care from all states and territories;

- an information market place showcasing services, tools and resources from around the country and New Zealand;
- covering topics such as – latest research, policy frameworks, service delivery models, practice issues, measuring outcomes, Indigenous issues, NESB, disability, youth justice, education and employment;
- group work by the delegates based on information presented that worked towards developing models for better practice initiatives;
- state and territory recommendations.

EXPERIENCES OF LEAVING CARE

Permission was granted by the following young people to include their stories as part of this report. Special thanks to these young people who shared with us at the Forum:

Lee

Hi, my name is Lee. I'm 20 and am living in shared housing through a youth agency.

When I was 17 I was living with a foster carer. I was told by my Family Support Officer that I would have to move out.

I was scared because I didn't want to go. I had found a place I thought I could call my home.

My carer didn't have any idea how I felt. I told her I was fine with the situation.

Eventually it played on my head more as time got closer. I started to push my foster carer and the other kids in the home away.

That's when she realised something was up. I had an outburst, and went to my room and started packing my stuff. I thought I was going to get kicked out and would have to leave straight away.

Instead of letting me pack, she asked me what was going on. She said that she didn't want me to go. She told me she was happy for me to stay on with her even though I was turning 18. After that I realised how much she cared for me and I wasn't just in her job description.

I stayed on with her for about 8 months after my 18th.

She helped me sort out a plan. I paid board and I helped out around the house with the kids when I could – it wasn't part of my responsibility, but I wanted to do it.

She made it official by giving me rent receipts. This helped me get used to paying rent and looking after myself. When we

Table 1 Participants

	TOTAL	Young people	Carers	Gov't workers	Community Service Providers inc CREATE staff	Other
ACT	10	2	2	4	2	
NSW	36	5	4	3	24	
NT	1				1	
QLD	38	6	2	9	21	
SA	23	6	2	4	11	
TAS	5	2	1	1	1	
VIC	44	2	2	11	29	
WA	29	9	3	2	15	
Other	13					13
	199	32	16	34	104	13

started doing food shopping, she taught me how to get a bargain to get more for your money – all the little skills.

She didn't rush me, or ask me when I was going to move out. She just let me do it in my own time. That made our bond stronger.

Now, even though she doesn't have to, she feeds and clothes me and looks after me still.

Hayley

I learnt a lot through my transition experience. And because my Family Support Officer (FSO) was pretty new to the job, I think she learnt a lot too. I'd like to think that her experiences were as positive as mine. I actually did have a positive experience. Which I believe is fairly unusual with limited funding, time, and lack of preparation contributing to perhaps not the best, most productive experience possible.

I'd like to share with you a few key things that satisfied me about my transition.

I think the main one was my own initiative. I was encouraged to take my own initiative and also given the opportunity to do so. An example of this would be the time half way into year 12 when I needed a new placement. I wasn't prepared to go back into traditional foster care, however I felt that immediate independent living would be too much. So I sought a college lifestyle at a local uni campus. A kind of transitional transition ... if you know what I mean. To achieve this, my FSO asked me to do some research. So I did. I approached the colleges and got one of them to agree to a meeting. I did all the figuring out of the finer details and presented it to my FSO. She then had to get her manager to approve. I really appreciated that she explained the structure to me that it wasn't her call, it was the manager's call.

So she actually arranged that afternoon for the manager to give me a lift home which gave me 15 minutes to sell the idea directly to her. That's what I mean when I talk about giving me the opportunity to take my own initiative.

Another thing that made my transition memorable was my FSO's attitude.

She helped me get excited about it ... I think, despite how exciting it should and can be, some young people can get quite despondent about the whole thing. It's a scary world out there and a couple of thousand bucks doesn't make it better but we didn't take that focus ... we talked about the awesome opportunities the money I was given would make for me ... TAFE courses, textbooks, driving lessons ... it's all great stuff and I'm glad she was so positive about it.

And finally, when I was set up in my own apartment, doing all the things I had set out to do ... it was really great when she followed me up. I was fine, didn't really need a hand but she called and came and visited me. I liked showing her my new place and what I had achieved.

I was proud of that and it made me feel great to know she was interested.

Tim

Hi, my name is Tim and I'm 17 years old. I have been in care with the same carers since I was 4 months old, but over the past few years I have been learning to take care of myself, at school mainly but also at home with help from my foster parents.

When I turn 18, I'll probably stay living with my foster parents because I haven't really thought about whether I'll leave yet.

I've been learning how to maintain a healthy diet, how to clean, how to manage my money, how to organise my time creatively and most importantly, how to cook and stay home and look after myself.

Lance

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Lance and I am 17 years old. I first entered the foster care system at the age of two and have since spent 11 years enjoying a happy comfortable lifestyle in the care of 3 different foster families. Early last year I moved back with my mother and was soon referred to Wanslea Family Services in Western Australia. With my mother being a single parent with 5 boys to look after, all of which are younger than me, I felt it was inevitable for me to move out.

At this point of my life I'm starting serious study and need to get away from all the distractions at home. Wanslea has helped me greatly with this. My youth worker has formed a plan with outlines for me to be able to move out into appropriate accommodation. This includes helping me find a job, manage my money properly, i.e. budgeting, and providing me with plenty of help when dealing with other services, including advocating to DCD on my behalf. Marissa, my youth worker at Wanslea, has always talked to me and involved me in decisions about my future. She has also encouraged me to explore all my options and motivated me to get on and do it.

By the end of this year, maybe early next year, I hope to have gained enough skills and knowledge to (1) successfully live independently, and (2) be financially in the black, always keeping in touch with both my youth workers and DCD for support.

Marie

Hi, I'm Marie. I'm 19. I'm currently in an Independent Living Program. It's a program which is a step to living on your own. I live with a roommate. We get along well. I meet a worker about once a week to see how things are going. They do everything – if you wanted emotional support, money, any sort of support, they'll help.

Home life with my foster mum wasn't good before I moved into the program, so I didn't talk to her for about a year.

About six months ago we started to reconnect and have been getting along really well. We've got an understanding, and I know that I've got something more positive there.

I'm happy where I am, close to work, friends, family and shops. I want to work on getting my motorbike licence and continue working with CREATE.

KEY OUTCOMES

The key outcomes of the forum include:

Leaving care across Australia

States and Territories provided a current picture of leaving care in their respective jurisdictions including policy and legislative requirements, initiatives supporting leaving care practice, specific leaving care services, and approaches to measuring outcomes and success for young people.

Collectively, these reports provided a national snapshot of what was happening in leaving care across the country.

Experiences of leaving care

Many of the young people participating in the forum shared their stories and experiences of leaving care. Other stakeholders were also involved in sharing their experiences of providing care and working in this area. Young people's stories provided a foundation for the forum to focus its endeavors and achieve its aims.

Their stories provided first hand insight into the experiences young people face when transitioning from care and the lead up to this important life event. These experiences included:

- feeling nervous and scared about moving out on your own;
- not feeling prepared when moving out;
- not being able to find suitable accommodation and services to assist in finding somewhere to live;
- foster carers provided ongoing support well after the age of 18;
- some had completed independent living skills courses whilst others were taught these skills by their carers, and others who had no preparation at all;
- selling their ideas and needs to caseworkers with the hope of having their needs met;
- relying on shelters and emergency accommodation;
- falling into the cycle of drugs and dealers.

Research and the challenges ahead

A panel of Australian researchers creatively presented what they had found through their research. Areas covered included the needs and experience of young people in care,

the costs of meeting and not meeting those needs, the factors that impact on young people achieving positive outcomes, and what is needed to improve those outcomes. This provided an overview of Australian research into leaving care and the challenges that lay ahead.

Blueprint for leaving care

Participants examined key elements involved in preparing young people for leaving care, supporting their transition and providing post-care support. These elements included areas of need, responses required to meet those needs, and case planning processes to guide ongoing assessment, planning and review. Each element was considered in terms of what was currently happening in the sector, identifiable gaps in what was happening, and a vision for how it should be. Collectively, this provided a blueprint for leaving care.

Moving forward

Participants worked on four pathways for progressing the leaving care blueprint. The four pathways were policy, targeted services, practice, and learning and outcomes. Key themes relevant to each of the pathways were identified from the activities already undertaken in the forum. The themes for each of the pathways were prioritised by participants and examined in terms of what they wanted to achieve and how it could be achieved. Collectively, this provided a set of priorities and proposals for moving forward in establishing policy, developing targeted services, enhancing practice, and measuring learning and outcomes.

State and Territory commitment to action

Stakeholders considered the outcomes of the forum in their State and Territory groups and identified priorities for their jurisdiction and initial plans of action. This provided a statement of commitment from each State and Territory and a foundation for action post-forum.

National commitment to action

FACE TO FACE Steering Committee members and invited participants considered the outcomes of the forum and how they as stakeholder groups could support achievement of forum outcomes at a State and Territory level.

Representatives identified priorities and strategies that could be pursued:

- by their national organisations (CREATE Foundation, Australian Foster Care Association, Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia, and Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care);
- through briefing Ministers of relevant State and Territory departments and mechanisms such as the Community Services Ministers Council;
- through collaboration between stakeholder groups at a national level.

This provided a national commitment to support States and Territories in pursuing the outcomes of the forum.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations arising from the forum were:

- Young people in care and post-care should have access to the same opportunities as other young people in the community.
- Leaving care is a process not an event. Planning for leaving care should start on entry to care and should be responsive to the developmental needs of children and young people at different life stages and transition points.
- Greater attention to stability of placements and relationships, consistency of school attended and educational attainment will improve outcomes for children and young people when they are in care and when they have left care. Young people's perception of security is critical to understanding stability.
- Many young people will return to, or make contact with, their families when they leave care. It is therefore essential that contact be maintained between children and their families, and that opportunities are provided to assist children and young people understand their separation and family history, and manage family relationships and conflicts.
- Major practice themes highlighted included inclusive case planning, enhanced relationships between the young person and their worker, improving the knowledge and capacity of those caring for and working with young people leaving care and ensuring the relevance of policy in practice.
- Children and young people in care and those leaving care require access to a range of services provided or funded by Government, not just those provided directly or funded by statutory welfare departments. Further work is required in ensuring access and assisting other government departments in understanding and responding to the needs of children and young people in care and post-care.
- Specific areas of service delivery highlighted included greater educational and employment opportunities, greater access to and stability of housing, greater use of specialist programs (mentoring, empowerment and recreation based), progressive development of independent living skills, improved access to case files, and greater capacity to reconnect young people with their families.
- There is an urgent need for greater flexibility and responsiveness in policy development and the delivery of services to meet the needs of young people and to be

more reflective of the wider general community. Current government approaches to managing risk are not compatible with children and young people's developmental needs to take risks and learn. Policy development must be better coordinated across government departments at State and Federal levels to ensure consistency and enhance integration.

- Foster carers involved in continuing to provide care and support for young people who have left care must be actively supported, including remuneration for costs of providing such care and support.
- The personal, social and economic costs of not meeting the needs of young people leaving care are prohibitive and preventable.
- Young people leaving care and post-care should have access to the same opportunities regardless of the State or Territory in which they live. Minimum standards for leaving care should be developed across States and Territories to promote equity of opportunity and improve consistency.
- In line with social and demographic trends, young people requiring ongoing support post-care should have access to the necessary services and resources until 25 years of age.
- There is urgent need to develop and collect baseline data in relation to young people leaving care and to identify indicators of successful transition from care.
- A greater emphasis is required on evaluation and research to improve the evidence base for policy, service, and practice development, and thereby improve outcomes for young people leaving care.

□

The National Snapshot on leaving care and the full report of the Forum can be found at <www.create.org.au/f2f> or by contacting the FACE TO FACE Coordinator:

Sharyn Low from Matrix On Board
Tel: 02 4572 3079, Fax: 02 4572 3972
Email: sharyn@mob.com.au