

PARITY SPEECH

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Like so many of the young people I work with I was not given the best start in life. I had an alcoholic father, a mother with mental health issues and was a victim of abuse. As I entered my teenage years my world began to unravel. I pursued a world of drugs, crime, self harm and men. I was kicked out of home and sent to live with strangers. As a result I absconded, did more drugs, more crime, more self harm and more bad relationships. I was neatly placed in the too hard basket by teachers, family and workers. I moved 11 times in 18 months. The future looked bleak and survival, uncertain. I was hard to love and harder to believe in.

However, despite my behaviors and my lifestyle choices I had one worker who stood by me, who saw something in me that others didn't. She worked hard to ensure my transition from care would give me the best chance to succeed. My transition was a smooth process, I moved from ACP to lead tenant, to transitional housing and finally into private rental. My worker was with me every step of the way. Supporting me, educating me and advocating for me. At each phase, I developed my living skills, my understanding of independence and ability to succeed. By the time I moved into private rental I was confident that I could survive without the intense support that I had received to this point. I knew how to pay bills, apply for jobs, connect utilities and how to live off a budget. I know that if any of the phases had been missed a long the way I would not have learnt all of the skills required to survive in the real world.

I started as a residential worker when I was 21 years old. I didn't know a lot but I believed whole heartedly that every young person has within them the potential to succeed, I knew what I had needed as a young person in care – the things I didn't get and the things I did, and I knew that every young person needs somebody to care.

Throughout my time working in the out of home care sector I have seen numerous young people exit the care system. I want to share the stories of two of these young people.

First was a young man who had all the necessary qualities and characteristics to succeed. He was resilient, intelligent, was able to hold down a job and had a great sense of humor, which helped him through the tough times. He had some emerging mental health issues but was proactive in dealing with this. Anyone who worked with this young man had no doubt that he would make it on his own.

Secondly was a young woman who had a different story, she appeared to be at the other end of the spectrum. She was a beautiful young woman but it seemed as though the odds were stacked against her. She had an intellectual disability, was involved in extremely high risk behavior and to be honest there were not many that were brave enough to believe that she would make it to her 18th birthday. She was unable to care for herself, yet did not have the option of living

with family, she was still sitting in residential care after 18th birthday because no one knew what to do with her.

Despite predictions, the journeys for these young people did not go the way we first thought. The young man who had everything going for took a similar transition path as I did. He moved from residential care to lead tenant to transitional house but this is where his path unraveled. He was not provided with the support, education and advocacy that I had. He had not been taught the required living skills and so found himself in debt, scared, lonely and isolated.

The young woman who on the surface looked as though she would be stuck in a cycle of homelessness is now thriving, she has stable and secure housing and most encouraging of all, she is happy. The difference for this young woman is that she was given adequate support, she had workers who believed in her and helped her to learn and to develop. Despite her ID and high risk behaviors she and the fearful predictions held by professionals she is living independently without requiring ongoing support from homelessness services.

Successful leaving care transitions cannot be predicted by behaviors, characteristics or luck. It comes down to the support and education that we as a sector provide each individual young person.

The sector has a role to play in filling the gaps in the system but without the appropriate resources this is an impossible feat. Leadership in this area must come from the people elected. From my own experience and the stories that I have just shared with you all, I believe that there are a number of integral elements that are required in order to give young people transitioning from care the best chance for success. Today I would like to speak about a few of them.

This is my call to the government.

1. Leaving Care Plans

Up to 2000 young people leave out of home care each year. The Create foundations transitioning from Care report card, revealed that 69% of young people leaving care either do not have or were not aware of having a leaving care plan.

I find it frustrating that there is not a specific Leaving Care Plan document. I am baffled as to why there is not a document in place that help to guide the practice of case managers, child protection workers, carers and other professionals responsible for the exit planning of young people. There is a document for almost anything you could think of but in one of the most important areas of a young person's life it is absent.

A specific Leaving Care Plan would ensure that professionals were covering every aspect of exit planning. It would provide a level of accountability to professionals and ensure that a young persons exit from care has been well planned. I see that this kind of document could sit under the umbrella of Looking

After Children (LAC). A working document that outlines goals to be achieved leading up to a young persons exit and clear plans for the young person post care. If this was to sit with LAC it would also ensure participation of the young people.

Being involved in the plan

The number one key to my transition from care running so smoothly was that I was included in the plan, I knew each step in advance – I owned the plan, it was my plan and so I wanted it to work.

Active involvement of young people in the leaving care planning and decision making process is essential. You and I do not have to live out these plans but the young people do. If the young people don't feel as though they are part of the process or that their desires are heard then they will not participate in the process. Many of them have spent years rebelling against the system because they feel as though they have no control over decisions made about their lives. This is one area that we need the young people to feel some control over in order for them to have the best outcomes.

Ongoing support

We are living in an era where people are still living with their families in their mid to late twenties and hence being provided with the on going stability, support and financial benefit that goes with this. – however many of the young people that we work with do not have this option. Accordingly, a government needs to acknowledge their responsibility to these young people as their corporate parent.

I believe that all support services need to extend to the age of 25. It has been encouraging to see progress in this area but there is still a way to go. Services that provide support for health, education, jobs training, financial assistance and the like need to be easily accessible for young people post care and up to 25 years of age.

Adequate time and resources must be spent on services aimed at improving mental and emotional well being to reduce the impact of past experiences on a young persons future development. For many young people the affects of past trauma and feelings associated with having been in out of home care, do not start to surface until they have left the care system. I believe that any young person that has been in out of home care should be entitled to free psychological services if and when they are ready.

Best Practice standards for leaving care

Currently, one third of young people leave care with case plans that release them into programs for homeless people. This statistic was revealed in a study conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Excellence. In my experience, this percentage has not shifted nearly enough.

We need a standard that ensures young people are not exiting care into inappropriate accommodation. This would put an end to the all too common practice of exiting young people into refuges, boarding houses and other forms of temporary accommodation.

These standards would also make certain that case managers, child protection and other professionals had a level of accountability when planning for a young persons exit from care.

I am horrified and still often shudder when I recall early on in my career, the amount of meetings I have attended where professionals have said "just keep them alive until they are 18. For a short time I adopted this same belief. If we kept them alive to their 18th birthday then we had done our job. This attitude is dangerous and totally unfair. If that is all we have done then we have failed. We have done our job when we can say to ourselves and to each other that we have done everything in our power to give each young person the best chance possible.

I know that leaving care can be done well. I know it from my own personal experience and I know it from my professional experience. We just need to believe that it can be done.

All of us need support and lucky for most of us we have it on tap. It is easy to pick up the phone and in an instant have someone on the other end loving us, encouraging us and supporting us. For many of our young people it is a very different story. When they turn 18 and say goodbye to the child protection system they often also say goodbye to the only safe people in their life, the only encouragement they receive and the only support they know. You and I couldn't do life on our own so how can we expect some of the most vulnerable people in society to go it alone.

Today I call on the government to acknowledge the crisis this sector is facing and to take action in order to gain positive outcomes for young people leaving care. I call on all of us to remember that although our duty of care as a statutory body may cease when a young person turns 18 but our duty of care as a community does not.