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Breaking the cycle of homelessness for young parents needs a lot more than roofs over heads

Providing accommodation only is not nearly enough to address the complex challenges and traumatic experiences confronted by homeless young parents.

According to Brendan Bourke, Head of **yourtown's** Client Services, which includes a homelessness service for young parents in Sydney, any solution put forward to reduce the number of homeless young parents must recognise the exceptional complexities they and their children face.

"For 35 years, **yourtown's** San Miguel Family Centre in North Richmond has been providing not just temporary accommodation but also counselling and tailored initiatives that help families tackle the issues that cause homelessness. Last year, we changed our service model to focus on young families only – and for good reason," Mr Bourke said.

"Young parents make up an alarmingly large proportion of young people aged 12–24 years experiencing homelessness, with approximately 10,000 young parents in Australia requiring support from specialist homelessness services each year.¹

"Despite this need, there are limited services available for young parents and most fail to look at the complex and traumatic situations these young people and their children have experienced.

"The youngest homeless parent at San Miguel to date has been 15 years old with the average age of most parents at the centre around 19. Many should still be at home with mum or dad but sadly this is often not an option.

"Of the more than 116,000 people in Australia who are homeless, over a third say family violence or relationship breakdown is why they are homeless.²

"Tragically, an exceptional number of young parents who sought refuge at San Miguel last year were victims of either chronic sexual abuse or had been sexually assaulted, some by members of their own family.

"Added to this, many had had extreme difficulty just securing a roof over their head when they became a parent let alone the help needed to address challenges and thrive."

According to San Miguel Manager Alison Schneidereit, a teenage mum who came to San Miguel had been under the care of the NSW Government for two years due to allegations of sustained sexual abuse by a family member.

"She had been couch surfing and had had several accommodation and support placements by the NSW Government. During her most recent placement she became pregnant and was forced to leave the accommodation service because it wasn't equipped to support young parents," Ms Schneidereit said.

"There were few options available to her and she again found herself in an unsafe situation. Fortunately, she was able to access a place at San Miguel.

"Over a nine month period we looked at why she was homeless in the first place, working with her to establish positive healthy relationships. Using our unique Expressive Therapy program we helped her and her child to work through past trauma and create a secure parent-child relationship. We also focused on developing independent living skills and provided links to employment options as well as legal, medical and other specialist services. We gave her the support needed to find a way forward."

Mr Bourke said **yourtown** is highly supportive of the New South Wales Premier's commitment to reducing youth homelessness and the number of children and young people at risk of significant harm, but to do this with any measure of effectiveness the solution must be multifaceted.

"We know that when young parents secure sustainable housing and employment the life prospects of their children also improve dramatically, breaking the cycle of homelessness and welfare dependence - but this is not an easy journey," he said.

"Any solution for young parents must include an assessment of the complexity of situations faced by young parents, combined with safe accommodation, therapeutic case management, practical skills development and training.

"Just providing a roof over their heads will never be enough."

The San Miguel Family Centre can accommodate up to 19 families, including 40 children at any one time and is usually filled to capacity. The Centre is 97% funded by the **yourtown** Art Union.

yourtown is a registered charity and public company providing services young people can access to find jobs, learn skills, become great parents and live safe, happy lives. For over 57 years we've been tackling the issues impacting young people in Australia - like youth unemployment and mental health, and we take on issues like family and domestic violence. The community, including **yourtown's** Art Unions, funds most of what we do.

-ENDS-

INTERVIEW/PHOTO OPPORTUNITIES

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¹ Ella Kuskoff, Submission No 1 to the Australian Human Rights Commission, 'National Children's Commissioner's Investigation into Young Parents and their Children', 1, citing Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist homelessness services 2014- 2015* (2015).

² Homelessness Australia (2018) 'Homelessness in Australia' <https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/sites/homelessnessaus/files/2017-07/Homelessness%20in%20Australia2.pdf>, accessed 1 August 2018.