



**yourtown**  
POWERING **kids**helpline

## **Redesigning Family Preservation in NSW**

A submission to the Department of  
Communities and Justice, NSW  
Government

**May 2024**

Authorised by Tracy Adams,  
Chief Executive Officer, **yourtown**

**email:** [advocacy@yourtown.com.au](mailto:advocacy@yourtown.com.au) **tel:** 0421 956 262

**yourtown** is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

### San Miguel: yourtown's child-centred family residential service

For over 40 years **yourtown**'s San Miguel has been providing a child-centred family residential service in Western Sydney. San Miguel is a tertiary residential parenting program for young parents up to the age of 25 and their children who have experienced trauma and are at risk of harm. The service has a focus on family preservation and restoration and can currently house 17 families.

For up to 12 months, families have access to:

- **Secure and sustainable housing** – as well as developing rental experience and preparing to enter the open housing market.
- **Hands on development** – of parenting skills including routines, home safety, health, sleeping, feeding and understanding of trauma.
- **Individual and group activities** – to support families to set and achieve goals in relation to practical life skills (e.g. personal hygiene, cooking, caring for a house), personal development, health and wellbeing, community connection, parenting, financial independence and housing stability. Alongside building positive relationships with others for both parents and children.
- **Specialist and intensive support** – through an integrated trauma-informed and client-centred program, which includes an onsite counsellor and access to health professionals.
- **Therapeutic assessments** – for parents and children who have experienced or are experiencing trauma.
- **Family casework** – that incorporates child development, parenting and therapeutic responses.
- **After hours and crisis support**, and
- An additional **Six months of transitional outreach support** – to help families make a successful transition to independent living.

**yourtown** predominantly self-funds San Miguel, with fee for service income also derived from referral fees from the Department of Communities and Justice.

### Our New South Wales services

#### *Additional Family Programs*

- **Transitional Housing**, for women and their children transitioning out of crisis DFV support. A safe and supportive environment for 6-12 months. With support for legal and financial matters, accessing services, schools and pre-employment support.

#### *Mental Health*

- **Kids Helpline**, free and confidential 24/7 phone and online support for any young person aged 5 – 25.
- **Kids Helpline @ School** an early intervention and prevention program to improve students' mental health literacy, resilience, and help-seeking skills in Primary and High Schools
- **My Circle**, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- **Contingent Psychology Services** since 2020, backfilling school psychologist vacancies through tele-counselling for students in hard to fill locations or covering staff leave.
- **Niggle**, an evidence-backed wellbeing toolkit to help young people self-manage their mental health and wellbeing and connect with others experiencing similar challenges.

### *Employment and Education*

- **Social Enterprises**, providing 15–25-year-olds across Western Sydney with paid work experience and training as a 'stepping-stone' to employment since 2006, and
- **Get Back in the Game**, supporting 15 to 19 years olds in Western and South Western Sydney to successfully transition from school to work or further education.

### **Other services provided outside of New South Wales**

- **Young Parent Program** providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments, and
- **Early Childhood Development Programs**, working with families to enhance education engagement and outcomes for vulnerable preschool-aged children
- **ParentsNext**, specialised support for young parents with children under 6 years, to plan and prepare for employment
- **Domestic and family violence refuge**, accommodation, and therapeutic support for young parents with children, including post-refuge support
- **Parentline**, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- **Employment and educational programs** to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment.
- **Mental health service/s**, face to face for children and young people with moderate mental health needs

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Communities and Justices' (DCJ) redesigning Family Preservation in NSW discussion paper. While **yourtown** supports a redesign of the Family Preservation model in NSW and agrees with its aims, it is disappointing that a residential model has not been considered or included, particularly for vulnerable families experiencing high levels of trauma and persistent disadvantage.

For over 40 years **yourtown**'s San Miguel has been providing a child-centred family residential service, with intensive individualised support for young parents and their children. Given our extensive experience in providing this residential service alongside our services supporting children, young people and families with mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV) we are well positioned to provide feedback to the discussion paper and redesign.

### **Residential support for families in the Family Preservation system**

Many families in the Family Preservation system are experiencing or are at risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. Children experiencing homelessness are an especially vulnerable population, more likely to experience mental health problems, food insecurity and disruptive education, child abuse or neglect.<sup>1</sup> When parents are caring for children while living in highly unstable housing, on the street or couch surfing there is an increased risk of children being removed.<sup>2</sup> In order to develop a Family Preservation system that is evidence-based and responsive to the diverse needs of families, there must be consideration of the critical housing needs of families.

We know that when families are homeless, it multiplies the multitude of other complex issues and risk factors they are experiencing such as poor wellbeing, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, residential care history, contact with the justice system, and lack of support networks.<sup>3</sup> Intervening earlier in the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and complex trauma is key to helping young families achieve long-term positive outcomes and keeping children out of care<sup>4</sup>. To do this successfully we must start by addressing their housing needs.

The Housing First approach to homelessness states that immediate practical needs such as shelter, food and safety must be met before beginning to address more complex issues that the family is experiencing.<sup>5</sup> Unless we assist families to have safe and stable housing we cannot support families to stay together and keep children from entering out-of-home care. Once family stress is reduced and parents have the psychological space needed to think beyond day-to-day survival, activities can target the core elements that the discussion paper and framework identifies such as: family and parent support, therapeutic support, healing and child-focused support.

*"Here [San Miguel] it's like, it's our home. I've never had a home. I've always been in drug houses or institutionalised care. Here's my chance to be the best mum I can be."*

*San Miguel Client (2023)*

Residential family preservation support provides more than just shelter for these vulnerable families. By paying a small amount of rent, signing a rental agreement and having home inspections, families develop budgeting skills, an understanding of landlord expectations and a rental history which can assist families to obtain a private lease when transitioning to

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2020). *Australia's Children* (Cat. No. CWS 69).

<sup>2</sup> Common Ground Queensland & Michah Projects (2016). *Families caught in the homelessness and child protection cycle: A supportive housing model for keeping families together*. Common Ground Queensland.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (2017). *Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect*.

<sup>4</sup> Boulden, K. (2010). *What it takes: Supporting pregnant and parenting young people*. Association of Women Educators.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. (2022). *Housing First: An evidence review of implementation, effectiveness and outcomes*

independent housing. This helps these families to achieve long-term positive outcomes, including keeping children out of child protection and keeping families together. A residential model also allows families to learn from each other, share stories, and form positive relationships.<sup>6</sup>

We cannot protect those most at risk if we are not looking at ensuring the ultimate safety net is in place – safe and secure housing. At **yourtown** we recognise the importance of intervening early in the cycle of homelessness, and the earlier we intervene, the more impact we can have. In order to have an effective Family Preservation model in NSW it is critical that housing insecurity and homelessness are addressed through inclusion of a residential component.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

**That the NSW Family Preservation system recognise the importance of creating safety and security through housing, by including a residential component to the Families Together Framework and provide appropriate funding for these services.**

### **Residential support for young parents**

For young parents, parenthood often presents a range of different and complex challenges compared to those experienced of older parents. These challenges include developmental maturity, reduced life experience and parenting knowledge, reduced education and employment, less stable financial situation, insecure housing, the social stigma associated with young parenting and resulting social isolation.<sup>7</sup>

Experiencing DFV, low socio-economic disadvantage or poverty, intergenerational cycles of out-of-home care and teenage motherhood, drug and alcohol abuse, and coming from a First Nations background are all risk factors for becoming parents at a young age.<sup>8,9,10</sup> This level of significant trauma is reflected in the young parents we support, with:

- 100% of current parents having a lived experience of DFV
- 61% of young mothers having experienced sexual abuse including incest
- 46% having a history of OOHC
- 63% having a history of alcohol and other drugs
- 60% being single parents
- 54% being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders
- 20% being fathers

*"I came here because I'm a young parent, but the only reason why I'm staying here is that I need the help, because things went wrong a lot earlier. A lot stuff, like a long time ago before I became a parent. I have tried throughout the years, but it's, it's very hard to change the only way I've ever known to be. And it, like I said, it's been normal. It's how I was raised. I just need someone, I just needed someone to not give up, someone to stand by you."*

*San Miguel Client (2023)*

---

<sup>6</sup> Rapsey, C. M., & Rolston, C. J. (2020). Fostering the family, not just the child: Exploring the value of a residential family preservation programme from the perspectives of service users and staff. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108, 104505.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). *Support young people leaving out-of-home care*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). *Teenage mothers in Australia 2015* (Cat. No. PER 93).

<sup>10</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2017). *The rights and needs of young parents and their children: A summary of key findings from the Children's Rights Report 2017*.

Children born to young parents are at an increased risk of a range of poorer long-term emotional, cognitive and behavioural outcomes.<sup>11</sup> These children are 15 times more likely to be placed in out of home care (OOHC), more likely to have future contact with the justice system, use social welfare and mental health services.<sup>12</sup>

In view of these challenges, the evidence clearly shows that young parents represent a highly disadvantaged group of parents whose experience of parenthood is more likely to be testing, and whose children are more likely to be at risk of harm. Those with complex needs and high levels of trauma are often situated within a context of social exclusion and entrenched disadvantage and many face barriers to accessing the intensive support services that they need. They require support services designed to meet their specific need and can require increased parenting and life-skills than older parents. This includes providing long-term intensive support in order to build trust and effectively address the complexity of issues these young parents and their families are facing, as well as transitional support as they move out of the service.

*"I've never really had family support. I was out on the streets when I was 15. Yeah. Almost got locked up. Got sent to South Australia so I didn't get locked up cause I was always stealing stuff and for fraud and all sorts as a teenager. So I had a rough life."*

*San Miguel Client (2023)*

Young parents are also particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. Over 37% of people experiencing homelessness are children and young people (aged up to 24), with 14% percent children under the age of 12.<sup>13</sup> At San Miguel, our young parents may have been thrown out by their parents after telling them about their pregnancy, or the relationship may have become strained due to the arrival of the baby. Insecure housing can be due to battles over custody or the client's partner's behaviours and DFV. With long social housing wait lists making it difficult for them to find their own accommodation, and for those under 18 unable to sign a rental release, many young parents are left homelessness or in insecure housing. The Department of Communities and Justices' assessment of families includes the safety of the home. When this is assessed as being 'unsafe' or 'high risk' families are unable to reside in the home, putting the family into housing insecurity or homelessness.

*"I had four kids, no one was able to house us. So, my biggest concern was losing my children because I couldn't have a roof over their head."*

*San Miguel Client (2023)*

While community-based support can be effective for many families within the family preservation system, those at high-risk, with significant trauma and experiencing homelessness benefit from the long-term intensive support that at residential service like San Miguel can provide. By providing safe residential accommodation and long-term intensive support to young parents and their children, we can address the complex and inter-related issues through an integrated, trauma-informed program. Helping to strengthen young parents' socio-emotional and physical well-being, parenting knowledge, life skills, support networks/systems, and independence, support children's socio-emotional well-being, development, and school readiness, and enhance child well-being and safety.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). *Australia's Children* (Cat. No. CWS 69).

<sup>12</sup> Fry, T. (2018) Forecasting future outcomes: Stronger Communities Investment Unit – 2018 Insights Report. NSW Government

<sup>13</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). Estimating Homelessness: Census. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>

<sup>14</sup> Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (2015). *Families with complex needs: International approaches* [In focus]. Wellington, NZ: Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit.

When DCJ refers families to San Miguel, it is because they have classed them as 'high-risk' and that their needs can no longer be met through the current Intensive Family Preservation (IFP) system. Without the inclusion of a residential component to the Families Together Framework or the Family Preservation system, we are failing these families and children. Carly\* is one example of a young parent who's needs and those of her children could not be met through the IFP service.

*Carly\*, an Aboriginal mother was referred to San Miguel in 2022 by DCJ along with her 3 children. At the time of referral, Carly's 3 children were not in her care and all 3 children had been removed in 2018 due to exposure to DFV, parental alcohol and other drug misuse, neglect, and abuse. In addition, the property Carly had been residing in was in a serious state of disrepair and was assessed as being unsafe for Carly and her children. DCJ referred the family to San Miguel due to the children's experiencing a breakdown in their placement.*

*Reunification had been a focus of DCJ family action planning for a significant amount of time and informed DCJ's decision to make a referral to San Miguel. Through advocacy of the DCJ caseworker and in agreeance with court, Carly was able to move into San Miguel with her 3 children while Carly was in the process of a Section 90.*

*The family resided at San Miguel for approx. 10 months. During this time San Miguel was able to support Carly and her children to have a safe and stable home where the children were able to attend school consistently as well as rebuild attachment with Carly after being away from her care for a significant amount of time, continue with NDIS support, access to counselling, address concerns around relational safety through a combination of day-to-day casework, groupwork (Love Bites Program) and counselling. San Miguel were also able to support Carly to access a local Aboriginal organisation, so she and her children were able to reconnect with culture. Through this, Carly and her children were able to be supported to receive their confirmation of Aboriginality.*

*During her time at San Miguel, Carly became an advocate of Indigenous rights and played a crucial role in an onsite flag raising ceremony. Carly engaged well with services and in late 2022, through self-advocacy and advocacy from San Miguel and DCJ, Carly was permitted by the court to return to her local community with her children while continuing to navigate through the Section 90 process. At the time of writing this case study in 2024, we believe Carly's 3 children continue to remain in her care.*

*\*name changed to protect anonymity*

#### **Recommendation 2:**

**That the NSW Family Preservation system prioritise the service gap and inter-relationships between homelessness and child protection, particularly for young parents who are a highly vulnerable group.**

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission or to arrange a visit to our San Miguel site, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at [advocacy@yourtown.com.au](mailto:advocacy@yourtown.com.au).