

Transition from Care position paper (Raise the Leaving Care Age to 21)



CAFFSA ELECTION POLICY POSITION

Young people transitioning from care

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Across jurisdictions in Australia, there is a growing awareness of the need for the continuation of support for young people under Guardianship as they make the transition to living independently from the out of home care system they have grown up in. This has resulted in changes to legislation and governments across Australia making various commitments to formalising the continuation of support to young people until the age of 21.

CAFFSA takes that position that the Government of South Australia should commit to formally extending the care leaving age to 21 and co-designing with young people a flexible person-centred service that can be accessed by all young people with a care experience. We also request a commitment from government that no child in the care system will exit in to homelessness.

This position paper could provide the foundation for co-design of a new service that is available to young people until the age of 21. This service would address the systemic barriers so often experienced by young people transitioning out of the care system.

The South Australian context of young people leaving care

In South Australia, transition plans currently begin at the chronological age of 15 with 'exit' from formal statutory care at the age of 18. In many instances, foster parents and kinship carers continue to provide material, financial and emotional support to young people when they begin to live independently.

Many young people in care, however, face a termination date, with the system around them doing its best to prepare them for the reality of living independently (Snow and Mann-Feder, 2013). Whilst post-care services are provided in the state of South Australia, it is at the discretion of the individual young person to seek out and initiate the support, rather than a structured program providing ongoing support and stability for the young person as they transition from care and into adulthood.

Leaving care is a major life transition for children and young people under Guardianship, and it is a time when young people move from dependence on the state to a position of being self-sufficient. It is recognised that there are a range of pathways for young people that exit care. Some remain in foster or kinship care and others may return to family, but for many there is a move into independent living, often beginning with the transition planning process at the age of 15 (Mendes, Saunders and Baidawi, 2016). Unfortunately for many children and young people with a lived experience of care, there is an increased propensity for poor life outcomes when compared to their non-care peers.

These young people are also overrepresented in the youth justice system. No single factor contributes to or accounts for this. The compounding effect of multiple vulnerabilities, including unresolved complex trauma, substance abuse, and difficulties with emotional regulation and behavioural problems often stemming from attachment disorders often leave these young people marginalised, socially excluded and isolated them from mainstream services that could assist in diversion from the justice system.

In addition to this, instability is known to be a significant contributing factor, with frequent placement changes, lack of predictability with workers and schools, and a lack of resources and ongoing supports being the main systemic contributing factors to offending behaviours and contact with the justice system for care leavers. (Mendes, Baidawi and Snow, 2014).

The costs and benefits of ongoing support until the age of 21

A report published by Deloitte Access Economics (2018) documented a federal and state cost benefit analysis of extending the leaving care age to 21 years. It found that the benefit to cost ratio was 2.0, indicating that every \$1 spent on the program of supporting young people between the ages of 18 to 21 years would generate a return of \$2.

The savings were projected over a 40-year period (between the ages of 18 and 57 years) for each care leaver who opted to remain supported 'in-care' until the age of 21 years. The total net **benefit** per care leaver (total benefits over 40 years minus total costs over the three years between 18 and 21) was \$109, 296¹.

The benefits comprise savings to governments from lower utilisation of Commonwealth and state government services by care leavers over a 40-year period. The financial impact on the Commonwealth government includes housing and homelessness costs, hospitalisations, non-hospital health costs, costs of drug and alcohol dependency, welfare payments and services associated unemployment, welfare payments to teenage parents, as well as forgone tax revenue. Many of these **costs** are shared with the state governments, with the average annual cost over ten years to the state governments, per care leaver, being \$8,533.

The intangible benefits of increasing the care-leaving age to 21 years include improved wellbeing and prevention of hospitalisation, alcohol and other drug use and mental illness, improved physical health outcomes, better outcomes for the children of care leavers and higher levels of social connectedness.

What does the legislation say?

Fortunately, the relevant South Australian legislation (Children and Young People (Safety) Act (2017), provides a pathway to continued support for young people until the age of 25. The legislation states the following:

The Minister must cause such assistance as the Minister thinks appropriate to be offered to each eligible care leaver for the purposes of making their transition from care as easy as is reasonably practicable. Without limiting the kinds of assistance that may be offered to an eligible care leaver, such assistance may include 1 or more of the following:

- (a) the provision of information about Government and other resources and services available to the eligible care leaver;*
- (b) the provision of education and training services;*
- (c) assistance in finding accommodation;*

¹ (18/19 present value)

- (d) assistance in finding employment;*
- (e) assistance in accessing legal advice and health services;*
- (f) counselling and support services.*

If an eligible care leaver accepts an offer of assistance, the Minister must take reasonable steps to provide such assistance, or cause such assistance to be provided, to the eligible care leaver.

What is currently available that supports young people until the age of 21:

- The Stability in Family-Based Care (SFBC) program helps support young people to achieve their potential with the opportunity to remain in their family-based care placement until they turn 21. The program provides primary family-based carers who continue to care for a young person after their 18th birthday with extended carer payments until the young person turns 21 ***This does not extend to continuation of support from their supporting agency.***
- Transition to Independent Living Allowance is a one off payment of up to **\$1,500** from the Australian Government to help people transition to independence. The payment helps eligible young people cover some basic costs as they leave out-of-home care.
- Post Care Support Services – services for young people and adults who are 16.5 years and over include case management, counselling, information and advocacy to support young people and adults who have lived in care and/or were placed under the Guardianship of the Chief Executive of the Department for Child as a child for more than six months.
<https://elmplice.org.au/our-services/post-care-support-services>
- Dame Roma Mitchell Trust Fund grants – an unspecified amount that care leavers can apply for to achieve personal goals, contribute to health and wellbeing, and provide developmental opportunities. <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-and-learning/financial-help-scholarships-and-grants/dame-roma-mitchell-grants>

What needs to happen until the young person turns 21 to ensure the benefits outlined above can be realised.

A structured, flexible and person-centred set of services and tangible supports that addresses the systemic issues young people leaving care experience will enable both the support specified in the current legislation and the realisation of substantial benefits to the young person, the community and the state.

It is CAFFSA's position that designing a person-centred service that facilitates agency and choice for young people leaving care is essential. It will provide young people with a stable foundation as they move in to adulthood and give them their best chance at living independently successfully. Consultations with young care-leavers conducted by the CREATE

Foundation reported that young people want support when they need it, and that it should be made available in the same way for every care leaver.

A person-centred system: a possible way forward.

It is recognised that there is a difference between chronological age and developmental age, and that young people with a history of trauma or neglect, a major change in family structure, or the death or loss of a primary caregiver are likely to be impacted developmentally. As such, specialist services oriented to meet the needs of children and young people in care who have varied experiences, needs and capacities should not cease once a young person turns 18. A person-centred approach would respond to this by providing responsive and ongoing support to young people that is based on their developmental needs.

Person-centred systems recognise that each individual has their own specific needs. In a study that examined the experiences of young people who exited care with an intellectual disability, it was found that 59% of them experienced homelessness within two years, and 42% had a child, with a 96% statutory child protection intervention rate in relation to this child. The study also found that they were highly likely to be victims of crime. Although a relatively small sample of young people were involved in the study (n=43), the findings were consistent with the reported post care experiences of young people, as well as their heightened vulnerabilities and poor life outcomes (Macdonald, 2010).

Characteristics of support services continued to the age of 21 in SA could include:

- Person-centred brokerage systems, with young people having agency and choice in how they spend the funds and are actively involved in decision making about which services they will access
- Peer mentoring and peer support on an as-required basis
- Continuity of care from the support agency with whom they have an established relationship, where a significant history of trust is a factor
- Formalising continued support until the age of 21 as young people transition with increasing independence into adulthood
- A focus on stabilised housing, health, education and employment in the support that is continued until the age of 21

Recommendation: That the SA Government commit to co-designing with young people a flexible person-centred service that can be accessed by all young people with a care experience until the age of 21.

References

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