

Submission

No 48

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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Region Youth Development Officers Network_(RYDON)

Submission

**New South Wales Parliamentary inquiry into,
children and young people aged 9-14 years in NSW**

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The Regional Youth Development Officers' Network (RYDON) has been operating since 1987. RYDON is a network of professionals who focus on community development for young people.

RYDON's purpose is to:

- Promote coordination, cooperation and networking between providers of services to young people;
- Lobby government and other relevant bodies on behalf of young people and providers of services to young people;
- Support, organise and provide training for those working with young people;
- Represent the interests of young people and those working with young people

RYDON covers the Local Government Areas of Cessnock, Dungog, Gloucester, Gosford, Great Lakes, Greater Taree, Lake Macquarie, Maitland, Merriwa, Murrurundi, Muswellbrook, Newcastle, Port Stephens, Scone, Singleton, and Wyong .

RYDON advocates for and encourages the participation of children and young people in the articulation of their needs.

The needs of children and young people aged 9 – 14 years.

::: ACCOMMODATION

Development of coastal areas is significant in the Central Coast, Newcastle/Lake Macquarie and parts of the Lower Hunter, with large areas of new housing attracting both families and retirees looking for more affordable housing. Many families are arriving with little or no family support, placing increased pressure on the existing service system. These areas also experience higher rates of domestic violence related assaults in the RYDON regions than the average for NSW.

The percentage of children in Out Of Home Care (OOHC) is higher in Hunter and Central Coast Region compared to NSW averages. Indigenous children accessing OOHC are also higher than the state average. Children aged 5 to 14 years comprise the majority in OOHC within the Region. The largest placement type for these children is relative and Aboriginal kinship care, followed by foster care.

It is reported that 83% (1382) of accompanying children accessing SAAP services in the Hunter are aged 12 years and under.

The recent NYC Report into Youth Homelessness again highlighted that children and young people over the age of 12 are not seen as a priority, so where do young people 12 – 15 years old go? What happens to them? What is the impact on them?

::: TRANSPORT

The areas covered by RYDON contain many small and dispersed communities. In places such as the Upper Hunter, Port Stephens, Cessnock, East and West Lake Macquarie, and Dungog there is limited or no access to public transport.

Families with low-incomes and children or young people, living in geographic, social or transport isolated areas, without access to public transport are at considerable risk of disadvantage.

Limited public transport options mean that children and young people need to rely on the support of parents, other family members or friends to be mobile (this can impact on the ability of young people to become independent).

Accessible, reliable, affordable and frequent public transport in regional and rural areas facilitates community participation by children and young people.

The lack of transport linkages in our regions impact on the ability of children and young people to:

- Access social and recreational activities;
- Access social networks (friends);
- Access education, training and employment options;
- Access designated destinations;
- Access support services.

The cost and frequency of current transport is prohibitive. Some children and young people need to travel for long periods of time to reach destinations. Restrictions of transport options increases the isolation already experienced by children and young people who live in our regions.

There is a great need across the RYDON regions for public transport that is safe, timetabled to meet the diverse needs of the community, links to connecting buses and trains, and covers routes that access outlying rural areas and villages.

RYDON supports that travel concession cards be available for all children and young people that extend beyond school use only.

RYDON supports education and training with transport providers to enable better support and safety of children and young people utilising public transport.

::: HEALTH

It is important to remember that children and young people are a unique population with specific healthcare needs and RYDON is concerned that these needs are not being prioritised or recognised for their significance. Some of these include mental health and wellbeing, drug and alcohol, sexual health, reproductive health and dental health.

Due to currently priorities and parameters of health funded services, the 9 – 14 year old age group have limited to no specific health services available to them in our Regions.

:: SHORTAGE OF SERVICES

There is a shortage of GPs and children and youth specific health services across the Hunter Region.

The establishment of comprehensive one stop shop children and youth health services is one direction RYDON supports in addressing children and young people's health needs. These services would need to be strategically located in areas of need, or even co-located with schools and/or other youth services in areas such as Maitland, Muswellbrook, Port Stephens, Cessnock, Lake Macquarie.

One-stop shop youth health services are currently in existence in NSW – such as The High St Youth Health Service in Sydney. This is an integrated health service to young people who are at risk and homeless, within a primary health care framework. They also develop, implement and evaluate a creative drop-in program, outreach and other community based activities.

RYDON supports the creation and ongoing funding for permanent Youth Health Coordinator (YHC) positions in all Area Health Services to assist in coordinating and developing youth-focused initiatives.

:: DENTAL CARE

RYDON supports free and accessible dental care for children and young people.

The NSW Association for Adolescent Health Inc. submission to the National Youth Commission into Youth Homelessness (2007) highlighted that *"the links between oral and general health are well known. Given that homeless and marginalised young people often have poor oral health, it is important that potential barriers to receiving treatment are minimised wherever possible. Poor oral health exacerbates the disadvantage homeless young people are already experiencing, limiting their social networks due to shame and embarrassment, damaging their self-esteem and limiting their ability to secure meaningful employment."*

:: DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

In the Hunter region there are **no youth specific** Drug and Alcohol detoxification or rehabilitation services.

There is also a lack of Drug and alcohol education programs in both Primary and High Schools.

There is one service in the Hunter that supports young people aged 10 – 18 years who have a parent(s) with a drug and/or alcohol dependency. This service is based in Newcastle. This means there is an enormous gap for support of 9 – 14year olds in the rest of our regions.

:: SEXUAL HEALTH

Sexual health education in schools is a very positive and necessary initiative. While education in schools is important, it needs to be available to all young people in the 9 – 14year old age group.

Chlamydia is now occurring in epidemic proportions in the Hunter Region, particularly in young people from the ages 15-24 years. Unprotected sex, inconsistent condom use and varying knowledge about STIs are key factors driving the chlamydia rate rises.

Currently FPA Health in Newcastle run a youth drop in twice a week and this includes limited sexual health checks. There are no other youth specific sexual health services in the region.

RYDON recommends:

- That Hunter Sexual Health Service receive increased funding to be able to provide outreach to young people in other areas in the Hunter Region, particularly lower socio economic areas, and geographically isolated areas – eg Windale, West Lakes, Woodberry, Dungog, Port Stephens.
- The establishment of at least one specific Youth Sexual Health Services (similar to the Satellite Sexual Health Youth Clinic operated by the Sydney Sexual Health Centre) in the region. This should be a free, confidential clinic for young people under 25 (no Medicare card required).
- Health Nurses in all Primary and High Schools in NSW.
- Peer sexual health education programs with young people in schools and non-school settings.

:: HIV AND HEPATITIS PREVENTION & GLBTQ SERVICES

ACON is a health promotion organisation based in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities with a central focus on HIV/AIDS. ACON provides HIV prevention, health promotion, advocacy, care and support services to members of those communities including Indigenous people, injecting drug users, sex workers and all people living with HIV/AIDS. ACON has been instrumental in restricting the spread of HIV infections in NSW.

The Hunter branch of ACON provides services for the Newcastle, Central Coast and Hunter Regions.

The ACON Hunter Youth Education Officer position is currently funded for **7 hours per fortnight**. This is a Hunter wide position. There is no other organisation in the Hunter that provides education and support specifically to young gay and lesbian people.

RYDON recommends:

- Funding the ACON Hunter youth position to be full time would have an enormous impact on the lives of young gay and lesbian people in the Hunter Region. ACON are experts in community awareness campaigns about HIV, sexual health, anti homophobia, drugs and alcohol dependency. ACON also provides support to young Gay and lesbian people who are coming out, break down isolation, provide early intervention for potential self harm, suicide or mental health issues through program such as social support, education, group work, connection to community, self esteem building, counselling services, safe spaces, health care and education, community events, and access to resources.

- Increased support for parents and families of children and young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, via an early intervention role, such as "Open Doors" Reconnect program in Brisbane, or Twenty 10 in Sydney.

:: MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The Hunter New England Health Mental Health Services Plan 2006-2010 identified that *one in five children and adolescents have a mental health problem. In adolescents, mental health problems are as common as physical health problems such as asthma. Some mental health problems are relatively mild and short lived. Others may cause considerable distress for children, adolescents and their families.* Yet, there is a general lack of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, psychological services, and child psychiatry in the Hunter.

headspace is a Federal Government initiative to address mental health and young people. There is a headspace facility established on the Central Coast that services the Gosford and Wyong LGAs. It provides support on a range of issues including mental health, sexual health, school concerns, housing, General Practitioner services, and Psychologists. It currently provides services to the 12-24 age groups. Therefore a gap in service provision for 9-11 year-olds.

While the Samaritans foundation has secured federal headspace funding to establish the Hunter headspace hub in Maitland, this service is also for 12 – 24 year olds, therefore children and young people aged 9 – 11 continue not to be serviced.

COPMI (Children Of Parents with Mental Illness) services provide great support to children and young people, however this service needs to be extended across the RYDON regions to be able to support children and young people and link into existing services.

:: EDUCATION

All discussion and strategising around education must identify low socio-economic status and educational need; and recognition of the increasing number of students with disabilities and the need to plan and cater for these students.

The Hunter Region has a lower proportion of residents who completed Year 12 than the State.

Low levels of Literacy and Numeracy are identified as an issue for young people in the Hunter through programs such as Youth Pathways, where an estimated 90% of the young people they work with have low literacy skills.

Increasing literacy rates will help to provide better opportunities to young people. This has been encouraged along by the implementation of the NSW State Government's Learning Assistance Program. While a good initiative it needs to be rolled out to schools in regional and rural areas, in conjunction with broad community education of the existence of the program.

The NSW State Government Reading Recovery program is currently available to children in Year 1 only, who attend school regularly. Programs such as these should be available to older groups of children and young people, based on the competency of the child or young person, rather than age.

There is a lack of similar programs to address low levels of numeracy within this age group.

Schools are active social systems, and children with positive relationships demonstrate positive behaviours. The teacher-student relationship is central in this system. Teacher education programs that draw upon the data showing that emotional support and attention to the student-teacher relationship, in fact, enhance children's capacities to learn could prove quite

significant. RYDON also supports a reduction in class sizes to enable better connection and learning environments between teacher and students.

RYDON supports the review of school suspension policies. If we can use diversion programs around criminal behaviour with children and young people, why can't we utilise a similar approach with children and young people at risk of suspension within school settings. What are the outcomes of suspending children and young people? For example – what does suspension for truancy achieve?

Children and young people who get suspended from school often lack adult supervision while on suspension. Research finds that children under 13 that are regularly left to spend time alone or to care for younger siblings, can be at risk of injuries, developmental problems, challenging behaviour and poor academic achievement.

RYDON supports implementation of safety education in the use of Internet and technology as part of Information Technology curriculum and PDHPE, each year from years K – 12.

RYDON supports school anti-discrimination policies and practices to include the rights and recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer young people and their families.

RYDON supports the trial of innovative bullying programs that address bullying on a whole of school level, and include parents and the wider community.

RYDON supports Children's/Youth worker and Health nurses in all Primary and High Schools.

::: FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS.

Kids Help Line (2006) and Mission Australia (2008) studies' of children and family relationships both indicate that children feel a higher sense of security when there are positive family connections. Significantly, over three quarters of the children surveyed in the Mission Australia (p.1) report revealed that family relationships were highly valued.

Subsequently, Kids Help Line reported that "for the past 15 years, family relationships have consistently remained the most common reason why children contact Kids Help Line". This was due largely to family conflict, disruption, breakdown, and concern about family members. The report also indicated that this was the highest concern for stress among young people.

In general, children are often affected by issues concerning their parent(s) such as employment, money, and family conflict. The deeper issues of drugs and alcohol, housing and homelessness can diminish a sense of security for young people and these highlight a need for services to be available to them.

Currently, the Hunter has various organisations that provide services to young people and their families however these predominantly provide service to young people aged 11 years and over for example:

- Northlakes Youth Counselling Services, provide individual and family counselling to young people age 12-18 years who reside in the North Lake Macquarie area;
- Maitland Youth Counselling provides service for 12-21 years in the Maitland area;
- Port Stephens Adolescent Family Counsellor provide counselling to young people age 9-18 years and their families in the Port Stephens local government area;
- The Ark Youth Support Services Wickham, provide counselling and support for young people aged 12-25 years;
- Leaf Reconnect, support to young people (aged 12 – 18yrs) and their families in the Maitland & Cessnock LGA's.

Significantly, only the Port Stephens local government area provides counselling for the 9-11 age brackets.

These figures not only indicate the serious need for service provision to this age group in the Hunter but also the obvious disadvantage this places upon them.

:: SERVICE PROVISION

Investing in children and young people is one of the best social investments a community can make.

Local Youth Services in the RYDON regions, have identified instances when the 9 – 14 year old age group had been turned away because the service providers are not funded for this age group, be it accommodation services, drop-in centres, youth activities and various other support services for young people.

RYDON supports that a review of youth and children services be conducted to identify gaps in service provision for children and young people based on arbitrary age groups rather than on need, or service required for specific communities.

RYDON supports that early intervention services and programs be extended to children and young people over eight years of age.

The activities, services and support which provide opportunities for children and young people in the middle years to develop resilience

While there are a number of youth services and programs in the RYDON regions that aim to provide opportunities for children and young people to develop resilience, there are not enough, they are under resourced, they are time limited, or they are simply not accessible due to distance or age limitations.

The extent to which changing workplace practices have impacted on children and young people in the middle years, including possible changes to workplace practices which have the potential to benefit children and young people in the middle years.

Afters school care is an area of great need for this age group in the RYDON regions. Options for schools to have out of school care for young people over the age of 12 so young people have adult supervision while parent(s)/carer are at work. This could be provided by the school or an external organisation such as youth services. OOSH should also provide homework sessions – however OOSH providers would also need support and training to be able to supervise homework.

Out of school homework centres, these can be in school grounds or linked to children/youth &/or family services, Indigenous organisations, or CALD organisations.

An area that needs much more discussion is that of flexible work hours to coincide with school hours. Also options for children and young people's activities and support during 12 weeks of school holidays, when workplaces only get 4 weeks annual leave. In our regions, all the above areas such as limited transport and services impact on this further.

CONCLUSION

There is a need for service provision for 9-11 year-olds in the area of family relationships, health, transport, education, care and community outreach programs. The findings illustrate that this age group in our regions are largely disadvantaged by lack of support and services available to them.

Transport plays a critical role to all young people aged 9-14 years who have social and recreational commitments, health needs, care needs as well as accessing support services. Socioeconomic and location factors were also found to be indicators that impact upon the need of children's and young people's ability to access services.

RYDON is concerned with the increase in time-limited funding to provide services for children and young people. This puts enormous pressure on projects to be "sustainable" when in many cases the needs are ongoing. For example "MADMAP" - a mentoring project servicing the Maitland and Cessnock LGA's, that built positive relationships between young people aged 9 to 18 (who are at risk, have no significant adult in their lives, are carers of the adult in their lives etc) and a community mentor offering opportunity to engage in recreation and lifeskills activities as well as receive support from local youth services and MADMAP coordinator. This was a 3 year funded project through Area Assistance Scheme funds, there is no other service in the LGA's to replace it.

Ongoing Government support in terms of funding would enable existing programs that are successful and children and youth driven, to continue. This is vitally important because it gives the community a sense of security knowing that particular services are available to them. When they are discontinued, morale levels decrease not only from the perspective of children and young people, but also by the service providers and the communities where they are based.

NGO's, youth, welfare and community services are being asked to achieve unrealistic outcomes based on time limit funding. This is an enormous issue for service delivery and only further disadvantages children and young people when services are removed from already under-resourced communities when the funding period ends.

There does not necessarily need to be a lowering of the age of service provision across the board in Youth Services to address the needs of 9 – 11 year olds. There does however, need to be an increase to both Children's and Youth services and programs that are based on the needs of communities, rather than on the stipulations of funding bodies.

The children's, youth, welfare, health and education sectors need more coordinated approaches to service delivery, and improved communication and collaboration between the children's and youth sectors to ensure appropriate referral and transition. However this can only happen where these services exist in the first place.