

What Ever Happened to the (R)evolution? Take 2

Revisiting activism and the early days of youth refuges in NSW

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This article aims to chart some of the early history of the Youth Accommodation Association (YAA), the first youth refuges

in NSW and to capture some of the spirit of youth activism in the late 1970's to 1980's. It harks back to the days when youth workers found solidarity as part of a 'movement' which could call on the troops to march the streets in order to get the message about youth homelessness out to the public and politicians.

It wasn't just about service provision or economic participation. In contrast to current rhetoric about social inclusion, activism and advocacy within the sector in those days was much broader, coming from a bigger social justice paradigm. In those days the 'youth voice' meant youth rights. As a YAA worker from those times, Paul Van Ryk, commented:

It's very important to recognize an acknowledge that many of the workers in supported accommodation and housing politics and servicing were from backgrounds of radicalization in broader struggles - women's rights, Aboriginal rights, gay and lesbian rights, and early environmental struggles; and it's important first to recognize that many of us who worked in the supported accommodation area also did considerable work in the housing sector being critically involved in the various versions of Shelter at State and national levels. It was this that led us to making the connections between the personal and the political when it came to looking at root causes of homeless among the young people we dealt with and to



knowing that only operating on a case-work band aid approach was inadequate. We knew that we would get little unless the pillars of sexism, racism and homophobia were continually undermined in our relations with each other in the workplace, with our funders, and with young people

Paul Van Ryk, (NYCH presentation 2006)⁸

After the successes of the anti-Vietnam protests, the student movements and perhaps fuelled by the cultural momentum of the so-called 'counterculture' and a 60's -70' pop-soundtrack of youth activism (eg Redgum, Midnight Oil etc.), there was an mood of 'revolution' and change in the air ... that despite the conservative Federal politics of the time, anything might be possible.

During a ten year period from the mid 1970's, there was an increased public and political awareness of youth homelessness, which in 1983, coincided with a dramatic shift in the federal government from Liberal to Labor. By now homelessness and social housing was a big public and political issue. From there the political wheels were set in motion and a Crisis Accommodation Review, lead by Social Security Minister, Don Grimes, set a chain of events that resulted the eventual establishment of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) in 1985 and coincided with a new Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and Crisis Accommodation Program.

The establishment the first version of SAAP, followed a lengthy period of consultation and 'research'. There were tensions between promises of program reform; to "rationalise all crisis accommodation"¹⁴; to respond the lack of beds and accommodation and the expectation by the sector to think "Beyond Refuge" (YAA 1983) and beyond pilot programs towards a broader response to homelessness.

In the creation of SAAP, they merged and added onto three pots of existing supported accommodation funding: Youth Supported, Women's Emergency and General Supported.

Amazingly, 25 years on from the establishment of SAAP we appear to be at a familiar crossroads and in a similar position. Similar to 1983 there has been a

change of federal government; a high public profile of homelessness; a high level of consultation with State and Federal peaks and NGOs; lots of mixed opinions within about the effectiveness existing homeless response; an explicit and implicit program reform agenda and a cult of 'innovation'.

After 25 years, we are being told that SAAP, Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and the SAA Act are about to be shelved. They will be reconstituted as the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) in January 2009. They will set national targets towards breaking the cycle and ending homelessness.

In 2009, with a national figure of 105,000 homeless people with nearly half of these being young people, we are now looking for the BIG POLICIES and BIG PROGRAMS to match these BIG NUMBERS of young homeless people.

We expect more than "rebranding" or the rhetoric of "a broad sweep of government initiatives and pilots" (.. see "The Hollowmen" ABC TV 2008)

Keeping 'em off the streets

History tells us that Youth homelessness is not a new social phenomenon and that it has been with us for long time. While this fact hasn't changed, the way that services have responded to youth homelessness has changed.

The early legal and institutional responses to youth homelessness in Australia, utilised a deficit model. For example, the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864 defined neglected children as:

"Any child found wandering about or frequenting any street thoroughfare tavern or place of public resort or sleeping in the open air and who should not have any home or settled place of abode or any visible means of subsistence."

Services for homeless young people over one hundred years ago centred on notions of apprehension and detention of children and young people, keeping them off the streets, and placing them in reformatories or boarded out.¹¹ Governments acted as quasi parent where the 'mother state' had powers to care for children who were

deserted or abandoned, ill treated or found living on the streets. While this was process of 'child saving', often there was little compassion for these young people. Young people were constructed as a burden or a problem, and accordingly tagged with pejorative terms such as street urchins and vagrants were used during the 19th and early 20th centuries to describe them. Images of Oliver Twist come to mind here. These early responses were not rights-based approaches and instead worked on resocialising or reshaping young people towards more productive ways of life. Such social engineering was not without huge ethical and logistic problems.

Prior to the growth of the community/NGO sector in the 1970's the provision of services to the homeless was through state funded projects and the welfare work of the volunteer sector and the church charities. While youth policy and affairs were mainly focused on the various iterations under the National Fitness program.¹⁰

Gough says "It's time"

Finally in the early 1970's, a new era of funded NGO community sector came online, energised by a new sense of community and spirit that emerged in Australia, following a the passing of a repressive and extended liberal dynasty, with the progressive Whitlam led labour government and brief window of opportunity from 1972 to 1975.

It is also the time when new international notions of youth work practice emerged such as sub-cultural theory (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Birmingham) and youth development ideas



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pioneered by Karen Pittman. As the practice of youth work practice became more professional it shifted away from notions of child saving, or youth as a problem or victim, or juvenile delinquent ... towards the language of empowerment, enabling independence, giving youth a voice and recognising sub-cultures.

From the mid 1970s on, there was a significant increase in demand from homeless young people using night shelters or sleeping rough. The mid 70's the predominant assumption among policy makers was that the 1974-75 recession had caused a 'temporary' youth unemployment problem. It was assumed that all that was required was a number of short-term 'band-aid' programs until full employment was restored. The emphasis shifted on youth homelessness as an individualised problem to that of acknowledging the structural causes. The One Step Forward report in 1982/83¹², noted

"that much more was involved than a number of young people running away from home. The changing structure of economic and social life was thought to be exerting pressures beyond the control of the young and forcing them into homelessness".

The first youth refuges in NSW get funded.

In 1974 the Commonwealth introduced the Homeless Persons assistance Program (HPAP), which mainly went to the religious organisations for single homeless men, it also was used later to build youth refuges and shelters.

The first youth refuge in NSW, Young Peoples Refuge, opened in February 1975 in Chippendale as a temporary alternative environment for young people. It provided an alternative to large state run institutional homes/remand centres or religious orgs which provided foster care services. In July 1976, Bankstown Youth Refuge and Taldemunde opened with funding described by the SMH as being on "an experimental basis". The early youth refuges such as Caretakers Cottage in Paddington used the 'house parents' model, thinking that the young people needed 'love' and 'restoration of family' they often employed house parents to do this. Apparently there was a rapid turnover of staff 'houseparents' This was phased

out over the years in preference for the 'youth worker' model⁶

Yet, in contrast to this, Paul Van Ryk⁷ also noted a resistance to these family values:

"Many of us also had very strong critiques of the family as it was then socially constructed and again recognized the need to conduct work in questioning and challenging this construction, which at times put us at odds with other childrens and youth services, and certainly continually made us less than popular with governments and funders."

In 1979 the Commonwealth and States established a three year pilot Youth Services Scheme (YSS) to provide emergency accommodation, referral and info services to young people under 18, who at the time were described as 'runaways' 'street kids'. This pilot extended to 5 years.

Prior to YSS some services had been funded through HPAP³. And some states such as NSW, SA and Victoria had developed separate youth accommodation programs. Prior to YSS, services responses were described as ad-hoc and the YSS was welcomed as an attempt towards providing some structure and consistency. The introduction of YSS brought a new set of problems to the field services were uncoordinated, under funded and insufficiently spread in a geographical sense, there were wide disparities in funding levels. It was also realised that, for young people, income security needs were paramount and that after a short stay in emergency accommodation, there was nowhere else to go. Refuges were not the answer, and so an emphasis began to be given to public housing.¹³

According to 1979 report by YAA (as YRAG) the wage range for a youth housing worker in 1979, was between \$16 - \$17,000 per annum, the working week an average 40+ hours, with about 6-7 hours unpaid time. Youth refuges depended on a volunteer commitment of 25 unpaid hours, management committee time of 7 hours per week. Of a survey of 71 workers: 47 identified as youthworkers; 10 as foster carers; 7 as youth housing officers; 55% had tertiary level teaching qualifications; 17% had achieved social work qualifications.

In 1981/82 YSS was evaluated and documented in "One Step Forward" and a senate inquiry into the needs of Homeless youth. Both emphasised the need for long term accommodation options for Young people. In 1983/84 YSS had a national budget of \$2.1million. The states and territories also provided \$5.9 million.

By 1982 the Commonwealth Senate Standing Committee on Social Welfare reported that there were twenty two youth refuges in NSW (of sixty eight nationally) funded under the Youth Services Scheme, including the foster care program 'Stretch a family' and a medium - long term service. The report also noted that there were still many unfunded services which relied on voluntary workers.



The Original YAA logo

The revolution starts here !!!

As the public profile of youth homelessness began to increase, YAA was established in 1979 as the Youth Refuge Action group¹⁵, with 18 member services. as a group of workers in services who got together to discuss problems, to break down the extreme isolation which existed between them, share information and support each other. YRAG was first located at Burnside Homes in North Parramatta.

Foundation members at the first meeting (on record) were:

- Annandale Young People's Refuge : Eva Shervashidze, Margaret Bail
- Bankstown Youth Refuge: Peter Holt, Chris Holt, Kerry May, Geoff Garnen, John
- Blacktown Youth Refuge : Peter Cronau, Lesley Moore
- Fairfield Youth Refuge: Steve Warren
- Kings Cross : Kaye Garner
- Caretakers Cottage - Paddington : Laurie Matthews

Taldemunde – North Sydney: Paul Borger.

From the records of the first meeting 19-9-79 they agreed that

“YRAG would be a vehicle for lobbying (using simple statistics); info sharing; support and an arena for sharing ideas and new methods being implemented in the refuges”¹⁶

After a few meetings, eventually the YRAG and the Combined Refuges Association merged together to form the Youth Refuge Association and the group shifted from being about ‘working conditions’, ‘reflection’ and ‘support’, towards ‘action’ and structural ‘advocacy’ for both young people and workers.

In David Annis Brown’s words

”We decided that things needed changing outside of our services, that just talking about it amongst ourselves wasn’t going to do much and that we needed a base from which to work for change”⁷

This has been the base assumption for YAA for the next few decades, of working for young people.

Other youth homelessness peaks emerged around the country at this time... The Youth Accommodation Coalition of Victoria was also established in 1979 as a coalition of groups and individuals concerned about youth homelessness. Initially in 1981 there was an attempt to have a statewide Queensland Youth Accommodation Coalition (QYAC), this broad based Coalition eventually broke into two separate Coalitions - SEQYAC and NQYAC.

Your Dream Our Nightmare ... Early 1980’s and before SAAP.

YRAG merged with Combined Youth Refuges Association to become Youth Refuge Association (YRA) representing the interests of both workers and management of youth refuges. Membership in 1980 was 25 services². YRA was first located in Burnside Homes in Bankstown Around this time Medium term services emerged to solve the problem of refuges having nowhere to refer young people to. At the 1982 AGM, the extra ‘A’ was added onto YRA, to become the Youth Refuge

Accommodation Association, to account for the growth of medium and long term services and move ‘Beyond Refuges’.

There was much disagreement and difference in the sector. The YRA Philosophy Sub committee in 1979-80 reported

“It was identified by workers at the time that there were not consistent links between ideologies, principles and practices, which created difficulty and confusion.” And concern over the ‘geographical distribution of funds for Youth Refuges.’⁷

As a solution they recommended to set up an ideology subcommittee and a profile subcommittee. From a statement of philosophy from a service in Northern NSW:

“as workers at ... we are committed to understanding how young people are oppressed in our society and as a result of this understanding, taking action to ensure that all young people we come in contact with are treated as fully human, equal and much respected members of society ... in reality young people intelligent, zestful, powerful cooperative vital to the world and loving toward each other ... any appearance to the contrary are merely the effects of past mistreatment and unresolved pain ... as a united force, lets break the chain of pain and uncover the reality!”⁹

The State ‘peak groups’ got together in 1981 to establish a national movement as the National Youth Coalition for Housing (NYCH). Catherine Mackenzie (as YRAA NSW and NYCH delegate) noted at the first National Youth Accommodation Workshop in Canberra youth accommodation workers came together from all over Australia to form some sort of national apparatus. NYCH emerged out of that workshop. This was linked to a national campaign using the slogan “Shelter or the Streets”. NYCH received funding and began, it held its first inaugural meeting in Sept 1982. First NYCH youth housing policy drafted in September 1982. National secretariat of NYCH was established in Fitzroy in Victoria in March 1983.



As Narelle Clay noted in 1994 to a combined sector homelessness conference,

“The youth homeless sector was well organised, even in pre SAAP days.”⁵

The Shelter or the Streets and Your Dream Our Nightmare and other campaigns further activated the sector in the early 1980s.

Yet, it was also a time of building and establishment and of working through differences and putting the issues of youth homelessness on the radar, which culminated in the work of Brian Burdekin in 1989, when for a brief few years, the issue of youth homelessness perhaps reached a zenith in terms of public awareness.

The early days of youth refuges were in the days before the 'circuit' had developed. Most kids attending refuges then came directly from the 'family home', unlike these days. By the end of the '70s deinstitutionalisation was underway and increasingly kids were coming from foster homes and ward hostels. The few refuges in NSW at this time struggled with the extent of demand and the lack of funding. This I know from direct experience.

It should be noted that along with this move to 'deinstitutionalisation', came a preparedness of government funding departments to go along with these changes - but sadly not to provide the necessary funding. This is the main reason that the Youth Refuge Action Group first started, which I was part of. It battled the funding department during the early 80s until a proper funding model was established.⁶

The 'proper funding', as such, didn't arrive until the commencement of the SAAP program in 1985. To this, Cronau emphasised that it was the persistent advocacy of groups like YRAG/YRA/YAA and the Women's Refuge Movement that put pressure on Government to make that funding available.

During the 1980's the work of youth activism continued. Activity became increasingly more radical where anything was possible, with bold and statements, 'bush conferences', calls to action, marches, sleep outs and public campaigns, a sense of 'us and them'. But it was always a struggle to get noticed, to be heard to be on the political and social agenda.

Recently, workers at the YAA 25 year event, recalled this period with fondness, recounting stunts like staging sit-outs outside politicians offices, lots of street theatre and of shaming tactics of sitting behind politicians at question time in Parliament holding up big signs "LIAR" or "NOT TRUE". Some of the images in this article are from the YAA "Shelter or the streets / Your Dream Our Nightmare" sleep outs at Sydney Town Hall in the 1980's. This sort of activity led the youthwork historian Maunders et al to describe YAA as a 'radical' organisation, (aka left-wing) similar to the Eureka Youth League in the 1950s.⁴

But as the photos below suggests in those days the sector took their work very seriously, but did not take themselves too seriously (any excuse for a mask and hat making workshop).

During this time ideas such as structural and individual advocacy, activism, social justice

Protesting in Glebe early 80's style.



and equity, rights for ... public demonstrations and community development were championed as the good work, by the 'movement' while 'bureaucrat, politician and academic' were perhaps 'dirty words'. It was clear who the 'bad guys' were and 'heated' adversarial contests were common between 'us and them'.

As the movement slowly became a 'SAAP' sector, or an industry during the 1990s this began to change, as managerialism, accountability and professionalism took hold, many youth worker's began to lament the good old days.

Whatever happened to the revolution?

There were early warning signs.

In 1984, Van Ryk warned the sector, just as the sector was about to receive substantial funding with the commencement of Supported Accommodation Assistance Program - SAAP - funding, that some serious rethinking was needed to ensure that they didn't end up reflecting the institutional welfare practices, from which they were 'supposed' to be providing an alternative. He was worried that the principles of advocacy and activism in their work were under threat, as they came under the regulation of the obligation of managerialism, accountability and

professionalism which comes hand in hand with government funding. He was also worried about the brain numbing effects of consensus thinking.

"No association should be a safe, comfortable place. An association whose members fail to engage in critical review is already dead."

Paul Van Ryk 1984¹⁷

Paul did comment that he was, thankfully, encouraged by what he called 'signs of life'. Similarly in a paper produced by a worker Jonathan Astley in March 1985 to YAC in Victoria¹, Jonathan reflected on the initial stages of SAAP. He was worried that already SAAP had shifted the sector thinking into a zone of complacent comfort and job security, where the 'talk' at peak meetings was mainly about program issues and accountabilities instead of broader structural and human rights concerns. He warned that "securely funded services and workers may decide that the issues effecting them have been won and now it's time to knuckle down to full time service delivery ", becoming centred on service provision and less participatory in broader advocacy and activism (especially outside of paid work hours).

He was worried that an advocates or activists, could now only be legitimated by

status of employment in the sector as a youth worker, that if he was not a worker, he could not be accepted as authentic activist or advocate.

Of course, this tradition of unpaid activism, is still sustained by the many volunteers on board and committees of NGOs – who generously give their time and commitment keep the wheels of the community sector going.

He was also worried that the ‘movement’ would become a ‘sector’ or an ‘industry’ and would be so busy, that there would be no time for big picture thinking and that the movement would be “strangled by the rigor mortis of dead activists.” Not forgetting, as Peter Cronau highlighted, the irony that that same dead activism was a contributing factor to the establishment of government funding for homelessness through SAAP and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act.

In the late 1960’s/early 70’s and late 1970’s there were lots of pop-songs which evoked a ‘youth revolution’ ... but if you can remember that Skyhooks song “Whatever happened to the revolution” – you may either disagree or agree with the answer!

.... Don’t forget Youth Homelessness Matter Day on the 1st April 2009. Perhaps its time to re activate !

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We know what we want and we want it now!
Pic: YAA takes it to the streets in the early 1980’s



Pic: Christa : Sydney Town Hall mid 1980’s