

THE BIG ISSUE

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**“WE ALL NEED
TO DO BETTER”**

50% of young people are unemployed, homeless, in jail or new parents within their first year out of care.



Image: As a kid Kyle “dreamed of becoming a wrestler” now he dreams of “having a stable place to live”

“I am a Victim of the System”

Whilst most 18 year olds are trying to balance Tetris in class with assignments and exams, Kyle is trying to find a quiet bus shelter to sleep in. By 18 Kyle had lived in over nineteen different homes, been verbally, physically and sexually abused, and taken up drinking, smoking and drugs. His mother had died from a drug overdose, and the closest person he had to a father had died of cancer. “I was lost” said Kyle, “I was pissed off, upset and confused.”¹

At the age of two Kyle was “picked up, put into a car and driven off”, and so began his experience with out-of-home care in Victoria. His “best interests” remained “paramount”,² that is besides the system’s reluctance to provide any professional services for Kyle’s suicidal thoughts, sleepless nights, beatings, arguments and isolation. Whilst this may be hard to believe, keep in mind that our current legislation regarding foster care does blatantly contradict itself. It states that the Department of Human Services must “provide or arrange the provision of services to assist in supporting a person under the age of 21 years to gain the capacity to make the transition to independent living”, however

then proceeds to declare that care “ceases to be in force when the child attains the age of 18 years”. So even though young people within the foster care system are under the State’s care, they are not ‘legally bound’ to protect them past the age of 18.

This alone is enough to make alarm bells ring. Katie Hooper, CEO of the Foster Care Association of Victoria said “we need to enact plans and make real reform...for the first time in a long time the current State Government has significant investment in child welfare and theres a chance there could be a change.”³ With \$168.2 million of Government funding being dedicated to child protection and family services in the upcoming

budget, Ms Hooper hopes to see a “stronger system so we won’t have stories like Kyle’s in the next few years”. Victorian Minister for Families and Children, Jenny Mikakos said that the focus of the department is being shifted from “responding to crisis, to prevention and early intervention through boosting our universal services for families and children.”⁴

These legislative changes do not however address the fact that 50% of young people are unemployed, homeless, in jail or new parents within their first year out of care.⁵ With over 3000 young people in Victoria leaving foster care each year this is quite an alarming statistic. When asked why this is happening, Ms Hooper explained that

“Outcomes aren’t as great for children in care so they fall through the gaps...we all need to do a lot better so that 50% goes down to 5%”

Current legislation requires requires “care teams” to work with “the young person, other relevant professionals (and family where appropriate) to develop a care and transition plan from when the child turns 15.”⁶ When Kyle turned 15 he didn’t get a birthday cake let alone a care plan. Three years later, instead of being “supported” in his transition out of care, Kyle was placed in a mature-aged, short-term share-house in Ringwood. He stayed there



Image: “I’m awake all night crying and you’re not going to do anything about it?”. Kyle was refused counselling after his mothers death as he ‘didn’t need it’.

for two weeks before being forced to leave. At this point, at just 18, Kyle was on his own. Days later he was admitted into hospital, contemplating killing himself.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria knows more than anybody that “the system needs to do better”. As Ms

Hooper explains, “If I’m working with a young person today, does that young person really have an out of care plan or did I just write something in a computer to tick a box? We just have to do better because we’ve got some good documents in place.”

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“I’ve had it bad, but I know there’s other people who have had it worse”



Is the solution really that simple? Is inadequate planning really the reason why 50% of our young people leaving care end up on the street?

Paul McDonald, CEO of Anglicare Victoria and Chair of 'The Homestretch' movement believes

"Australia is out of step with the rest of the World". ⁷

Mr McDonald, along with the 45 other organisations that have committed their support to the initiative, are campaigning to have the option of care extended to 21 years of age. "Though leaving care programs have been good, the fact is nothing replaces guaranteed and authorised care" says Mr McDonald, "this has always been the missing piece of the system."

"In 2014 the United Kingdom implemented their 'Staying Put

Legislation' which changed the leaving care age to 21. Nearly half the States of America, Europe and Canada have also extended the age. Australia is at the bottom end of the table about how it treats its individuals leaving care" says Mr McDonald.

Homestretch have spoken to Minister Jenny Mikakos, and whilst "she understands the issues" no advancements have been made. The campaign has commissioned a report outlining the cost and benefits of extending the care age and will soon be approaching Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews as well as opposition leader Matthew Guy. "Australia is reluctant in its willingness to ensure young people are given a good start into young adulthood, however this is a reform that the Government needs to make. It is the unfinished bit of our foster care system that needs to be finished."

Minister Mikakos refused to speak to The Big Issue, however has said that she will be prioritising giving children 'the best chance to grow up healthier, form positive relationships, and lead better lives', commenting that improvements to Victoria's foster care system are "a once-in-a-generation chance to get this right for children and families." ⁸

Kyle is already a "victim of the system". However the 3200 children who enter the system each year ⁹ don't need to be. Changes need to be made so that children aren't taken into protection only to be abandoned 16 years later.

As Kyle said, **"this was never my fight."**

By Catherine Smith



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Face to face interview with Kyle Alexander, conducted on the 11/4/2016
- ² Extract from the amended 2005 'Child Youth and Families Act", accessed on the 12/4/2016
- ³ Phone interview with Katie Hooper, conducted on the 16/4/2016
- ⁴ Extract from the 'Roadmap to Reform' website, accessed on the 16/4/2016
- ⁵ Statistic from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, sourced on the 17/4/2016
- ⁶ Human Services Framework and Guidelines published in 2012, accessed online on the 16/4/2016
7. Phone interview with Paul McDonald, conducted on the 21/4/2016
8. Quote extracted from the State Government Media Release 13/4/2016, accessed on the 21/4/2016
9. Statistic from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *Child protection Australia*, sourced on the 25/4/2016