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Introduction

Lighthouse Foundation was established in 1991 to support the work of its founder, Susan Barton AM, who prior to the establishment of Lighthouse as an organisation, had cared for young people in her own home for 16 years.

Lighthouse Foundation is a not for profit organisation dedicated to providing long-term therapeutic care for homeless young people aged between 15 and 22 years. It does this by assisting young people to become active members of society by developing the skills and confidence to take control and responsibility for their own lives. Lighthouse young people predominantly come from a background of long term neglect and abuse. This experience can leave a legacy of physical, emotional and psychological difficulties evidenced in low self esteem, poor social and educational skills and an inability to form positive, meaningful and lasting relationships with others.

Lighthouse Foundation provides an integrated model of care and therapeutic support. There is empirical evidence from a range of disciplines to demonstrate that if children are offered a safe physical environment, with positive adult role models and a range of clinical and support services they can (re) build their self-identity and learn new ways of trusting and relating to others (Bowlby, 1969; Dockar-Drysdale, 1991; Becker-Weidman & Shell, 2005; Scharff & Scharff, 1991).

Lighthouse in collaboration with Connections UnitingCare is in the process of implementing an innovative early intervention program in Melbourne. The Home for Mothers and Babies Program is a long term therapeutic care program, that provides a holistic support system for mothers and their babies to assist them in building a healthy family environment and community connectedness, thus breaking the cycle of child maltreatment and homelessness.

Theoretical underpinnings of the Program and its application

The Lighthouse Therapeutic Family Model of Care incorporates Attachment (Bowlby 1969; Becker-Wediman & Shell 2005; Bretherton 2007; Hardy 2007; Sonkin 2005) and Object Relations theories (Dockar-Drysdale 1991; Scharff & Scharff 1991, Winnicott 1953) into a model of human development and needs-based therapeutic care.

Attachment Theory describes the biological and psychological need to bond with and relate to primary caregivers as fundamental to the survival of human beings. The ability to trust and to relate to others is established in infancy to early childhood through the quality of the infant/primary care giver relationship which influences and shapes development, and behaviour in later life (Bowlby 1969; Becker-Wediman & Shell 2005; Bretherton 2007; Hardy 2007; Sonkin 2005).

Object Relations Theory suggests that a prime motivational drive in every individual is to form relationships with others. The style of relationship that develops in early childhood becomes part of an internal blueprint or a learned way of relating to others that is replicated when we establish and maintain future relationships, which impacts on our sense of identity (Dockar-Drysdale 1991; Scharff & Scharff 1991; Winnicott 1953). Young people from a deprived background may have difficulty in forming and maintaining constructive and healthy relationships with others. The more traumatic their early experiences the more self-destructive some of their interpersonal relationships can be, hence their relationship to the outside world.

The family setting, the one-on-one relationship with a carer and the support of other specialists provide the young person with a safe, supportive and understanding environment. Here they can confront and deal with maladaptive and destructive patterns of relating, and learn how to form and sustain positive and reciprocal relationships with others – a hallmark of healthy and autonomous adulthood.

Lighthouse Home for Mothers and Babies Program

The Lighthouse Home for Mothers and Babies Program was developed in response to the needs of pregnant young women who have lived within Lighthouse Therapeutic Family Model of Care, and the needs of young mothers and their infants in the community, to have access to a program that could assist in their transition into motherhood, and provide infants the opportunity to build a healthy attachment with their mothers, which is vital for the healthy development of the child.

The program has been collaboratively designed by Lighthouse Foundation and Connections Uniting Care. Lighthouse is currently unable to provide specialised support to young mothers and infants in the current model of care, but has identified that young homeless mothers and their infants are the most vulnerable in the community, and that Lighthouse needs to play a significant role in developing programs that can cater for this vulnerable group, as a preventative model of care, that can break the cycle of child maltreatment and in turn homelessness.

A research project conducted on young homeless pregnant women by Keys (2007) highlighted the following:

Young pregnant or parenting women need to negotiate a place for themselves in a service sector that rarely caters for their specific needs. With the exception of a few targeted services, the existing split between the homelessness sector and the health sector means that they must negotiate health issues related to parenthood (such as preparation for birth and assistance with parenting) and accommodation and support needs through separate sectors... Many models of youth accommodation are unsuitable for, or poorly resourced to cater for, this population (p.3).

Aims of the program

The pilot project is aimed at providing a long term therapeutic model of supported accommodation for young women who are pregnant or parenting infants, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and aged between 15 – 22 years of age. This program supports young mothers while simultaneously providing an environment of enrichment and stability to enhance the development, across all domains, of the infant. Safety, security, stability and optimal opportunity for the mother/child dyad are the basis on which the pilot is based, with a holistic and flexible service delivery that addresses:

- 1 child development needs
- 2 parenting skill development
- 3 independent living skills
- 4 risk factors for both infants and mothers
- 5 community connectedness
- 6 emotional and physical wellbeing

The program has an early intervention focus. We aim to support mothers and their babies during a critical transitional period, the transition into motherhood. This is a time of massive change for young women, and for those who are homeless the levels of risk can be greater. The program aims to support the most vulnerable in our community, with the view to breaking the cycle of child maltreatment and future homelessness. By providing a safe and caring environment, and strong community supports, the mother and their infant have the opportunity to build a secure attachment, which is the foundation for a healthy individual. We hope to provide mother's an environment in which they can provide their own children the opportunities that may have missed out on when they were children. This can potentially break the cycle of child maltreatment and future homelessness.

Support Services

The Natural Setting (In home): The mothers and infants will be supported in the home by live in carers, who are available 24 hours a day to support the mother and infants in the home. The carers act as parenting role models for the young mother, but also provide practical advice and support around parenting and life skills development. They also provide the opportunity for the mother to have some respite.

Psychological Wellness: The young mothers in the program will have access to a team of Lighthouse psychologists who provide psycho-therapeutic and psycho-educational support. The Mother's will receive attachment based psychotherapy, as well as skills based support to assist in them in developing the emotional resilience and practical skills required to be a healthy mother.

Case Management: Young mothers in the program will participate in an Individual Development Plan (IDP). The IDP is a mutual agreement of care between the young mother and the Lighthouse Foundation. The program provides a holistic approach to case management that covers the areas of education, employment, life management, recreational, relationships, physical wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The case management program will also assist the mothers and their infants in their transition into independent living, which will include support with applications for housing and developing other supports that may be required when living independently. This may include affordable private or public housing. They will also have access to an aftercare program through the Lighthouse Outreach Program, which can assist the mothers and children with the necessary support required for independent living.

Volunteer Services: The support provided by volunteers to each Lighthouse home is a critical component of this community based model of therapeutic family care. This assistance can take a number of forms and includes raising funds to meet specific residential needs, mentoring, maintenance work, transportation, employment and education support and other types of support.

Community Committee: The home has a Community Committee that is comprised of members of the local community that volunteer their time to support the home. The committee plays an active role in helping the mothers and infants feel connected to their local community. The committee becomes part of the extended family of the residents, and are the link to the wider community.

Connections Uniting Care Starting Out Program: The residents have access to a multidisciplinary team of professionals through the Starting Out Program, that can provide intensive specialist support with linkages to support services, access to parenting programs, Maternal and Child Health Nurses, mother's groups, general health, and other services that are vital for the emotional and physical wellbeing of the mother and baby.

Conclusion

Lighthouse has a long history of work with vulnerable young people who are at risk of homelessness. Our Therapeutic Family Model of Care has been developed from more than 30 years of experience working with young people, which began with the work of Susan Barton AM. The programs at Lighthouse are aimed at breaking the cycle of child maltreatment and homelessness. When Lighthouse works with a young person, we work towards providing a better future not only for that young person, but generations to come. Our Mothers and Baby Program is a clear example of our commitment, to breaking cycles, as preventative and early intervention programs are the logical solution to the issues of child maltreatment and youth homelessness.

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