

The Importance of Youth Participation in Programs for Traumatized Homeless Young People

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Youth participation in the program and the decision making process is an important element of the Lighthouse Therapeutic Family Model of Care™ (TFMC™). The young people that we work with have been subjected to numerous traumatic experiences outside of their control. Decisions regarding their lives—where they live, who they live with, who cares for them, what programs they attend—have often been made on their behalf without their consultation. This can result in a lack of trust, sense of victimisation, hopelessness and a feeling that life is ‘unfair’. Such a ‘disempowering’ experience of life can further diminish their resilience, ability to cope, as well as their internal and external resources to make pro-social and pro-active decisions about their lives (Barton, Gonzalez, Tomlinson, 2012).

At Lighthouse Foundation, a therapeutic care and specialist mental health program for homeless young people with backgrounds of abuse and neglect, we have numerous processes built in to ensure that young people have opportunities to actively participate in their own treatment and define the support they receive.

The involvement of young people in having a say in how services are provided is now considered best practice. However, how far this actually goes in reality is more varied and less clear. Hart (1992) provided the following hierarchical ladder to describe levels of children/young people.

- Rung 8: Young People and adults share decision-making
- Rung 7: Young People lead and initiate action
- Rung 6: Shared Decision with Young People, Adult initiated
- Rung 5: Young People consulted and informed
- Rung 4: Young People assigned and informed
- Rung 3: Children/Young People tokenised

Rung 2: Children/Young People are decoration

Rung 1: Children/Young People are manipulated

In order for consumer participation to truly transform the response to homelessness at policy, program and service delivery levels, the aim for all organisations should be to achieve the highest possible rung on Hart’s ladder. For organisations working with very young children, rung four or five may be the appropriate level. For an organisation such as Lighthouse that works with older young people, some of whom have come back to work at the organisation, the highest rung of the ladder is realistic, for example, Young People that have gone through the program are represented on the Board of Directors.

At Lighthouse, we are committed to engaging with young people at the highest level possible. In order to do so, we have a number of short-term and long term strategies that intersect with different rungs of the ladder. Some of the processes in place at Lighthouse relate to participation around rungs 4 to 7, where young people may be informed, consulted with, decision making may be shared but adult initiated, and when appropriate led and directed by the young person.

Our long term vision is to ensure client participation shapes the way the Lighthouse Foundation responds to homelessness for young people. This is achieved through promoting opportunities for these consumers to fulfil different roles within the organisation and to one day run the organisation. Built into the TFMC™ is a commitment to support our young people to move from being service users, to being involved at all levels of the organisation, as senior residents, lead tenants, carers in the home, care team members, psychologists, community committee and sub-committee members, student-placements, volunteers and board members.

It is through bringing previous service users back into the organisation that we can truly move beyond the tokenistic, to meaningful and powerful methods of ensuring consumer participation. This ‘experiential expertise’ is invaluable to the way that the organisation responds to homelessness in the future. According to Youth on Board (2000), “youth

involvement leads to innovative solutions, stronger communities, and increased self-worth, among young people who feel supported by adults, rather than feeling ruled by them” (p.4).

According to Youth Coalition (2008), for youth participation “to be carried out in a genuine way that moves beyond tokenism, it is essential that the organisation is fully committed and backs this up by ensuring the necessary levels of resources are provided (p.222)”.

At Lighthouse we recognise that resources are required to support and encourage young people to return to our organisation as employees, volunteers, placement students, board members and committee members. We tailor these resources to each individual, but resources may include but not be limited to access to in-house training, financial support with education, tutoring and training, and developing numeracy and literacy skills, driving lessons, individual ongoing therapy, being linked with a mentor and development planning with young people wishing to make the transition to working for the organisation.

Young people using our service feel inspired and see meaning in knowing that numerous staff and other members of the Lighthouse community have been service-users themselves, and not only will have a good understanding of their needs and wants, but also be living examples that Lighthouse truly values and believes in the need for consumers participation. ■

References

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