

A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

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Abstract

Concerned service providers, researchers and care leavers have been lobbying for extended (post-18 years) supports for young people transitioning from out-of-home care (OOHC) in the Australian state of Victoria for more than 20 years. These campaigns have succeeded in placing transitions from care on the policy agenda, and in persuading successive Victorian governments to introduce some leaving care policy programs and supports. But these initiatives have attracted limited resources, and mostly assisted the preparation of young people aged 15-17 years to leave care, rather than offering post-care support until at least 21 years. This paper argues that a number of factors have contributed to this policy inaction including stigmatisation of care leavers, budgetary challenges, and the competing sector demands for funding of out-of-home care services vs post-care services. But the key factor is arguably the dominant language used by governments which narrowly frames the policy agenda around progressing inflexible age-based transitions to independence, instead of acknowledging that care leavers, as per their non-care peers in the general population, require continuing parenting well beyond the age of 18 years.

Keywords

transitions from care, care leavers, Australian and Victorian legislation and policy, barriers to policy reform, Home Stretch campaign

Introduction

In August 2016, Anglicare Victoria established the Home Stretch campaign (Home Stretch, 2018a) to lobby all Australian States and Territories to extend the transition from state out-of-home care (OOHC) (leaving care) age from 18 until at least 21 years. To date, this national campaign has been effective in educating the general community regarding the limited discretionary rather than mandatory support currently offered to most young care leavers as they move into adulthood (Baidawi, 2016; McDonald, 2016). Yet as detailed below, the overwhelming social and economic case for extended care has been placed by specialist researchers, service providers, care leavers and sections of

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

the media on the public agenda for more than 20 years. But despite this evidence, governments have failed to act.

This paper uses the state of Victoria as a case study for analysing why long-term public recognition of the case for extended care has not resulted in substantial policy and practice reform. Part One introduces some of the key factors that influence the experiences of and outcomes for care leavers. It then draws a comparison between the sudden withdrawal of government assistance at the age of 18 years or earlier from that cohort with the ongoing support provided to most of their non-care peers into early adulthood. Part Two considers how the policy issue of transitions from care has been defined by tracing the history of the Victorian debate from the early 1990s. This discussion notes the consistent emphasis of government policy on an inflexible age-related milestone and associated preparation for independence prior to 18 years of age, rather than continuing care until 21 years or beyond. Part Three examines a range of factors that have contributed to the Victorian government's failure to provide a safety net of support that meets the minimum needs of care leavers aged 18 years and beyond, but equally identifies some variables that may shift government policy towards extended support. Finally, some conclusions are drawn as to reasons why the Home Stretch campaign may finally persuade state and territory governments to meet their ongoing parenting responsibilities.

Definition of leaving care

Leaving care is formally defined as the cessation of legal responsibility by child protection authorities for young people living in out-of-home care, which in all Australian jurisdictions occurs at no later than 18 years of age. In practice, however, leaving care is a major life transformation, and a process that involves transitioning from dependence on state care accommodation and supports, which despite their significant limitations are at least funded on a mandatory basis within annual government budgets, to so-called independence and self-reliance (Cashmore & Mendes, 2015). Care leavers often face significant barriers to accessing the key developmental and transitional opportunities that are readily available to their non-care peers.

Care leavers are not a homogeneous group, and have varied backgrounds and experiences in terms of the structure and capacity of their birth families, the type and extent of abuse or neglect experienced pre-care, and the age at which they enter care that can vary from infancy to early teens. Other variables include their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, given that a disproportionate number of children in OOHC in Australia have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins, their out-of-home care experiences, their developmental stage and needs when exiting care, the presence of

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

special needs such as developmental disability or mental illness, and the quantity and quality of supports available to them as they transition from care (Stein & Wade, 2000).

It is generally accepted that successful outcomes for care leavers result from secure and stable placements; educational support and progress whilst in out-of-home care; planned and gradual transitions from care that reflect individual levels of maturity and skill development; and the provision of stable accommodation and a range of ongoing relationship and material supports after leaving care including a dedicated caseworker or personal adviser till at least 21 years of age (Cashmore & Mendes, 2008; 2015).

The reasons for their relative disadvantage are transparent. Many care leavers experience significant abuse or neglect prior to entering care, limited stability in care, and a lack of assistance from family members or other community networks as they transition from care. In addition to these major disadvantages, many young people currently experience a sudden end at 16-18 years of age to the formal support networks of state care. This ending of support coincides with either the final years of schooling or the beginning of attempts to gain skills training or employment. Consequently, their transition into adulthood is markedly accelerated and compressed compared to their non-state care peers. The state as corporate parent fails to provide the ongoing financial, social and emotional support and nurturing offered by most families of origin up to and even well beyond 25 years of age.

Yet, transitions to adulthood in Australia have changed significantly over the last 100 years. In the last three decades, many young people have remained at home longer due to weakening labour markets and growing housing costs (Cobb-Clark, 2008). It is increasingly accepted that a new period of 'emerging adulthood' has developed between adolescence and young adulthood in industrialised societies. This term characterises the new developmental stages - involving longer periods of study and training, greater participation in premarital sex and cohabitation, and delayed entry into marriage and parenthood - that most young people now experience from their late teens to their mid-to-late 20s (Arnett, 2007).

Consequently, most families (at least in the middle class) continue to support their children with ongoing accommodation, money, food, clothing, health care, assistance with the cost of education or employment training, and emotional support often up to or even past 25 years of age (Vassallo, Smart, & Price-Robertson, 2009). Surveys confirm that a clear majority of Australians believe that parents should be willing to provide financial assistance to adult children or allow them to live with them if necessary (Weston & Qu, 2016).

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

Most other young people, at least in countries such as Australia, now live at home until 21 or even 25 years of age. The percentage of young people aged 18-24 years living with their parents increased from 50% in 1997 to 60% in 2012–13, the number of women aged 22-25 living with their parents increased from 27 % in 2001 to 48 % in 2015, and the number of men aged 22-25 years residing with parents increased from 43 % in 2001 to 60 % in 2015 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015a; Wilkins, 2017).

In contrast, care leavers, who as a result of their background experiences are the group least likely to cope with independent living at 18 years of age, are expected to swiftly transform into self-sufficient adults without any safety net of support (Raman, Inder, & Forbes, 2005).

Australian and Victorian policy and practice context

Out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia is the responsibility of the community services or child welfare department in each state and territory, and each has its own legislation, policies and practices. Consequently in-care or leaving care standards are not uniform, although the national out-of-home care standards, introduced in December 2010, suggest minimum benchmarks such as the requirement for each care leaver to have a transition from care plan commencing at 15 years of age (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2010). Additionally, the latest National Child Protection Framework Action Plan for 2015-18 identifies improved outcomes for care leavers as one of the three key strategies to be implemented and refers to improved housing supports as a priority in order to prevent youth homelessness (Department of Social Services, 2015a).

There is also some Commonwealth funding available to care leavers through the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which provides one-off financial assistance up to \$1,500 for young people aged 15-25 years who have departed OOHC within the past 24 months (Department of Social Services, 2015b). But neither the National Standards or Framework provide any specific funding to jurisdictions to assist the introduction of additional supports. Nor do they impose any accountability measures to enforce action by the states and territories (Beauchamp, 2016). To date, all state or territory legislative provisions are discretionary, not mandatory. And the Commonwealth implicitly approves the uniform policy approach of all jurisdictions that “young people in out-of-home care are declared independent when they turn 18 years of age” (Council of Australian Governments, 2013, p. 21).

Additionally, there is a lack of reliable data on the number and characteristics of young people leaving care. To be sure, the aggregated data collected and published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) suggests that approximately 3,130

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

young people nationally aged 15 to 17 years transition from OOHC each year (AIHW, 2017, p. 48). But no specific figures are provided by the AIHW for those who leave care at 18 years of age. Some earlier AIHW reports reported that 750-800 young people in the state of Victoria aged 15-17 years transition each year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014; 2015b). However, the Victorian Government seem to apply different counting rules and eligibility criteria. They estimate that only 500 young people leave care per year, and report that 2,000 young people aged 16-21 years are eligible for leaving care support – that is they were living under a child protection order on their 16th birthday (DHHS, 2017).

The vast majority of children in OOHC (94 per cent) had been placed in either foster or relative/kinship care or other types of home-based care. Only about five per cent reside in residential care which is generally reserved for older adolescents with complex needs. No precise figures are available as to what percentage of care leavers come from each category (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

The Victorian leaving care debate: Transitioning to independent living not ‘continuing’ care

Policy responses to social issues are heavily influenced by the specific terms and language used by policy makers to represent and define the problem (Bacchi, 2009). As noted below, concerns about poor outcomes for care leavers have been placed on the public policy agenda (Edwards, 2001; Palmer & Short, 2010) in most Australian states and territories since the late 1980s, and all governments have publicly recognised the need for policy and program responses. Victorian campaigns for expanded leaving care and post-care supports have been driven by a coalition of advocacy groups and individuals including the peak child welfare provider group, the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CECFW); child welfare service providers; academic researchers; the Foster Care Association of Victoria; the Council to Homeless Persons; and the national consumer group known as the CREATE Foundation which represents young people in, or who have left, care (McDowall, 2016a; Mendes, 2002; 2005).

Yet, the problem has mostly been framed narrowly by policy makers around preparing young people for a rapid transition to independent living by no later than the arbitrary age of 18 years, and consequently commencing leaving care planning at the tender age of 15 years when most young people are barely completing Year 9 at school. Few policy documents have recognised and operationalised the government’s responsibility as the responsible guardian to provide ‘continuing’ care until at least 21 years or even 25 years when the young person has achieved adult maturity (Baidawi, 2016; Bristow et al, 2012;

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

Community Affairs References Committee, 2015; McDowall, 2016b). Many researchers instead recommend use of the term ‘interdependence’ rather than independent living in order to reflect a notion of shared care and responsibility between young people, their families, friends, support workers, and the broader community (Avery & Freundlich, 2009; Frost & Stein, 1995).

Leaving care first came to national public attention in 1989 when the National Inquiry into Homeless Children found that a large number of homeless young people came from state care backgrounds. The Inquiry censured all governments for failing to provide these young people with the ongoing “nurture and support...to which they are legally entitled” (Burdekin & Carter, 1989, p. 117). A follow-up report by the Brotherhood of St Laurence found that care leavers continued to be prone to unemployment, homelessness and social isolation. The report urged all state governments to establish housing, education/employment and income support programs for children leaving guardianship orders (Taylor, 1990).

The 1989 Victorian Children and Young Persons Act (Sections 119-124), proclaimed in 1990, provided no specific entitlement to leaving care or after-care supports beyond 18 years of age other than stipulating that appropriate discharge procedures be followed. These procedures included a limited post-placement support period of up to three months (Green & Jones, 1999; Taylor, 1990). Yet from the mid-1980s onwards, concern was expressed in Victoria about poor outcomes for care leavers, including evidence of homelessness and involvement in sexual exploitation (Green, 1993; Maunders et al., 1999; Neave, 1985).

However, leaving care only reached the Victorian public policy agenda in 1996 when a report by the Victorian Auditor General demanded action from the government. The report noted the demonstrated connection between leaving care and homelessness, and criticised the Department of Human Services (DHS) for failing to provide any specific post-care programs. The report recommended the establishment of an advice or advocacy service for care leavers focused on accommodation, education, and personal support issues. A specific recommendation was made for research to be undertaken by DHS in order to examine the demand for and type of after care arrangements and support required (Auditor General, 1996).

In response to this report, the Victorian government introduced a Leaving Care Service Model Project in 1998 which aimed to strengthen support for young people leaving care aged 14-18 years. The project commissioned a research report which proposed extending care until 25 years of age, improved case planning practices, and the establishment of locally based leaving care and after-care services (Owen et al., 2000).

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

Further research reports and public consultations followed, but the leaving care project did not lead to any specific funding for transitional or after-care services. Non-government child welfare agencies were told informally by the government that after-care services would not be provided unless the sector could demonstrate through economic analysis that downstream savings would be made in terms of addressing potential longer-term costs pertaining to homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, early pregnancy, and associated child protection interventions (Mendes, 2004a; 2005). As a result, a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) including St Luke's Anglicare, MacKillop Family Services and Berry Street Victoria established their own transition from care programs, often without government funding, in order to address leaving care needs and influence government policy. For example, St Luke's Anglicare established a holistic leaving care and after care support service in 2003 which included a housing support program, a mentoring program and an employment assistance program (St Luke's Anglicare, 2003; 2008).

Additionally, the peak child welfare body, the Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, undertook a research study to demonstrate that significant after-care assistance provides economic as well as social benefits. Their study examined the economic costs of not supporting young people after they leave care. They estimated the long-term costs to the state government associated with service use by these young people (for example, for health and mental health services, police, criminal justice, child protection, drug and alcohol, and housing) at \$738,741 per person over a 42 year timeframe. That is, each annual cohort of approximately 450 young people would cost the state approximately \$332 million per year over the next 42 years, and that was without counting federal costs such as income support and lost taxation revenue. Conversely, a supportive transition model for care leavers up to 25 years of age would only cost the state 11 per cent of this total. The CECFW advised the government to "spend a little more now to save a lot in the future" (Raman, Inder & Forbes, 2005, p. 2).

Over time, the Victoria government's Office of Housing introduced housing and support projects in all regions, including an Indigenous specific initiative managed by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. In addition, a mentoring program was provided for some care leavers. But these projects were arguably fragmented and time-limited in scope, offering support to only a small number of care leavers with an emphasis on a swift transition to independent living. Many care leavers continued to be referred directly to Supported Accommodation Assistance Services (SAAP) that were intended for young people who were already homeless rather than those transitioning from care (Mendes, 2004b; Clare, 2006).

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

A 2004 Victorian Government report acknowledged a widespread concern from the child welfare sector that care leavers faced “significant challenges and poorer outcomes than other young people in Victoria” (Freiberg, Kirby & Ward, 2004, p. 21). The report suggested that “many of these young people are not equipped with the skills to move to independent adult life, and yet are expected to make this transition more abruptly than others and with no fall back supports” (Freiberg, Kirby & Ward, 2004, p. 21). A further report acknowledged that ‘good parents’ in the general community supported their children for many years beyond their 18th birthday, and suggested that the government had a responsibility to provide similar ongoing assistance to care leavers (Department of Human Services, 2004: 115).

Consequently, Victoria legislated via the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* for the provision of leaving care and after-care services for young people up to 21 years of age. The *Act*, which was proclaimed in October 2006, appears to oblige the government to assist care leavers with finances, housing, education and training, employment, legal advice, access to health and community services, and counselling and support depending on the assessed level of need, and to consider the specific needs of Aboriginal young people. But Section 16(1) of the *Act* circumscribes the key purpose of services as being to facilitate a “transition to independent living”, rather than ongoing support from existing carers and placements (Department of Human Services, 2005, p.27). Additionally, Section 16(2) of the *Act* states that these responsibilities “...do not create any right or entitlement enforceable at law” Department of Human Services, 2005, p. 27, suggesting that leaving care programs are in fact discretionary, and care leavers do not actually have any legal right to seek or demand support services from government. This optional duty to provide support compares unfavourably with the mandatory obligation contained in the English Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 to assist care leavers via a formal Pathway Plan and supportive Personal Adviser until at least 21 years of age, and a similar obligation via the Staying Put Bill (2013) in Scotland to provide care leavers with advice, guidance and assistance until 26 years of age. Its intent also seems less robust than the Fostering Connections Act introduced in the USA in 2008 which provides financial incentives to states to extend care provisions for young people involved in substantial education, training or employment until 21 years of age (Baidawi, 2016).

Concerns about poor outcomes remained. The Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry Report, released in February 2012, recommended major reforms including extending individual placements when needed beyond 18 years of age, and providing post-care support when required until 25 years of age (Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012). But the government’s ambivalence towards recognising any post-care

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

guardianship responsibility remained. A report released in May 2012 reinforced the notion of an accelerated transition to independence. The report argued that “once a young person reaches the age of 18 they are considered to be an adult. Protection orders expire and the statutory child protection system no longer provides care” (State Government Victoria, 2012, p. 25).

The government responded to the Vulnerable Children Inquiry and other reports by introducing some new assistance such as a Care and Transition Plan for young people aged 15 years and above based on the seven domains of the Looking After Children framework (Department of Human Services, 2012). Additionally, they established mentoring, post-care support and flexible funding support for young people transitioning from care or post-care in all eight regions. These services, which cost approximately \$11 million a year, include discrete Indigenous support and housing assistance programs (DHHS, 2017). In late 2017, the government announced the introduction of a new housing assistance package funded for nearly \$6 million over four years. However, this package will only assist about 100 young people each year which is less than five per cent of all eligible care leavers (DHHS, 2017).

The new housing package, whilst welcome, encapsulates the limitations of the existing Victorian leaving care system. Only about \$5000 per year is allocated to meet the needs of each of the more than 2000 young people aged 18-21 years who have left care over the past three years. That is less than two per cent of the total out-of-home care budget for Victoria which was \$566,526 million in 2016-17 (Productivity Commission, 2018), although these young people constitute nearly 15 per cent of the total age groups in and beyond care covered by the Victorian legislation. And a considerable proportion of that small pool of funding is allocated to young people aged 16 or 17 years who are still in the out-of-home care system. Hence the real amount of funding per care leaver is even lower (Campo & Commerford, 2016).

It is arguable that the required minimum level of spending to meet the needs of the estimated 2000 care leavers aged 16-21 years in Victoria each year should equate to the average of \$54,938.52 spent per annum on children or young people in OOHC in Victoria (Productivity Commission 2018), and would be nearly \$110 million in Victoria alone. That is about ten times the current level of leaving care spending, but still very little compared to the \$566 million that Victoria already spends on OOHC each year (Productivity Commission, 2018).

Explaining Victoria's Policy Failure

So why is there such government inaction around improving supports for care leavers? One factor seems to be that children who grow up in out-of-home care are still

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

stigmatised as unworthy of the same supports as their non-care peers. According to Michell (2015, p. 673), children living in out-of-home care are subjected to social prejudice and hurt by the wider society, and relegated to the 'bottom of the heap'.

Another factor influencing the abandonment of parental responsibility at 18 years is that state care is expensive, and governments everywhere are influenced by neoliberal agendas to reduce social expenditure. For example, Australia currently spends over three billion nationally on out-of-home care (Productivity Commission, 2018). Yet a number of economic studies suggest that extending supports to 21 years or beyond will result in much greater long-term cost benefits due to lower demand by care leavers for crisis intervention services (Raman, Inder, & Forbes, 2005; Hannon, Wood, & Bazalgette, 2010). This potential saving from enhanced leaving care funding has been a key argument of the Home Stretch campaign which I discuss below.

A further factor paradoxically is the lack of any public opposition to more generous assistance to care leavers which currently tends to mute the issue politically, but could potentially exert a positive impact in the longer term. As noted by Palmer & Short (2010), sometimes highly divisive social policy issues (e.g. abortion or euthanasia/assisted dying or illicit drug use or same sex marriage) force governments to act as a result of public disagreement and associated media coverage of competing views. In contrast, there is overwhelming public support for expanded leaving care supports. An October 2017 survey by Reach Tel found that 76 per cent of Australians favour extending state care until 21 years, 82 per cent believe governments should do more to assist care leavers, and 87 per cent believe that all young people deserve accommodation support until at least 21 years (Home Stretch, 2017). Consequently, any government that takes action to expand leaving care supports is likely to receive overwhelming public support.

A further barrier to government action has arguably been the competing priorities of leading child welfare sector agencies and advocacy groups. All Victorian NGOs have argued for more substantial leaving care supports and funding at Budget time for many years. But many have also simultaneously proposed additional funding for early intervention programs for families, and extra resources for a range of out-of-home care programs such as foster care, kinship care and residential care (for example, CECFW, 2014). This absence of a dedicated campaign for leaving care supports has allowed governments to divert pressure for substantial funding increases by arguing that there are only limited resources to be allocated across a range of child welfare programs, and that new funds for leaving care would require the identification of savings in other child welfare areas. Additionally, some child welfare service provision agencies and peak bodies are reluctant to vigorously attack inadequate government policies for fear of

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

losing their government funding. In the final section, it is argued in contrast that the independently funded current Home Stretch campaign offers a unified advocacy approach that should place serious pressure on government to address core care leaver needs.

Additionally, there has been minimal engagement by Victorian governments to date with international research evidence which could have informed effective policy reforms. There has been substantial research from the UK, USA and Europe for more than 20 years showing that post-care supports not only help produce better outcomes for care leavers, but are also highly cost effective compared to crisis intervention programs (e.g Stein & Munro, 2008; Gilligan, 2018). Yet this research, often distributed via the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (known as INTRAC) and actively utilised by Australian researchers (Stein, 2016), has largely been ignored in government policy development documents.

The government has also paid little attention to the numerous Victorian qualitative studies based on surveys and interviews with young people after they have left care and/or consultations with specialist leaving care service providers. This non-engagement means that the important first-hand voices of care leavers concerning their experiences and challenges have largely been neglected in policy development.

For example, the 2012 Vulnerable Children Inquiry made minimal reference to the numerous Victorian research reports, and wrongly implied that evidence on care leaver experiences and access to support services in Victoria was “not available” (Cummins, Scott & Scales, 2012, p. 260). The Inquiry could have also added that the Victorian Government has displayed little or no interest in collecting data on, and monitoring the outcomes for, young people formerly in care (Community Affairs References Committee, 2015). To be sure, these existing research studies, described as “good quality” by Bromfeld & Osborn, (2007, p. 21) have some limitations, particularly in regard to accessing large samples that are representative of the experiences of care leavers in any one year.

In the May 2011 Budget, the government itself announced funding for a longitudinal study tracking a group of young people aged 16-18 years leaving care over a period of four years called Beyond 18. The Australian Institute of Family Studies in partnership with the Department of Human Services commenced this research project in 2012. But at the time of writing, only the first wave of study findings has been released by the government (Muir & Hand, 2018).

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

The Home Stretch Campaign and the future

Home Stretch is a dedicated campaign to persuade all state and territory governments to extend out-of-home care provision until 21 years of age. According to Home Stretch, “State care for young people ends at 18. They’re cut off from all support, care and assistance and left to fend for themselves” (Home Stretch, 2018, p.2) Citing evidence from the USA, England and Canada that extended care results in better outcomes, Home Stretch argues that continuing care until 21 will enable young people to “finish school, find employment, have access to stable accommodation, as well as providing them with ongoing care and Support. Let’s finish what we started” (Home Stretch, 2018, p.2).

To date, the campaign, which was officially launched by Anglicare Victoria in August 2016, has a number of notable achievements (Home Stretch, 2017) including:

- 3000 registered supporters and 129 affiliated organisations in the child welfare, housing and legal aid fields;
- Financial support of \$500,000 over 3 years from philanthropic trusts enabling employment of an ongoing Project Coordinator and Campaign Manager.
- Discrete launches in five capital cities, and additionally regional town launches are planned;
- A series of radio, television, print media and social media interviews which have provided an opportunity for the voices of care leavers and foster carers to be heard in the policy debate;
- Publication of the ReachTel survey of public opinion as discussed above;
- Meetings with relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers in all States and Territories and the Commonwealth; there have also been meetings with representatives from significant minor parties;
- Presentations to numerous policy and advocacy conferences.

The campaign has published two detailed reports in favour of extending care until 21. The first report analysed the limitations of existing state and territory legislation (Baidawi, 2016), and will be followed by the preparation of draft reform legislation in partnership with Victorian Legal Aid. Additionally, the campaign commissioned a cost benefit analysis report by Deloitte Access Economics. That report demonstrated that extending care would provide major economic benefits to the Victorian government, due to reduced homelessness, less hospitalisation, fewer care leavers arrested and

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

general improvements in physical and mental health and social connections (Anglicare Victoria, 2016).

Home Stretch has achieved political breakthroughs in four states. Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia have announced trials of extended care until 21 years in response to the Home Stretch advocacy campaign. These trials will only assist a small percentage of care leavers, but could potentially lead in the longer term to universal programs that assist all care leavers (Mendes, 2018).

The ongoing challenge for Home Stretch is to extend support for their campaign beyond what Kingdon calls the “specialist policy community” (Kingdon, 2011, p. 117) (consisting of child welfare bodies and associated groups who have worked together and endorsed extended care for many years) to a wider group of advocates in the general community. Ideally, the campaign would benefit from a parliamentary champion who would initiate a parliamentary inquiry or hearing (similar to those that occurred recently in Victoria in relation to the introduction of the Assisted Dying Bill and the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) that placed leaving care on the immediate agenda of all political parties. Such an action should also produce greater media coverage of care leaver needs which would then lift the public profile of the leaving care policy debate (Edwards, 2001), and potentially open up a ‘window of opportunity’ (Kingdon, 2011, p. 165) that would place pressure on the Victorian and other state and territory governments to take action.

Conclusion

The state of Victoria (and indeed all Australian states and territories) are policy outliers compared to both England and the USA in terms of lacking either prescriptive legislation or adequately resourced services and programs to support care leavers. That is despite the existence of numerous government reports and independent research studies over more than 20 years verifying the need for expanded and ongoing assistance to care leavers. The most significant factor contributing to this policy inertia seems to be the government’s narrow framing of the policy debate around progressing a sudden transition to adult independence at the age of 18 years which does not reflect the developmental needs and capacities of most care leavers, or conform with the extended support provided by most families in the wider community to young adults. The key argument of this paper is that continuing care till at least 21 years is required both to provide reasonable opportunities for the inclusion of care leavers in mainstream society, and to reduce the major economic costs emanating from their disproportionate disadvantage and exclusion. The current Home Stretch campaign is the first dedicated movement making the case for the extension of care till 21 years. Whilst its policy

Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

arguments are not new, its range of public advocacy strategies may succeed in educating and pressuring the community and politicians to initiate policy reform.

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Mendes: A case study of policy inaction: Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria

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