

Australian Residential Care responds to COVID19 impacts: An overview of ongoing challenges and opportunities

Children and young people growing up in therapeutic residential care (TRC), along with their families, almost always confront major life challenges. Invariably they manifest enormous courage and resilience in responding to these stressors. Arrival of the COVID 19 pandemic has further stretched the personal reserves of TRC service users and impacted care providers; mental and physical illness, relationship disruption, unemployment, housing issues, and restrictions on movement are just a few major effects (ANU, June & July, 2020; Senate Inquiry, 2020; SVA, 2020). Some changes to residential care provision since onset of the pandemic have arguably proved positive, whilst others have added a further layer of trauma and complexity. In Australia, formal research evidence of COVID19 impacts on Therapeutic Residential Care specifically remains unavailable, although broader reports on out-of-home care service delivery since the pandemic are now emerging (CCYP, 2020; CFECFW, 2020; SVA, 2020). Policy, programmatic and practice initiatives are also being disseminated and this appears to be proving helpful to the sector's collaborations and advocacy efforts. Since early 2020, the National Therapeutic Residential Care Alliance (NTRCA- Australia) has met regularly to monitor pandemic impacts and share best practice responses under lockdown, quarantine, isolation, social distancing and related restrictions. This paper describes diverse learnings from the pandemic experience by senior managers from the NTRCA Reference Group; they describe impacts from micro to macro systems and across the developmental continuum (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Examples of innovative response strategies addressing impacts on pre-existing trauma, partnering with families, education and training, peer relationships and milieu subculture are described. Challenges encountered and opportunities created in a time of change and uncertainty are described, utilizing specific practice examples. Keeping TRC young people, their families and carers: safe and well, physically and mentally; connected to extended family, friends and community; empowered, self-actualizing, learning and growing are ongoing priorities for these managers. They continue to operate under statutory restriction across all Australian states and territories. Practice wisdom and advanced expertise of TRC professionals in this presentation is enhanced by the experience of young care leavers whose descriptions life in TRC under pandemic conditions.

CREATE Foundation (Australia)www.create.org.au is the national consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. CREATE runs programs and services across all Australian states and territories for children and young people in foster care, kinship care, and residential care. CREATE's research reports and articles, submissions and policy development allow the Foundation to advocate for a better care system.

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