**Outreach and crisis service adaptions for COVID-19**

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Throughout the pandemic, Australia’s community sector has had to continue supporting our most vulnerable young people through crisis. Many youth outreach and crisis services have been categorised as essential services, which presents unique advantages but also unique challenges.

In this piece, you’ll hear from youth workers Andy (he/him, they/them) from the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS) on Wurundjeri Land, Ryan and Laura from Nungurra at the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-Operative (GEGAC) on Gunaikurnai Land, and Lucy (she/her) and Alan (he/him) from headspace Collingwood on Wurundjeri Land.

This piece is divided into three sections; you can use the links above to navigate between them. The audio tracks are quotes from the case studies. You can listen to them, or read the short transcript using the red ‘Read’ links underneath them.

**1. Pandemic adaptions**

Lockdowns have made many vulnerable young people quite isolated – but that doesn’t mean they have to be left to rely only on themselves. Supporting independent living skills has always been a priority of outreach and crisis services, but how they deliver that support had to change. Here’s Andy from YSAS describing what they did to **promote mental wellbeing and independent living, and facilitate connection with community organisations.**

**Adapting practical support when you’re working from home**

**Andy, YSAS:**

*The ability of all of the PIVOT team to adapt their practice, to fit in with the current climate, was just amazing.*

*Whether it be going for a walk with a dog and then talking to a young person as they’re going for a walk. “****Hey, I'm going to go out, how about you come out, and you know, you go for a walk around your area, I'll go for a walk around mine?****”*

*I know that we did a lot of, and we still are doing, a lot of the like online shopping for our young people.* ***“Hey,******you need some groceries? Cool. Well, we could do potentially, some budgeting stuff online, and then go through a Coles shop.******Right, this is your budget, what can we do?”*** *Trying to get that* ***independent living skills*** *promoted and increased.*

*Our aim is to to* ***reduce recidivism[[1]](#footnote-1) in our young people.*** *Some of our team members they were doing cooking, so they would say, right okay well, we can do some independent living skills today. Let's plan it. I can't come out to you, but what we can do is we can do you shopping list, we'll get it sent to you, and we’ll cook it together****. And we'll go for it together on FaceTime or on MS Teams****.*

*One of the things I like that we did: putting together kind of* ***care packages*** *for our young people and their families. So we understand that our young people, like you and I are, like everyone has had to do, is be quite confined to one space, which can be quite difficult. So we came up with ways in which we could make that easier, whether it be a $50 Coles voucher for food, but then we'd also have some sensory toys for the family, for the young people. Even like Netflix voucher. “****You need to entertain yourself, what would work for you?****” I know I bought one of my young people a gaming voucher because he loves games.*

*For some of our clients that unfortunately weren't at home, and were in transitional housing, it was really about looking at what services and charities and organisations, not-for-profits are available that we can link them in with.*

**How do youth workers keep vulnerable young people engaged, while keeping them COVID-Safe?** Pre-COVID, many crisis accommodation services have focused on young people building a positive network that supports their education, employment, social wellbeing and overall health. Getting engaged with the community and getting out and about has been a pillar of that priority, so what happens when lockdowns mean that’s not possible anymore? Ryan from Nungurra run by GEGAC shares how they adapted the house rules and activities.

**Adaptions for accommodation services in lockdown**

**Ryan, Nungurra –at GEGAC**

*The rules to the house changed as well. The residents’ computers, they’re closed through school hours. Normally, the lounge rooms are closed through school hours. But we opened everything up just to try and keep the kids here. So Netflix in the lounge rooms, unlimited use to the computers. We never used to give the Wi Fi password out to the young people. Just a part of independence: you’ve got to learn to have your own Wi Fi, or phone data. But we passed the Wi Fi out and everything, just any sort of carrot we could dangle in front of them to encourage them to stay here to provide some sort of entertainment.*

*We try and ask the young people when they do come into the refuge,* ***“what are your interests?”*** *Because we're happy to adjust their activities day-to-day.* ***It's not what the staff want, it’s what the young people want.***

*Not all youth workers are like us because we actually live with our clients. Everyone does become frustrated. Staff members become frustrated but the young people do too. So give them a bit of leeway – you know, listen to them and take on their advice on how we can help get through this together because it is a long period.*

For accommodation services like Nungurra, the pandemic has shown how the best ways to support young people, and what healthy expectations we should set, can totally flip depending on context. On the other hand, when youth workers can’t be with young people, they’ve had to find creative ways support them from afar.

Andy and Ryan listed combinations of the following as **keys to adapting to restrictions:**

* Coordinating COVID-safe time outdoors
* Supporting independent living skills, such as budgeting, food shopping and cooking
* Providing care packages or access to other materials so young people can entertain themselves
* Providing practical essentials such as travel cards or phone credit
* Keeping young people updated about restrictions and having open discussion about what they mean
* Connecting with young people virtually, using platforms they already prefer

**Ideas for connection and communication with young people in isolation**

**Andy, YSAS:**

*I think it was more about just trying to be as interactive with them as we could, and still giving them that* ***sense of connectivity*** *and that* ***we’re here with you on this journey****.*

*For me personally, I had a young man that was in and out of custody all the time. So trying to facilitate day of release was really difficult in terms of, we’re organising a taxi to go and pick him up and drop him to his emergency accommodation. And then I'd get special permission from my manager to go over to the hotel and drop off a care package - so it'd be some food, it would be toiletries - basic essentials. Some favourite snacks of his. But also things like Myki cards and phone credit.* ***The real practical things that these young people need to connect.*** *Masks were another one – “hey, you need to put this on when you go out” – and* ***making sure our young people were aware of what the rules were.***

**Ryan, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*We've got our own mobile phone here to contact the kids. And we never used to text much at all. Normally you'd ring and they don't answer, then you follow up with a text – “Can you please call me back?” And what we would find is, rather than calling us back, they would write back, “Why? What is it you want?” So we’d respond and* ***you'd start communicating via text*** *because you know* ***that's the way they prefer to.***

**Andy, YSAS:**

*I think it comes down to their learning styles, really. You always make sure you text them, “these are the rules as of the latest change.” But even just on the phone – “Hey, are you keeping safe? How you feeling with your physical health, your mental health, your emotional health?” and doing that check in with them. Some of the PIVOT workers would write their young people letters, and kind of be like a pen pal.* ***Trying to be as personal as you can be in an impersonal time.***

**2. Pandemic challenges**

Despite the best ongoing efforts of youth workers, some aspects of their work can’t quite be replicated in lockdown, or they haven’t received enough support to do so.

**Losing regular face-to-face opportunities,** particularly for newly engaged young people, has been challenging because it masks so many of the non-verbal messages that youth workers look for and can respond to. Where face-to-face work has been possible, it’s often been staggered or less frequent. This can present an imbalance where there are quiet periods of no in-person contact, followed by more condensed and intense work periods.

But as you’ll hear from Laura, there were some positives. For example, an outreach worker wouldn’t normally visit a young person at midnight. But when they’re relying on more virtual contact, a young person can get in touch whenever something is on their mind, at whatever hour, and it also feels less daunting to not share face-to-face. In some cases, this meant young people were opening up a lot more because they could do it on their own time. Here’s Andy from YSAS, and Laura and Ryan from Nungurra sharing their insights.

**Challenges of losing regular in-person contact**

**Andy, YSAS:**

*Face-to-face with our young people, with any young person’s so much more effective than on the phone. It's so much more personable. You're able to pick up so much more as a youth worker, even if it's just the tone of voice, the mannerisms, the facial expressions. You're able to see actually how they're doing. You can see by their personal presentation - hey, did they look okay, do they you know, do they look tired, do they look scruffy or do they look well slept? Did they look clean? You know, do they look kept? So always if we can we'll try and do the face-to-face stuff because it’s just... again, it shows that more personal side and allows you to meet them where they are and where they're at.*

**Laura, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*I think a lot of our guys on outreach, can feel isolated as it is because they're living by themselves. In normal circumstances I'd be visiting them regularly. But when COVID hit, I was working from home for a period of time. So it was contact over the phone. So that had a lot of challenges in itself.*

**Andy, YSAS:**

*The new referrals I had compared to the older ones I had, it was* ***a little bit more difficult to try and get them on the hook because we weren't working towards anything.*** *It was almost a real struggle to work towards the big goals that they set for themselves. Because of the way we were and because of the landscape.*

**Adapting to loss of in-person contact**

**Laura, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*It wasn't all doom and gloom. It sort of made us utilise a lot of other ways to keep in touch. So my emails went up a lot more from clients. So those emails would come through at midnight, 2am - when there was something on their mind. And so when I came onto shift in the morning, I felt like they were opening up a lot more about some of the issues they were having, because it was done through email rather than me coming to their door and them having to tell me something face-to-face.*

**Ryan, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*Sticking to the guidelines that we can only have two people per room, we had to chop our roster in half. So we had half working from home for one week, and we had about half working at the refuge for one week. But when you're working in crisis accommodation, there's not a real lot you can do from home. So it really meant that the staff that were working that week, were putting in extra hours, and doing a lot of weekend and evening and sleep over shifts more than the nine-to-five stuff. But the staff adjusted okay to that because it meant that they got the following week more or less off – there's not much you can do from home. So they had that sort of week break before they come back in and did the real long week again with all the sleepovers and weekend work.*

**Lockdown fatigue** was a challenge that impacted young people, their households, and youth workers alike. In crisis accommodation like Nungurra, the complete change in how they operated was both jarring and testing.

Unfortunately, lockdowns have also seen an increase in domestic and family violence. Ryan explains this here; **content note for mentions of family violence during COVID-19.**

**How COVID-19 changed referrals and responses**

**Ryan, Nungurra at GEGAC**

*When COVID hit, we did a whole 180 degrees of the way that our service rolls. So we were always asking the kids pre-COVID to leave the house, go to school, find a job, don't hang around the house all day, you need to be doing something worthy. Once COVID hit, it was the exact opposite. We're normally asking them to leave, and now we're asking them not to leave. And it was a real challenge for the young people to stay put in the house, because we're quite a large house. That many people all together for a length of time can really test the boundaries of both staff and young people that stay here.*

***Content Warning: Family violence***

*If we take a little step back, the reason people get referred, did change a little bit. And that was because you know, they're remote learning at home and the parents working from home. So there was a lot more family violence. The referrals did pick up a lot more. And we expected this as well. And you gotta be keep mindful, this was in time of the bushfires that had just finished as well. I'd say that would be 95% of the reasons why the young people were referred to us throughout the pandemic is the family violence.*

Another challenge that outreach and crisis workers face is **what to do** **when** **young people don’t comply with restrictions** – both for the young people themselves, but also for the youth workers’ own workplace health and safety.

The reasons why young people haven’t followed restrictions have varied – from not understanding restrictions, to not understanding the urgency of the health risks. The consequences can also range; accumulating fines or putting vulnerable staff at risk. They’re nuances that have been difficult to weigh up and decide the safest and most constructive response. But in all scenarios, it’s been about having honest conversations.

Ryan from Nungurra describes how they reviewed their agreements with young people who stayed in their accommodation, and Andy from YSAS shares how they helped young people work off fines through engagement.

**Responding to young people who break restrictions in accommodation services**

**Ryan, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*We amended our agreement that you can only leave for essential reasons. And the main reason for that is, we’ve got Indigenous staff here that are in their 50s and they were high risk to the Coronavirus.* ***So we had to look after our staff as well as the young people; we couldn't put our staff at risk.*** *So it was a real honest conversation with young people that weren't abiding by the only four reasons to leave that maybe if you did have somewhere to stay, and maybe when these restrictions lift, we look at a return back and start again because we couldn't put our staff and our other residents at risk with their behaviours.*

**Helping young people work off fines**

**Andy, YSAS:**

*The work and development permit scheme we signed up for. And that allows our young people to work off their fines through engagement with us, which I think is brilliant.*

*Justice and community safety working development permit scheme. Vulnerable and disadvantaged people with a non-financial option to address their fine debt. We worked them through engagement with drug and alcohol, engagement with mentoring for under 25s. They're also able to do it through education. If they're linked in with an education provider, they can pay it off that way by attending.*

*I had a young man, he worked off $4,500 of fines for engagement with me and through engagement with the AOD team. Because let's be honest, when you're 17 and a policeman says right, we’re gonna fine you? “Okay, cheers,” put it in the pocket and it's ‘gone’. You don’t think about it. Whereas we were saying to our young people, “hey, listen, if you get these fines, we understand, let us know - you can work it off with us.” And that would be for things like not having a mask, for not having a reasonable excuse to be out - that kind of thing.*

**3. What outreach and crisis services need in COVID-normal**

One ‘silver lining’ of the pandemic was that several outreach services finally got overdue funding for new work. headspace Collingwood had never previously had an outreach service but was funded for one for the first time due to COVID-19. It’s been a comprehensive program that covered both outreach for young people, but also to their families and carers, who had to take on more of an emotional load with isolated young people losing many of their usual supports.

**The outreach program for young people** has followed these steps:

1. Staff identified a wide variety of services and organisations to connect with priority young people who need mental health support. This includes local council, schools, TAFEs, school leavers, programs for people who haven’t been going to school, homeless services, and also young people in public housing who experienced traumatic hard lockdowns in 2020.
2. Rather than putting young people into brief intervention support or onto a psychologist waitlist, young people could join the outreach program immediately from when they requested.
3. After completing the outreach program, they could then be put onto a waiting list, or get access to community services, through supported referrals.

**Families and carers** have been able to access education sessions about supporting young people through pandemic challenges. Here’s Alan.

**Running mental health sessions for families and carers**

**Alan, headspace Collingwood:**

*What we were able to do, we ran two online sessions, increasing the capacity of families and carers to support young people that are experiencing effects from COVID such as isolation, increased anxiety, school refusal, and other kind of increase or decreases in mental health. And then the other part of it, was really about how we can have an integrative approach of programs within the headspace centres. So making sure that each of the programs that are funded are directly integrating their supports together to make a soft referral easier, but also to create that ‘step-up, step-down’ approach to support the young people when they need it and as they need it, or as the complexity of their supports are needed.*

headspace Collingwood have also run education sessions in schools, to raise awareness about available services and referral pathways, and improve mental health literacy. This continues to be an important aspect of outreach youth work in the pandemic, as mental health literacy can vary incredibly. Alan and Lucy share their insights about where young people still need education support.

**Young people’s (mis)conceptions about mental health**

**Lucy, headspace Collingwood:**

*I just don't think it's standardised at all. So it's very much depends on the area you're in, or what services have reached out to you before.*

**Alan, headspace Collingwood:**

*There’s a lot of misconception around illness and decreased mental health. We’re a mental health service, we work with mild to moderate, but we also can support some complex young people with like formal diagnosis and stuff like that. And I think a lot of young people expect to be ‘diagnosed’, or to have that medical model put upon them. When in actual fact, when young people come into the service, we’re not identifying people with an identity of a mental illness, it’s actually supporting the young person with the current needs. So I think around like mental health literacy for parents or teachers, is really* ***looking at the idea of what’s wellness, and what’s mental health wellness, as opposed to mental illness?***

**Lucy, headspace Collingwood:**

*I think for a lot of young people, that's also what's scary. It's not like you're coming in to have a conversation about things you might do to make yourself feel a little bit better. You think you're coming in to have that conversation of, "you will now have this diagnosis." That's overwhelming to walk into. In the school talks I do I try and just bring it back to the basics. You know, not telling people that if you exercise every day your mental illness will be cured, but that is something you can do at home that might make you feel a little bit better.*

Outreach and crisis youth services have worked incredibly hard to support young people through the pandemic. **What do they want to see going forward?** According to Andy, Alan and Ryan:

* Young people’s resilience needs to be acknowledged.
* Person-centred support, where the young person is at the centre of decision-making about their own life.
* The pandemic has presented so many unknowns and curveballs. These should be approached as opportunities for constructive learning.
* Staff need continuous support for professional development and awareness of what other organisations outside of their own that they can connect young people with.

**Youth services in COVID-normal**

**Alan, headspace Collingwood:**

*There's been a huge turnover of staff as well within the last two years within the social services sector. And there's an expectation that people know who's who, and what's what. And what I've realised, there's been such a big turnover, that a lot of people are new and don't know what services are out there. So when we go out and tell them about the outreach program, there is a lot more referrals coming through that way, especially from the schools.*

***There’s more of a focus on person-centred planning approaches and systems of care.*** *The young person is present in the decision making of their care supports. Now, we're actually having better outcomes with young people as the directors of their support. Or they're choosing what to engage in and what not to engage in, but also in their own kind of safety planning.*

**Ryan, Nungurra at GEGAC:**

*When the first wave come through, we're all in this together, we had no idea where we're heading. We had no idea what we were doing; I don't think the world had an idea what they were doing, not just us. So we were making it up as we went along. But we learned from that. we do have documentation for catastrophes or when stuff like this happens, but putting it into practice - you're not expecting to, you know, your safety plans and everything like that. You think, hey,* ***this was real now!*** *let's pull out our documents and read what we've written here! So as you know, things went back to normal, but the second wave come back and we have a lot more education around it this time. So we we're prepared. We already had our plans in place and everything.*

**Andy, YSAS:**

*I think the whole pandemic, if it showed nothing else, it's shown the* ***resilience*** *of young people and how well they've done in this time. And that should be acknowledged.*

1. **Recidivism: the chance that a convicted person might reoffend.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)