

Annual Report 2023

# YSAAS

YOUTH  
SUPPORT +  
ADVOCACY  
SERVICE

Supporting young people  
and families for over 25 years



## Alisha Fagan

"My inspiration for this piece was what I feel YSAS stands for. The eye is drawn to the centre as young people are drawn to a gathering place. The currents lead to the meeting place in the middle which is YSAS. There young people can come together, find support, encouragement, friendship and ultimately themselves. The four ocean currents are filled with creatures representing different young people and families on their many journeys of life. The turtles are parents and their child. The parents are guiding their child through obstacles. On each side are meeting places filled with family, friends and connections.

I chose bright colours because I feel that they represent the radiance of youth and include all the diversity of the youth who come to YSAS. We are all one when we come together at a meeting place. In my experience with Bunjilwarra, I have felt included, respected and supported and I wanted to convey this in my art. Bunjilwarra is a place of healing and recovery. It is here that I have found the time and mindfulness to rediscover my creativity as an Aboriginal woman. I will be forever grateful to Bunjilwarra as it has allowed me to find myself and change my life in a positive way. I hope my art brings brightness to the viewer's day and leaves them with a sense of happiness."

YSAS acknowledges Victorian Aboriginal people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways that sustain our lives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were the first to establish sovereign Nations in this country and that sovereignty has never been ceded.

We are enriched by the continuing cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vast experience in caring for the social and emotional wellbeing of their community. We pay respect to their Elders past, present and future.

We are committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. We are open to listening and learning from Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) about how best to support them in fighting for justice and creating better futures for First Nations communities.

We accept the truth of this country's colonial past and recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience systemic racism in Australia today. We remember that the authorities in Australia used force to steal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, inflicting an overwhelming trauma that current and future generations must find ways to live with.

When we confront this shameful truth and listen to the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we can start to comprehend how devastating it is for them to witness the over-representation of their children and young people in the Out of Home Care and justice systems across the country. Even with the hardships endured and the sacrifices involved, we are inspired by the ongoing strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in sustaining the world's oldest living cultures.

We thank our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, partners and friends for helping us learn how best to walk alongside and support First Nations peoples.



**YSAS** YOUTH  
SUPPORT +  
ADVOCACY  
SERVICE



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# Foreword

## **This report is about YSAS people and their stories.**

In 2023, YSAS marked 25 years of continuous service delivery for young people and families who needed our assistance to secure a better future. We have witnessed so many of them confront and overcome adversity. We have also known and cared for young people who didn't make it through.

Poverty, discrimination and the trauma that stems from abuse and entanglement in cycles of violence can have a devastating effect on young people's wellbeing and prospects for the future. We also see how creative and resilient our young people and their supporters are in finding ways to cope with these experiences; often without the resources and opportunities that most people in our society take for granted.

The global pandemic and the national cost-of-living crisis have created even more challenges. Despite their best efforts to cope, the magnitude and complexity of the problems that young people and families face can be overwhelming. This can result in harmful drug and alcohol use, involvement with the criminal justice system and compromised mental health.

Back in 1998, when YSAS was first established, Victoria was in the midst of an unprecedented heroin epidemic. Tragically, throughout the nineties, many lives were lost to fatal overdoses. Street drug-using markets sprung up in Melbourne and Victoria's provincial centres. The ease of access

resulted in a huge spike in the number of teenagers using heroin. Victoria was not prepared - there were no government-funded treatment services available for them or their families.

Then Premier Jeff Kennett formed an expert 'Drug Advisory Council' to determine how Victoria could best respond to illicit substance use. A 'Youth Substance Abuse Service' (YSAS) was recommended.

The first YSAS workers were proactive in providing treatment and support to young people and families, offering it within their communities. The care provided was shaped to the specific needs and preferences of their clients.

After 10 years, Victoria's flagship 'Youth Alcohol and Other Drug' treatment service became the 'Youth Support and Advocacy Service' to better represent our broader focus on social justice and the wellbeing of the young people and families we serve.

We are thankful to have been guided and supported by our shareholder organisations The Royal Children's Hospital, St Vincent's Hospital and Jesuit Social Services.

YSAS is now Australia's largest youth-specific community service organisation, employing over 400 skilled staff across a range of programs and services in metropolitan and regional Victoria.

In 2023 YSAS provided care and support for over 6,000 young people and their families. Since its inception in 1998, YSAS has assisted more than 100,000 young people.

We recognise the great contribution of our managers, frontline workers and support staff who come together every day to fulfil our purpose. We also thank the young people and families that participate with us to improve our organisation and the services we provide.

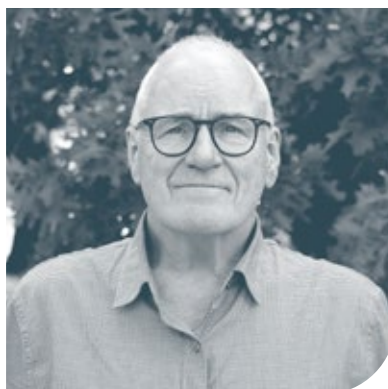
Each of us at YSAS understands that, in the face of overwhelming adversity, we too could require professional assistance to get through – just as our young people and families do.

It is an honour for those of us currently involved with YSAS to further a tradition established by great people like Professor Glenn Bowes, our first ever Board Chair. Glenn and others like Bernie Geary AO, Frank Costigan QC, Professor Margaret Hamilton, Professor Greg Wheelan and David Murray guided us through our early years with grace and helped establish the foundations that YSAS stands on today.




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**Andrew Bruun**  
CEO




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**Judge Michael Bourke**  
Board Chair

# Our approach

**YSAS is a community service organisation that is committed to social justice and creating the conditions in which young people, with their families and communities, can overcome and even be strengthened by adversity.**

YSAS practitioners meet young people and families on their terms and facilitate access to useful, culturally meaningful resources and opportunities that enable them to:

- Prevent harm
- Meet their needs
- Fulfil their aspirations
- Deal effectively with life stressors that lead to health and behavioural problems

We seek to understand each young person's unique circumstances and how they respond to the challenges that they face. Their efforts to cope with adversity are associated with unwanted complications and harm. We don't tell young people what they must do or demand that they change. Instead, we help them establish new ways to cope and meet their needs that are likely to result in better life outcomes.

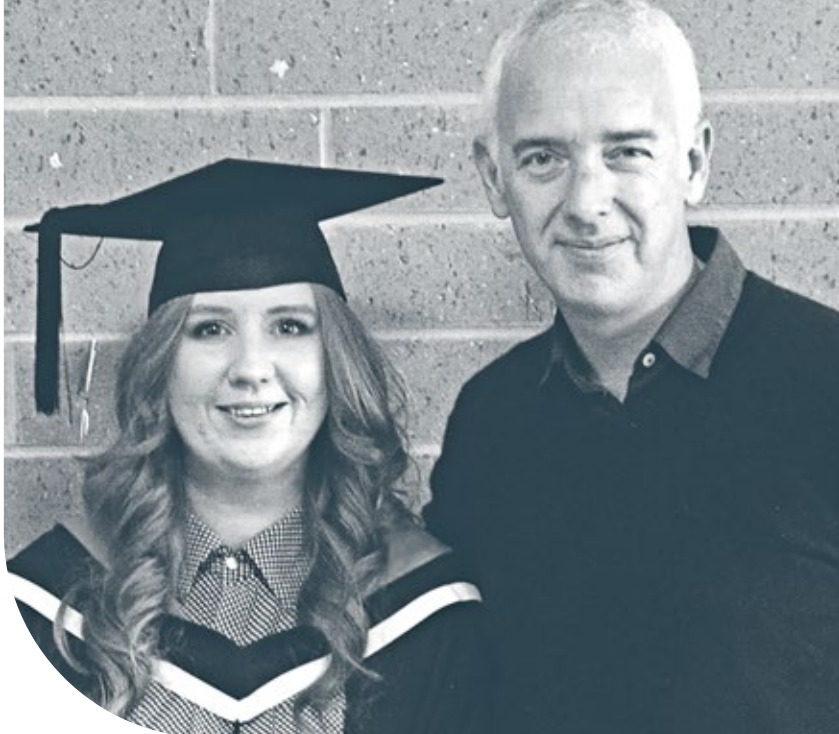
YSAS programs and services are designed specifically to meet the needs of young people who are, or who are at risk of, experiencing substance-use related harm, difficulties with mental health and criminal justice system involvement.

We recognise the strengths that young people, families and communities bring to our work with them and at the same time understand that they are often experiencing serious problems. We intervene as early as possible to prevent problems from escalating and becoming entrenched.

YSAS provides practical support and evidence-based clinical care through outreach and care coordination, residential programs and a range of community-based services. Across Victoria, we also collaborate with other service providers in the best interests of the young people, families and communities that we serve.

Will all that said, our relationships with young people and families will always be at the heart of our work.





## Relationships at the heart of our work

### Tara and Warren

There are many reasons young people come to YSAS. For Tara Schultz, it was a problem with marijuana. "I was nervous," Tara remembers, "because I thought cannabis wasn't a big enough deal to seek help." But at 16, Tara braved the rain, caught the bus to Frankston and knocked on our door.

Tara wanted help with her drug use, but her workers soon realised there was much more going on for her. "It didn't even occur to me to bring up what was happening at home," Tara explains. "I just didn't know how much of a big deal it was." But then she started to talk casually about her home life and the YSAS staff listened.

Tara was living with an older man who had been a friend of her father's, who had recently become violent. He was also supplying her with drugs and was extremely controlling. Staff eventually learned that Tara had lived with this man since she was 14; when her father left her in his care. They had previously all shared a house. Tara's mother couldn't care for her.

Looking back on that time Tara observes "I'd tried to leave, but I kept going back and I didn't understand why. I reasoned it must have been the drugs, which is why I came to YSAS. And that's

where I met Warren." Warren Eames, now a YSAS Regional Manager in Melbourne's South East, was the YSAS youth worker that Tara first met. "I was struck by Tara's courage when she walked in the door and sat on the couch," he recalls.

She really wanted things to change, so Warren arranged an emergency admission for Tara to get into our residential drug withdrawal service in Fitzroy. In this program, Tara was safe and had 24/7 support. This provided stability and protection and an opportunity for Warren to visit and connect with her.

During these visits, Tara revealed that the man she had been living with had been sexually abusing her for years. Tara took the risk to trust Warren who was determined not to let her down. He and the staff in the Fitzroy residential service found her supported housing to move to and Tara set about working toward a better future.

It wasn't until Tara was 20 that her life turned a corner, and she finally got in control of her drug problem and freed herself from the man who abused her and used violence to control her. She had tried so many times to do so in the 4 years since she first engaged with Warren. Each time Tara tried Warren was there for her. Tara reports

**"To make a difference, you must build trust.  
And you build trust by forming a relationship  
that is honest and can be relied on."**

being amazed "that when things didn't work out, he wouldn't judge me. He always kept the door open to the possibility of a brighter future, even when I had lost hope that anything good could happen for me."

That final time, Tara turned to Warren as a last resort and again he arranged a placement for her in the YSAS residential service in Fitzroy. By 24, Tara had enrolled in university. During her studies, she learned that her childhood wasn't unique. Similar trauma had been experienced by other children like her.

Today, Tara has a degree in Human Services and is happily married with a beautiful little boy. Tara also eventually told her story to the police who, in 2018, arrested the man who had abused her. Bringing him to justice was a harrowing experience. He is currently serving a 10 year prison term. Tara recounts being re-traumatised throughout the court case. While she would have preferred to avoid this experience, she explains that "it was something I needed to go through to be in a better place".

Through it all, Tara stayed connected to Warren. "Our relationship has been vital to me throughout all these years," she says. "Warren was the only adult I had in my life to guide me." Warren has deep respect and affection for Tara, who as an adult has been a great supporter of YSAS. She has helped

with fundraising, served as a Director on the YSAS Board and worked for a period as a Youth AOD Outreach worker.

Warren points out that "YSAS has grown and diversified over the years but our relationship-based approach – the call to be practical, to be useful, to listen – that's still the DNA of our practice."

"We don't just pass young people in need along a conveyor belt to the next service and leave them with it," Warren explains. "To make a difference, you must build trust. And you build trust by forming a relationship that is honest and can be relied on."

# Our Shareholders



**The Royal Children's Hospital**



**St Vincent's Hospital**



**Jesuit Social Services**



# Our Directors



## **Judge Michael Bourke**

Appointed 31 August 2020

His Honour Judge Michael Bourke has contributed to research and advocacy for the rights of young people who encounter the criminal justice system and strongly advocates for agencies that provide support services. Michael has been a Barrister since 1981 and was appointed as a County Court Judge in 2002 and Chair of the Youth Parole Board in 2006. He holds a Bachelor of Laws from Melbourne University. He became interested in helping young people who come from the most disadvantaged situations in the community through his interactions with them at the Youth Parole Board and the Victorian Bar.

### **Special responsibilities:**

Chair of the YSAS Board, Chair Remuneration and Nominations Sub-Committee and Member Strategy Sub-Committee



## **Dr Adam Pastor**

Appointed 31 August 2020

Adam is an Addiction Medicine Physician with a special interest in the impact of substance use on young people with medical illnesses. He peer reviews scientific journals, teaches students and junior doctors, and contributes to national guidelines regarding substance use treatment. He currently works as a specialist physician at St Vincent's and The Alfred Hospitals and is a former Director of Addiction Medicine in the Northern Territory. Adam is a member of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians Chapter of Addiction Medicine and has a PhD from the University of Melbourne. Adam is motivated by his interactions with young people and the staff at YSAS who consistently demonstrate the ability to 'meet people where they are'.

**Special responsibilities:** Chair of the Health & Clinical Governance Sub-Committee



## **Sean Hanneberry**

Appointed 10 March 2017

Sean has worked in marketing and advertising for nearly two decades across Australia and the UK and has worked with leading organisations across the private sector and government to drive more effective marketing and customer experiences. Before his current role as the Managing Director of Threefold where he helps organisations transform their customer and brand experience, he was the Melbourne Managing Director of the global communications agency, SapientNitro. Sean holds a Bachelor of Business (Economics and Marketing) from Swinburne University. With a young family of his own, Sean is passionate about ensuring that young people have a voice to ensure they are provided with the best possible support and services when in need.

# Our Directors



## Catherine Buckmaster

Appointed 26 August 2019

Cathy is an experienced Finance professional with over 20 years of experience, specialising in financial reporting, stakeholder management, project delivery and governance. Cathy has a background in professional and financial services and has strong technical knowledge of accounting, finance, risk and compliance matters. At Coles, Cathy is responsible for managing the communication of the Group's strategy and ASX market disclosures. Catherine holds a Bachelor of Business in Accounting, is a Chartered Accountant, and is a member of the Australia and New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants. Catherine also holds a Graduate Diploma in Applied Corporate Governance and Risk Management. Cathy is passionate about ensuring that YSAS' strategic direction is aligned with the voices of young people.

### Special responsibilities:

Chair of the YSAS Risk & Audit Sub-Committee, Member Remuneration and Nominations Sub-Committee and Member Strategy Sub-Committee



## David Murray

Appointed 15 March 2021

David Murray has worked with marginalised young people for over 40 years as a practitioner, supervisor, manager, policy advocate and board member of youth organisations. His career has spanned many aspects of the youth sector including senior roles in Government and he was previously the Managing Director of YSAS. He has established several projects and programs for young people with complex needs and has been a member of several Minister's Advisory committees relating to drugs, alcohol and young people. David is currently the General Manager of Policy and Advocacy at Jesuit Social Services. David has a Bachelor of Arts (History), a Diploma in Criminology and a Master of Arts (Social Policy). He has a particular interest in developing services that respond to the needs of young people who present with complex issues of drug use, mental illness, homelessness, self-harm and offending behaviour.



## Jorden Lam

Appointed 31 August 2020

Jorden is a senior leader with broad professional experience in governance, business operations and law, spanning across the legal, financial services and health. Jorden has a technical background in law and has held a variety of senior roles from General Counsel & Company Secretary to General Manager of Operations and Service Delivery, in the financial services and superannuation sector. As the current Head of Member Services and Operations at HESTA Super, Jorden is responsible for leading core business functions supporting business transformation, insurance, dispute resolution/complaints, pension and retirement services and account administration services. Jorden holds a Bachelor of Laws, Bachelor of Commerce, Master of Laws, and is a licensed Australian legal practitioner and a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. She is passionate about furthering social support services offered to vulnerable members of the community.

**Special Responsibilities:** Member Risk & Audit Sub-Committee



### **Margarita Frederico AM**

Appointed 24 June 2019

Emeritus Professor Frederico is an experienced social work practitioner who teaches and researches in social work. Her focus is on child and family wellbeing, child protection and trauma, community empowerment leadership and governance in Human Services and evaluation. She currently teaches Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University and is a Graduate Research Coordinator in Social Work and Social Policy. She is also a Principal Research Consultant at Berry Street's Take Two Program, a partnership with La Trobe University, Mindful and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). She has a Diploma of Social Studies, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Social Work and Doctor of Science. Margarita believes that all young people should have the opportunity to thrive and be supported by the services of YSAS if they need it.

**Special Responsibilities:** Member Advocacy & Communications Sub-Committee and Research Reference Group



### **Sarah Ralph**

Appointed 31 August 2020

Sarah is a senior leader in her field, with over 25 years of experience as an employment lawyer. She is an employment law partner and head of the EY law practice in Oceania. She acts for employers, including not-for-profits on employment law, industrial relations, human rights, governance, risk and government law. Sarah has a Bachelor of Laws and Arts degree from Monash University and a Master of Laws from The University of Melbourne and is a member of the Law Institute of Victoria. Sarah is passionate about YSAS and the YSAS community, having gone through many of the drug and addiction issues that impact young people and their families, with a close family member. Sarah knows first-hand how important YSAS programs are for the future of our young people.

**Special Responsibilities:** Member Risk & Audit Sub-Committee



### **Caitlin Gill**

Appointed 23 May 2023

Caitlin has practised as a lawyer for 18 years, working in private practice and in-house and company secretary roles, with a focus on good governance and delivering quality strategic, risk, and legal advice. She has a strong background in corporate and commercial law and has worked in funds management for 11 years. She joined St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne in 2021 and is the Director of Legal and Enterprise Risk. Caitlin holds a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Laws and is a member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Caitlin is passionate about growing and leading connected and engaged teams to deliver commercial legal and risk advice in the public health sector.

**Special Responsibilities:** Member Risk & Audit Sub-Committee

# Our Directors



## **Sandy Bell**

Appointed 11 December 2023

Sandy Bell is the Executive Director of Strategy, Planning and Performance at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Sandy was previously the Director of Strategy, Planning and Performance at the Royal Women's Hospital and Austin Health, building a vision and strategic plan for the future at both health services. Sandy began her career as a Registered Nurse before joining the Department of Health, where she worked in several roles across service and capital planning, elective surgery and rural health. In parallel, Sandy has built a 25+ year board career in both the public and not-for-profit sector in the areas of women, children and community services. Sandy is currently the Chair of the Queen Elizabeth Centre. Sandy has a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in women's studies, a Masters of Public Policy and Management and is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

### **Special Responsibilities:**

Member Health & Clinical Governance Sub-Committee



## **Andrew Gay**

Appointed 11 December 2023

Andrew Gay is the Chief Financial Officer at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Andrew has previously held CFO positions with the Victorian Department of Health, Northern Health Services, Canberra Health Services and Austin Health Services.

Before moving into the health sector, Andrew had a long and diverse career as a commercial executive and business leader across a wide range of complex industries and cultures. He has worked in packaging, paper and automotive industries in Australia, Korea and China. Before returning to Australia, Andrew was General Motors' regional lead for business services within the Middle East and Asia Pacific areas, along with being a board member of GM Holden Australia Limited. Andrew holds a Bachelor of Business degree, and a Master of Business Administration. He is a Fellow of the Australian CPA and a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

# Our Independent Advisors



**Hugh Tobin**

26 October 2023

Independent Member  
of Advocacy &  
Communications Sub-  
Committee



**Philip Mayers**

3 May 2021

Independent Member  
of Remuneration &  
Nominations Sub-  
Committee



**Clare Groves**

24 October 2017

Independent Member of Health  
and Clinical Governance Sub-  
Committee

## Departing directors and advisors

We are grateful for the contribution of the following Board Directors and Advisors who served YSAS in 2023:

- Jane Miller
- Bernadette Twomey
- Maria Flynn
- Martin Smith
- Phillipa Thomas

# Our Executive



**Andrew Bruun**  
CEO



**Pat O'Leary**  
Deputy CEO



**Anne King**  
Chief of Finance and  
Corporate Services



**Aji Akintola**  
General Manager,  
Residential & Primary  
Care Services



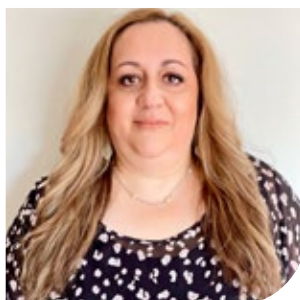
**Benaifer Sabavala**  
General Manager, Human  
Resources



**Jason Nanayakkara**  
Finance Manager



**Ray Jackson**  
General Manager Crime  
Prevention, The Zone &  
headspace North West



**Fotini Strongylos**  
General Manager,  
headspace SE &  
Community AOD



**Dom Ennis**  
General Manager, Quality  
and Service Development

# Our People

YSAS has over 400 employees, all connected by our belief in the resilience and potential of young people. Our front-line service providers are Youth Workers, Social Workers, Psychologists, Nurses, Doctors and Psychiatrists. They are supported by Senior Practitioners, Managers, Regional Managers and General Managers. Our support services are delivered by staff with specialist skills in Advocacy & Communications, Business Support, Finance, Human Resources, ICT, Legal & Compliance, Property & Fleet, Quality & Service Development, Research & Practice and Youth Participation.

**We'd also like to acknowledge the important work of our 2023 Youth Peer Advocates Georgia Willmott, Tamlynn Collins and Daniel Robinson Croft.**

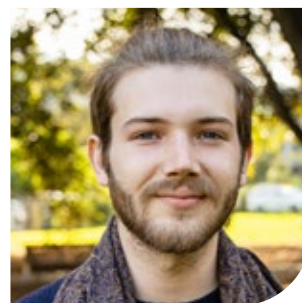
## Our Youth Peer Advocates



**Lucia Herrera**



**Kayla Marshall**



**Daniel Robinson Croft**

# Our Partners

**Young people and their families have diverse needs and goals that require a holistic and comprehensive response. That's why we complement our expertise and scope of practice through partnerships with other service providers and community supporters.**

Young people and their families have diverse needs and goals that require a holistic and comprehensive response. That's why we complement our expertise and scope of practice through partnerships with other service providers and community supporters.

You will read many stories involving our partners in this report, recognising their great work in collaboration with YSAS. While we don't list them here one by one, they include

- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- Community-led organisations (including those providing culturally and LGBTIQA+ specific services)
- Community service organisations (including those providing services focused on AOD, Mental Health, Primary Health, Out of Home Care, Housing, Vocational support, Family Violence, Crime Prevention, Legal support and advocacy)
- Health Networks (including hospitals and Area Mental Health and Well Being Services)
- Education and training providers
- Government services (including Victoria Police, Youth Justice, Child Protection, Centrelink)

We are also intimately involved with our Peak Bodies, who create the rising tide that helps create political and social change. They are the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA), the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS).

YSAS is also committed to providing opportunities for young people to participate in community sport. We love our partnership with the Collingwood Football Club where we field a Magpies team in the Reclink Football League playing out of Victoria Park (which is also where our headspace Collingwood centre is located).

We have also enjoyed a connection with many grassroots community sporting organisations and Police and Citizen's Youth Clubs.

Finally, we are grateful for the work of the Commissioner for Children and Young People who maintain Child Safe standards in Victoria and defend the rights of children and young people.

# Our Funders

YSAS continues to receive strong support from all levels of Government. Our federal funding is mainly provided through the following Victorian Primary Health Networks who also partner with us and support the work of our services:

- North West Melbourne
- South East Melbourne
- Eastern Melbourne
- Gippsland
- Murray

We are also funded directly by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. The Victorian Government contributes 85% of our funding through the following departments:

- Health
- Families Fairness and Housing
- Justice and Community Safety
- Department of Premier and Cabinet

We are also funded directly by Victoria Police for our work in partnership with them, delivering the Embedded Youth Outreach Project. We also thank our local government partners for providing practical support for our services in their communities.

In 2023, YSAS benefited from a Felton Bequest Major Grant that enabled us to strengthen our focus on early intervention and work with families.

**In 2023, YSAS provided care and support for over 5,000 unique young people and families.**



# Lived and living experience matters

**YSAS practice has always been about co-creating solutions with young people and families, and working toward the outcomes that have meaning for them.**

Our approach is characterised by shared power and participation in decision-making throughout YSAS by young people who are, or who have been, service users.

The lived and living experience of young people and families provides YSAS with knowledge and expertise on what matters most and what works best.

We have a long tradition in youth participation where young people's lived and living experience has been highly valued and applied to great effect to make our organisation better.

In 2023, YSAS commenced work on a framework that will build our capability to intentionally develop and incorporate lived and living experience expertise as a formally recognised, applied and supported skillset within our workforce.

Our new Lived and Living Experience Workforce Framework will enable us to create confidence and safety in practice for employees with lived and living experience expertise and for YSAS management, so that we provide the support and services young people want and need.

## Youth Participation

If we want our services to meet the needs of young people, they must be involved in decision-making on all levels. For over 10 years our Youth Participation team has worked hard to uphold this principle across YSAS, by having young people advise our boards, participate in our strategic

planning, assist in our hiring processes, and by supporting young people to provide feedback and complaints about our services. The team itself also includes several young people with lived and living experience using YSAS services.

A key part of our youth participation work is our Youth Advisory Committees (YAC). They are groups of young people with lived and living experience who use their voices to create change within YSAS and the broader youth sector. In 2023, The CREW put together a 'Paint it Forward' art gallery exhibition raising money for our Abbotsford Day Program, while the headspace Collingwood YAC organised a Mosh 4 Mental Health gig to promote headspace services and reduce mental health stigma.

The Youth Participation team also runs an annual Youth Partnership Month and Ideas Day to give young people a more formal opportunity to provide feedback and share ideas about improving our services and informing our advocacy campaigns. In 2023, the team expanded Ideas Day and visited seven YSAS sites over September, greatly increasing the number of young people's voices that were heard.

Through paid, volunteer and student placement experiences, the Youth Participation program gives young people the opportunity to learn valuable workplace skills, including project management and advocacy and communication skills. Many young people have gone on to work at YSAS after volunteering in our Youth Advisory Committees.

Continuing our Youth Participation work during the pandemic was no easy feat, and we would like to thank the dedicated work of Chantelle Hughes who held the fort as the solo CREW member for almost two years during multiple COVID-19 lockdowns.

## Paint it Forward

The CREW Gallery Fundraiser Paint It Forward ran in November and December 2023 at our Abbotsford Day Program. It was a celebration of music, art and the creativity of young people, featuring paintings by young people who use or have a connection with YSAS services. During the event, guests had the chance to win art pieces through a raffle featuring donated works from Mic Porter, Leisl Jackson and others. The closing night on the 7th of December was packed with performances, DJs, artist talks, and a special meet-and-greet with Mic Porter. All funds raised went towards the music and art initiatives at the Abbotsford Day Program.



## Fighting for sensible drug policy reform

Daniel Robinson Croft



The Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) is a big deal in the world of drug policy. It's a United Nations policymaking body that looks at drug-related matters on an international level. Passionate youth peer advocate Daniel Robinson Croft knows how important it is for the voices of young people with lived and living experience to be included in drug policy reform. In March 2024, Daniel attended the 67th session of the CND in Vienna, Austria, giving him the unique opportunity to amplify the voices of young people on the international stage.

Leading up to the conference, Daniel met regularly online with the Paradigma Coalition, a coalition of young people passionate about drug policy reform. The group then met in person at the conference to discuss their experiences and critique the CND's engagement with young people. "It was empowering to be surrounded by such a diverse group of young people so deeply passionate about youth participation and drug law reform," Daniel says.

Daniel also had the opportunity to present at a side event about young people and cannabis, further amplifying the voices of young people at the conference. "I delivered a speech about different approaches that could be used to centre young people with lived and living experience in cannabis law reform processes, such as the creation of a youth lived and living experience led and run

working group that directly influences cannabis law reform," he says. "That was a great opportunity to be able to be heard and share those reflections."

Daniel says seeing how much work is being done on this issue worldwide is inspiring. "One big takeaway that I took from the overall experience is witnessing how change is made and influenced, and how small steps can lead to bigger steps," he says. "Even though it feels like nothing's happening and nothing's changing, some of these small wins that happen can make a bigger difference in the grand scheme of things."

He says the CND could do much better in its work with young people. "In terms of youth participation at the CND itself, and especially meaningful youth lived and living experience participation, I think it lacked spaces where young people could be listened to and be heard," he says. He returned to Australia more passionate than ever to improve drug law reform for young people. **"Involving young people with a lived and living experience in decision-making that affects them is important because they're the experts in their own care, and it's hard to say what's best for them without them being in that conversation."**

As Daniel concluded in his speech at CND, "nothing about us as young people who use drugs, without us as young people who use drugs".

# Nothing about us without us

Georgia Willmott



The idea of 'bringing your whole self to work' has become a corporate trend in recent years. But for Georgia Willmott, tearing down the wall between your professional and personal life is just business as usual. As the Youth Participation Practice Leader, it is Georgia's job to ensure YSAS is meeting the needs of young people. And one way they do this is by holding their own lived and living experiences up to the light.

"I have complex post-traumatic stress recovery," says Georgia. "I'm also genderqueer and pansexual." Instead of checking these parts of their identity at the door, Georgia uses them to assess YSAS's performance. **"I review how YSAS works, then I reflect on my own lived and living experiences to ask: 'Is this appropriate for young people? Do we need to make any changes?'"**

Georgia has worked in several volunteer and paid youth participation roles at headspace Collingwood and YSAS. In their current role, they support staff to better engage young people in decision-making at YSAS. They also support YSAS's youth advisory committee The CREW and run their own projects. They find the work deeply rewarding. "I definitely cry a lot in meetings, happy tears. That's just who I am."

Georgia also gets to express their creativity at work in a way that makes a difference. "I've been artistic and imaginative my whole life, and I get to do so many different creative projects related to my role." One of their proudest memories was when they presented a video they made about the headspace Collingwood Youth Advisory Committee. "Everyone asked for an encore, so we rewatched it, and that was really nice."

Georgia says creating space for young people to provide feedback and be part of the decision-making at YSAS is a no-brainer. "We're making a service for young people, so young people need to be involved in the decisions that affect them," Georgia says. "Otherwise, we're just going to be useless." Georgia says everyone at YSAS is passionate about improving youth participation, even though it is challenging work that can take time to get right. **"But that is not necessarily a bad thing, because we really focus on quality. We want things to work for young people. So we take the time to do that."**

# Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)

YoDAA, Victoria's Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice service, is the simplest way for young people, families and the community to get therapeutic support and information about alcohol and drug challenges. YoDAA is an advice line and a website, staffed by highly trained and experienced youth and social workers with a wealth of knowledge and contacts in the sector.

The first thing YoDAA workers do is listen deeply and without judgement, to understand any concerns fully. Staff provide callers with best-practice advice and information about drugs and alcohol. If a referral to another service like a rehab or detox centre is needed, they'll do the research required to ensure they refer the young person to the right place. The goal is to find the right support for each young person, even if that takes days and many calls to different services.

YoDAA's focus is on drugs and alcohol, but many of the calls also touch on mental health and family violence, and staff provide support and referrals for those issues too. YoDAA is not just for young people - it is also for families, carers, schools and other workers. We know families and carers play a pivotal role in helping young people change their lives, so it makes sense that they need support and advice too. Sometimes it is as simple

as listening and empathising with the situation; sometimes more detailed information and support are provided.

YoDAA also works with school wellbeing staff and other workers, so they can better help the young people in their care. Using a holistic, non-judgmental and thorough approach, YoDAA connects young people, families, carers and other workers with the knowledge and support they need to improve young people's lives.

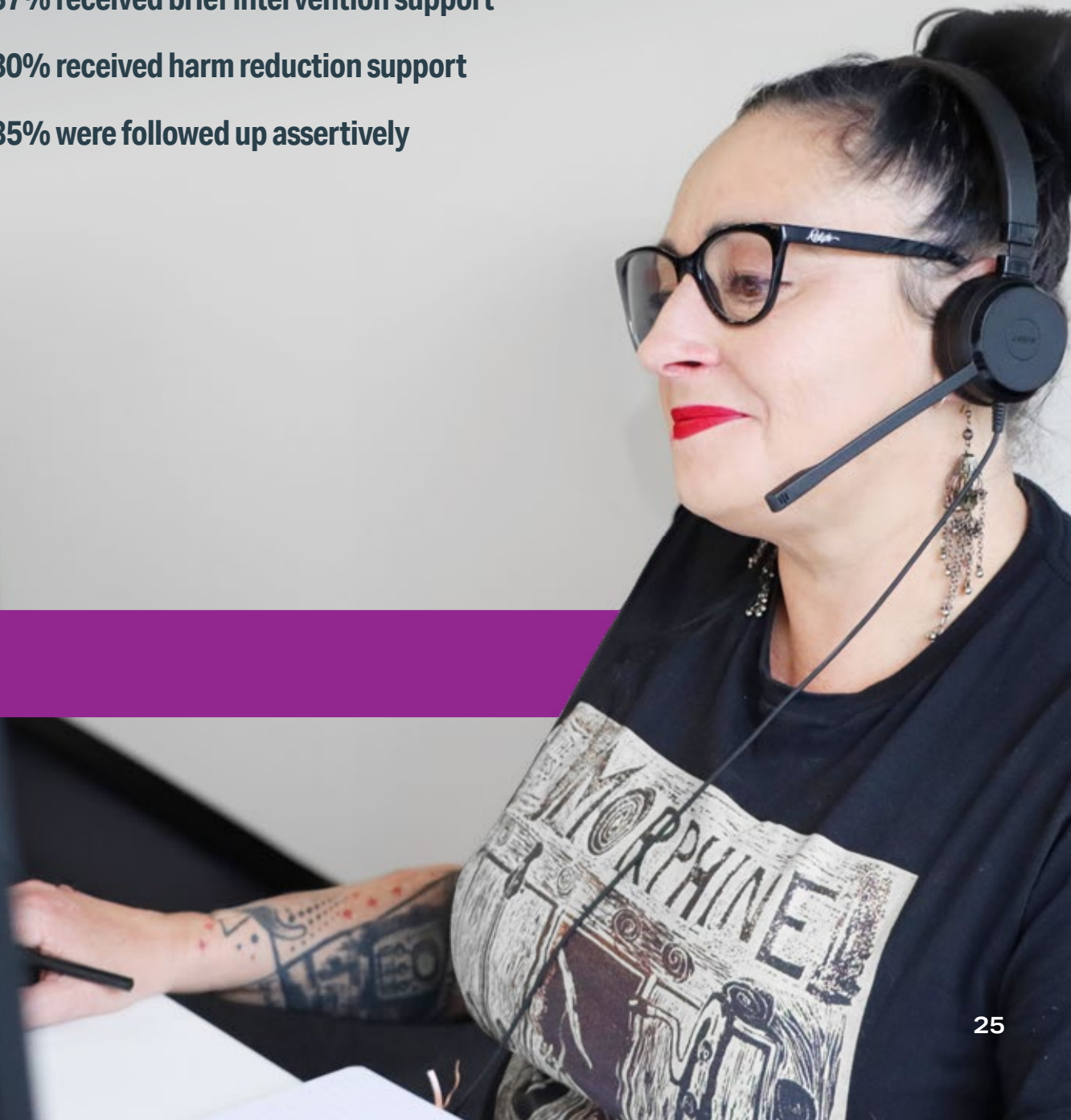
## What young people say

**"Thank you for providing me support and leading me in the right direction so I could become a better person. I am so happy that I am able to move on in life and put my past behind me"**

**"Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk to me, better understand me and my situation, and where I'm coming from. You guys seem like a grouse service, I'm sure many people are thankful for your services and all that you do"**

## YoDAA 2023 in numbers

- + 13,211 calls (25% young people, 31% families and carers, 35% workers)
- + 1406 first calls
- + 50% connected with helpful services
- + 37% received brief intervention support
- + 30% received harm reduction support
- + 85% were followed up assertively



# Addressing drug related harm in the community

YSAS was established as Victoria's flagship Youth Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) treatment service in 1998. Since that time, YSAS has continuously delivered a wide range of AOD services and initiatives for young people, families and communities in Victoria. We provide residential and online services with statewide coverage, and we also have a wide range of services embedded within local communities in a range of locations throughout Victoria.

## **They are:**

**Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula**

**Dandenong and Melbourne's South East**

**Ringwood and Melbourne's East, including the Yarra Ranges**

**Abbotsford and Melbourne's inner North**

**Epping and Melbourne's outer North**

**Sunshine and Melbourne's West**

**Gippsland**

**Bendigo and surrounds**



Our teams invest in their communities to ensure they are inclusive for young people and provide the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. We have deep connections in local communities that we have developed over 25 years. We work closely with networks of other health and welfare providers, Centrelink, community legal centres, local government, schools, local traders, politicians and police.

The AOD services that we provide in each community are shaped according to local needs and blend a range of services and initiatives:

- Every AOD community team has Youth Outreach so we can take care of young people and families.
- In most locations, our teams include Youth AOD nurses providing home-based withdrawal support and primary health care.
- In some locations we have Open Access Day Programs and Activity-based programs that provide stability, rehabilitation and pro-social connections and experiences
- In Melbourne and Bendigo we have practitioners dedicated to addressing the AOD related needs of young people in Out of Home Care.

# Youth AOD outreach



Our practitioners are experts in engaging young people and delivering evidence-based interventions to reduce alcohol and other drug (AOD) related harm. Through assertive outreach, our practitioners shape their service offerings to meet the unique needs and preferences of each young person and family.

Outreach workers link young people to a range of helpful resources and support their involvement in services, such as those providing residential AOD treatment.

Youth AOD Outreach is a critical mechanism for linking and coordinating activities across related services and sectors, including youth homelessness, criminal justice, Child Protection, education, employment and mental health.

## Across all Outreach teams in 2023

1042 unique young people and their families were provided with 2470 episodes of care

- + 61% were 18 and under**
- + 8% were First Nation's young people**
- + 12% were from African backgrounds**
- + 8% were from Pacific Island backgrounds**

The young people who use our services reflect the communities in which they are based. For example, in Dandenong, 25% of the young people and families using our services were from African backgrounds and 13% from Pacific Island backgrounds.



# Everyone is worthy of health care

## Nat Joyce

Senior Primary Health Outreach Nurse Nat Joyce is not your typical nurse. He is dedicated to supporting young people with their health - physical, mental or sexual. To do that he doesn't just use health care skills - he's using case management and counselling skills as well.

He says there "is never a dull day" in his job. One day, he's at a young person's home, supporting them to withdraw from a drug safely. The next day, he's helping a young person get an STI test at Sexual Health Victoria and providing them with education about sexual health. As an outreach worker, he is mostly out in the community, meeting young people where they are. "I don't like being stuck in one place, so it allows you to move around," Nat says.

YSAS Ringwood team leader Hayley Gladman always flags the most complex clients for Nat because he is so experienced and skilled at his job. "They're the clients with really significant mental

health concerns, and quite serious substance use where just to stop automatically would be harmful to their mental and psychological health," Hayley says. Nat quickly gathers all the information he can about the young person's experiences and health history. "He is literally just gathering information from everywhere, and it all just streams in within about a week," Hayley says. "He peruses it and then starts to formulate a case, bringing all the key players together that need to be involved in this young person's care."

Nat goes above and beyond to ensure the young people he works with have a positive experience. "We're working with the raw end, the hard end, so it's looking at it and going - how do we get people to believe in themselves, that they're worthy enough to have health care." Empathy and kindness are at the core of his approach, and he never forces any care or treatment. Over the years, he's developed a list of other workers who also take a trauma-informed approach. "If I find someone in the hospital and they were nice to the client, I'll get their number."

It's not always easy work, so over the years, Nat has learnt ways to avoid burnout. "Instead of running around like a chicken, which we would have done in the early days, it's slowing it all down." His favourite form of self-care is walking his dog, Lola, along the river. "When you walk in the door she knows okay, you need a little something right now," he says. He is also grateful for the team at YSAS Ringwood - who are always available to have a chat or a laugh when it has been a long day. **"People listen and support each other here," he says. "It's a safe space, which is important to be able to do your work."**

## Home-Based Withdrawal

Our nurses enable young people to get their substance use under control without having to enter a residential program. Our nurses work with each young person and their families and supporters to design and implement a withdrawal plan that will work for them. Through this process they also attend to primary and mental health needs, connecting with the broader service system and working with our Youth AOD outreach workers to reduce harm.

**"We're working with the raw end, the hard end, so it's looking at it and going - how do we get people to believe in themselves, that they're worthy enough to have health care."**

## **Open Access Day programs**

Our programs in Dandenong and Abbotsford offer open access to support in a safe environment. Young people can access healthy meals and facilities including showers, washing machines, computers and the internet. Young people who are reluctant to seek support may attend a day program to 'suss out' what YSAS workers are like and what services are on offer.

Open access day programs are best suited to young people who are:

- Not attending school and are unemployed
- Socially isolated
- Experiencing housing instability

Young people can also participate in structured activities and life skills programs, and access vital services including Centrelink and Community Legal Services.

## **SHERPA – Activity based programming**

SHERPA is an activity-based program in Ringwood working with young people facing AOD related challenges in Melbourne's East. Every young person has an individual plan and participates in weekly group activities in the community, focused on reducing AOD related harm, enhancing connections to work and education, fostering meaningful ties to the community and improving physical wellbeing.

## **AOD services for young people in Out of Home Care**

YSAS has a Principal Practitioner, several Alcohol and Drug Youth Consultants and a 'Reach Out' worker focused on building the capacity of Out of Home Care services (OoHC) to address substance use related behaviour and risks. Direct care is also provided for young people in OoHC to address AOD related problems and to reduce harm.

# Better connected care for those most in need

Pete Stockton



**"I just listened. I just sat without making lots of comments and listened to what they had to say."**

Drug and alcohol worker Pete Stockton says listening is the most important skill in his job. He really listens to the young people he works with, no matter what. Pete works with young people living in Victoria's Out of Home Care system - they often end up there because they cannot live in the family home. "The young people who reside in Out of Home Care are probably the most disenfranchised and disadvantaged young people in society," he says. "But my job is not to see them as someone who is using drugs or someone who isn't going to school or someone who's having difficult issues with their childhood backgrounds. My job is to see them as a young person, first and foremost."

Pete recently visited a young person in residential care who was feeling agitated and upset. The staff were having trouble calming him down, so they asked Pete to go and check on him. Within a few minutes, the young person was feeling calmer. When staff asked Pete how he'd deescalated the situation, he said: "I just listened. I just sat without making lots of comments and listened to what they had to say." He says it's important to acknowledge that Out of Home Care is a tough and overwhelming environment for many young people. "It's not where they want to be," he says. "We can be empathetic, and we can care for them, but it's not like love from a parent."

Pete's life experiences make him uniquely suited to understanding the young people he works with. His father passed away when he was seven, and in the aftermath, his mother became dependent on Valium. "It got to the point where myself and my older brother took on caring roles with my mother, and basically had to learn to fend for ourselves and be independent," he says. He says they were known as the 'poor kids' at school because they often didn't have the correct uniform or the money to go away to sports events. "In some ways, from my experience, I understand the disadvantage that I see with the young people I work with today."

It's challenging work, and Pete's been doing it for over eight years now. "You've got to be persistent and patient in supporting these young people until they are able to recognise within themselves the ability to change," he says. As part of his job, Pete also does education work with child protection workers, which provides some balance that helps prevent burnout. The main thing that keeps him going, though, is the young people. "These young people have been through so much in their lives, often without a lot of love, support or stability," he says. **"And yet they're still alive, and they are resilient and tough. I'm always in awe of the fact that they trust a complete stranger - which is me - to sit down and work with them."**

# Needs-led residential care

**2023 marks 25 years of YSAS providing safe, age-appropriate residential programs for young people who are seeking to gain control over their substance use.**

YSAS offers 3 types of residential services:

- Residential Drug Withdrawal – enabling young people to stabilise
- Residential Rehabilitation and healing – supporting young people to develop and make lasting changes in their lives
- Supported Accommodation – providing structured support in the community that enables young people to stay in control of their substance use and work toward positive health and social outcomes

One of our Residential services is Bunjilwarra - a healing service for Aboriginal young people run in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS). Not including Bunjilwarra, in 2023 18% of young people participating in YSAS residential programs were Aboriginal.

## **Community Youth Residential Drug Withdrawal Services – Geelong and Fitzroy**

Our 8-bed residential services in Geelong and Fitzroy provide young people with access to medically supervised drug withdrawal and intensive psychosocial support for up to 14 days. Young people are provided with around-the-clock care, enabling them to stabilise and connect with a range of pro-social activities and help from others, including family and supporters from their communities and other service providers.

Young people's physical, psychological, and emotional needs are catered for during their stay, with a focus on improving health and wellbeing. Participants learn relapse prevention and harm reduction strategies while working on long-term developmental goals that build their resilience.

# Empowering journeys

Nathan Akoka



**"They are survivors, and I feel really privileged to hear about all those really difficult adversities."**

The first time Nathan Akoka was in a drug and alcohol withdrawal unit, he wasn't a worker. He was a client. When he was 13 years old, he moved to Melbourne following some big life changes. He was feeling lost, so he started using substances to help cope. Eventually, he was referred to a YSAS Withdrawal unit in Fitzroy. What he remembers most was how non-judgemental and supportive the workers were. "They weren't telling me what to do, they wanted to know my story," he says.

Flash forward to now, and Nathan is giving that same support to others at the Fitzroy Withdrawal unit, where young people can stay for up to 14 days and access support while withdrawing from drugs and alcohol. Nathan says many of the young people who come into the unit live chaotic and challenging lives, and they've turned to drugs to cope. At the unit, they can get proper sleep, eat good food, exercise in the gym and socialise with others. There is also a music recording studio and a basketball hoop. "It's not a hostile environment - it's really warm and caring and friendly."

Nathan says some people think drug and alcohol work is complex, but for him, the essence of it is simple. It's about listening without judgment. **"Instead of saying 'what's wrong with you?', we say 'what's going on for you, tell us your story'," he says.** "I think these young people just want a person to connect with, someone to be on their level." Nathan's focus is always on helping young people with their own goals - whether that's reducing the use of a substance or quitting altogether.

Nathan knows first-hand that addiction doesn't stop overnight. "Some people can get frustrated when they see a young person coming back over and over and over again," he says. Nathan says his role is to plant seeds of ideas that the young person can use if and when they are ready. He's seen young people come back into the detox four or five times before they're able to start reducing their use, but slowly over time, big changes can happen. A few of his former clients have gone on to study and work in the drug and alcohol sector, just like him. Nathan says he learns a lot from their resilience and perseverance. "They are survivors, and I feel really privileged to hear about all those really difficult adversities," he says.

Alongside working at the Fitzroy unit, Nathan also conducts research as part of his Doctor of Psychology, which leads to becoming a clinical and forensic psychologist. His study looks at personality functioning in young people aged 18-25, and the relationship between antisocial behaviour and substance use. He also works for YSAS as a Research Assistant, looking at whether a non-stimulant ADHD medication can help reduce cannabis withdrawal symptoms in young people at YSAS. He hopes the outcomes can help inform the work he does at the residence. "We can always reflect on and improve our practice", he says. "We're all in this for the same reasons - we want to empower our clients so they can have good outcomes."



## Willum – Supported Accommodation

The Willum Youth AOD Supported Accommodation program provides secure housing and support from skilled Youth AOD workers to create the conditions for young people to stay in control of substance use while living in the community. Willum is an important option for young people who are transitioning from more structured residential withdrawal or rehabilitation programs and for some, it prevents more intensive treatment from being required.

## Birribi Residential Rehabilitation

Residential rehabilitation provides young people with purposeful care and structured support to help them address substance use-related issues, develop resilience and achieve lasting change.

Birribi is a 15-bed Residential Rehabilitation service on Melbourne's Northern edge for young people from across Victoria. Young people typically participate in the Birribi program for three to four months but stays can be longer or shorter depending on individual needs and circumstances.

Through community living and shared responsibility, Birribi offers young people the chance to address the underlying issues that have driven and triggered harmful substance use in their lives. This includes individually tailored care plans and involvement in a range of engaging and challenging group programs that enable them to build practical life skills and support resilience.

Birribi keeps young people connected with helpful support from their families and communities and has a strong emphasis on supporting young people to keep themselves healthy and safe when they transition back to community life.

## Thanks to Deloitte

In 2023 a collaboration between some YSAS staff and Deloitte resulted in the planting of a sensory garden around the pool at Birribi. The team also raked out a significant amount of scree to create a solid area in front of the cottage so that staff, young people and their families could enter the Birribi Cottage without traipsing through mud and puddles in winter.

Deloitte is a large consulting firm that takes its Corporate Social Responsibility seriously and this event was part of their "Impact Day" program whereby each staff member can nominate a charity they would like to support for a day of volunteering either utilising their skills or "getting their hands dirty" at a working bee. Earlier in 2023 the Deloitte Foundation also provided a sizable grant to improve the cyber security of the sensitive data and information YSAS gathers on young people and staff.

## Bunjilwarra – a healing service for Aboriginal young people

Bunjilwarra is a 12-bed residential healing service for young people and families from First Nation communities in Victoria. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) are our partners and Bunjilwarra is the only service of its kind in Australia.

Bunjilwarra combines physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural aspects of wellbeing into a single, integrated service. Central to young people's experience at Bunjilwarra is the strengthening of their understanding and connection with culture, family, community and country.

We are grateful for the contribution of Uncle Pat Farrant, the Bunjilwarra Cultural Lead and Co-manager who, along with the leadership team and our workers, has helped create a safe and nurturing environment that Aboriginal families and communities trust will support their young people.



**Bunjilwarra combines physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural aspects of wellbeing into a single, integrated service. Central to young people's experience at Bunjilwarra is the strengthening of their understanding and connection with culture, family, community and country.**

**In 2023, Bunjilwarra commenced enacting plans to improve the facilities at our Hastings site to support more extensive and innovative programming. These works have received generous support from:**

- Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program (ACIP) \$1.43M (Major capital works)
- Paul Ramsay Foundation \$485K (Funding two studio units provided by Kids Undercover)
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) \$295K (Basketball court cover fit out for facilities)
- Gandel Foundation \$40K (Basketball court cover)
- Jack & Robert Smorgon Families Foundation \$20K (Technology)

**We would also like to acknowledge those organisations that have contributed to service enhancements at Bunjilwarra:**

- Marram Nganyin Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Program \$335K (Bunjilwarra youth mentor program)
- Department of Justice \$40K (Cultural Exchange Program)
- Lowitja Institute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluation Grant Scheme (ADRIA)



# Stronger Sisters Healing Camp

Brooke Clifford

Brooke Clifford is always amazed at how much can change in four days. The proud Palawa woman runs a four-day camp for Koori young women who have experienced family violence, as part of her work as a Family Violence Coordinator at the Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Alcohol and Drug Health Service. "If you look at the photo from day one, the women are really separated, standing like they're being forced to have a photo taken," she says. "And then a photo was taken on the last day where they were hugging each other and crying and swapping phone numbers. I was in tears about the bonds that were made."

Brooke experienced the isolation of family violence growing up. "I went through it alone," she says. That is why she is passionate about supporting other women going through it. "I really wanted to be someone that they can trust and talk to. Someone that can show them that you can have this bad upbringing in life, but you can change your life so quickly." Brooke says there is a strong link between family violence and drug and alcohol use. **"A lot of young people use drugs and alcohol to numb out feelings and emotions, and cope with home life."**

Brooke developed the Stronger Sisters Healing Camp with Carla Lauch, after realising there was a lack of family violence programs for young women. The women who participate spend four days on Country connecting and healing together, and learning about family violence, sexual health and respectful relationships. They also enjoy massages,

hot springs, art classes and cooking together. "Some of these women have never known the small luxuries that we have, like a massage or getting your hair washed."

Brooke says many of the women do not feel safe in the world. "We did a power and control wheel at one of the camps," she says, "and all of them said that rehab or jail was their safe space. That really broke my heart. By educating and giving the women a chance to sit around and talk and share their stories, it makes them not feel alone."

One young woman was struggling with angry outbursts when she arrived at the Bunjilwarra rehab. When Brooke asked her what was going on "she just burst into tears, and said, 'because that's how my mum and dad speak to each other'". "She didn't realise that she could communicate without yelling and screaming." Over her time at Bunjilwarra and at a Stronger Sisters camp, the young woman learnt how to regulate her emotions. "Just to watch her be more mellow and more in control of her emotions - that was amazing to me."

There's one question Brooke hears over and over again after each retreat: "When's the next camp?" "They just want more of it, they love it," she says. Some of the young women have told Brooke and her co-facilitator Carla that they want to be like them when they get older. **"If you'd have seen me 15 years ago you wouldn't want to be like me. So I guess that feedback holds a special place in my heart."**

# Special thank you to Uncle Pat Farrant

*In 2023, Uncle Patrick Farrant Snr was inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll, which recognises the achievements of Aboriginal Victorians who have made a profound contribution to their community and Victoria. The following is part of an article written about him honouring his achievements as an inductee.*

Uncle Patrick Farrant Snr is a proud Wemba-Wemba/Wati-Wati/Muthi-Muthi man born in Balranald, New South Wales. He has dedicated over 40 years of his life to serving and empowering the Victorian Aboriginal community through his work in legal services, health, social and emotional wellbeing and involvement in sports. His remarkable journey is characterised by resilience, leadership and his profound commitment to cultural advocacy.

Uncle Pat was employed at a car dealership in Deniliquin as a 14-year-old and later had jobs as a fruit picker, farmhand and labourer in southern New South Wales and the Murray River regions of Victoria. He eventually moved to Melbourne. Education was important to him, and he completed Australia's first Applied Social Science diploma for Aboriginal students, attesting to his determination and commitment to personal growth. During the course, he completed placements with the Aboriginal Advancement League.

At YSAS, Uncle Pat played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Drug and Alcohol Healing Service. This service supports young Aboriginal people aged between 16 and 25 wanting help with their drug and alcohol use. Uncle Pat currently serves as the Cultural Lead and Co-manager at Bunjilwarra, reflecting his ongoing dedication to the recovery journey of young Aboriginal Victorians. Since 2014, Uncle Pat has continued to focus on his work at Bunjilwarra supporting Aboriginal young people and their families.

Uncle Pat has also worked at other organisations including the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and the Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative Ltd. He is part of the Coralie Ober Honour Roll, the Southern Metro RAJAC committee and the newly established Public Intoxication Reforms Aboriginal Advisory Group.



Over the years, Uncle Pat has represented Bunjilwarra and the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service at state-wide and national conferences and forums. He has provided support and cultural awareness training for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health workers in both Koori and mainstream Victorian services. More recently, he has been an active member of the Koori Youth Justice Taskforce and a contributor to the Our Youth, Our Way report tabled in the Victorian Parliament in 2021.

Uncle Pat's advocacy for the prevention of Aboriginal youth incarceration and his role in the Our Youth, Our Way report underscore his commitment to systemic change. He was recently recognised for his extensive leadership with the Elder Award at the 2021 Southern Metropolitan RAJAC Aboriginal Community Justice Awards. His dedication to cultural integrity at Bunjilwarra, ensuring adherence to cultural protocols and providing the best Aboriginal cultural strengthening programs, is a testament to his commitment to preserving and promoting Indigenous heritage.

Uncle Pat's impact is reflected in the testimonials from colleagues and community members. Described as kind, generous, humble and a source of wisdom, Uncle Pat's mentorship has had a tremendous impact on those fortunate enough to work alongside him. An exceptional leader, Uncle Pat continues to share invaluable guidance with Aboriginal youth at Bunjilwarra. He says:

**"You can't change what happened yesterday, but you can make a change today, and tomorrow will be better".**

# Integrated health care for young people

Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health. Health has physical, mental and social dimensions and for First Nation's communities and many others, it is inextricably linked with spirituality and cultural connections.

In 1986, The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion was adopted by the World Health Organisation, making it clear that improved health requires individuals or groups to have the resources and physical capacities to satisfy their needs, realise their aspirations and change or cope with the environment. In this way, YSAS is inherently a health service and the medical care provided to our young people by our General Practitioners and Nurses is a vital resource.

## **Specialist Youth Health Clinics in Frankston and Collingwood**

headspace Frankston and Collingwood each have Youth Health Clinics. Local young people can access free and confidential primary health care from GPs and nurses who understand them, in an environment where they are connected and feel comfortable.

In 2023, our Youth Health Clinics also helped provide the 'Doctors in Schools program' to make primary health care more accessible to students. The program also helped young people identify and address health problems early while reducing the pressure of health care access and costs on families.

## **Bendigo Mental Health AOD Nurse Practitioner**

Our Mental Health AOD Nurse Practitioner in Bendigo is an outreach worker who engages with at-risk young people, providing sexual health testing, vaccination check-ups, referrals to AOD withdrawal and rehabilitation programs, pharmacotherapy and psychological interventions.

## **Our Secure Care - Primary Health and AOD Service**

Secure Care is a specialist state-wide service run by the Victorian Department of Families Fairness and Housing for children and young people aged 10-17 years who are subject to a child protection intervention, and who have been assessed as being at substantial and immediate risk of harm. The placement of children and young people in Secure Care is subject to judicial oversight and can be for no longer than 21 days.

Secure Care operates two secure residential facilities in inner north-west metropolitan Melbourne. Secure Care aims to keep children and young people safe and address their protection needs, while planning to reduce the risk of harm and return them to the community as soon as possible, in a safe way.

YSAS is contracted to provide a comprehensive primary health and AOD service for the children and young people residing there. Our team includes GPs, nurses and an AOD worker. When secure and stable, young people can benefit from receiving a comprehensive health assessment and treatment plan, that often results in immunisation, sexual health education and intervention, dental care, AOD harm reduction and treatment, mental health care and psychoeducation and responses to any conditions that might be detected.

# Positive experiences of medical care

Dr Tania Nishimura

**"We've got registered nurses, mental health nurses, drug and alcohol clinicians, GPs – all as part of the team."**

When Dr Tania Nishimura was given the opportunity to join YSAS eight years ago, she jumped at the chance to help some of Victoria's most vulnerable people. Tania works as a GP with Secure Care Services, a residential program for high-risk young people connected to the child protection system. The aim is to keep young people safe and make sure they stay safe when they go back into the community. Tania found the work rewarding (if challenging) right from the get-go. But looking back on her time, she says it's clear just how far the service has come.

"We're just so much more comprehensive now," Tania says of the transformation. "When I first started, the assessments we provided were quite narrow. Now, we're very multidisciplinary. We've got registered nurses, mental health nurses, drug and alcohol clinicians, GPs – all as part of the team."

"We also have such extremely high levels of engagement with young people," she adds, "which is good." Good, perhaps, is an understatement. Young people can be placed in Secure Care for up to 21 nights at a time, and initially, doctors like Tania were brought in to ensure their basic medical needs would be met during their stay. But in 2023, Tania says the service is focused on delivering more than 21 days of care.



To achieve this, the team has become more strategic about how they use a young person's time in Secure Care. The trick, Tania says, is to see that time as an opportunity to engage with people who are, on average, less likely to seek medical advice.

This takes patience – indeed, Tania says it's not uncommon to be turned away three or four times before a young person is happy to see her. But if the team manages their introductions well, the benefits of their work can continue long after the client has left Secure Care. "If we can provide a positive experience, the young person might feel encouraged to continue seeking out services after they leave, either with us or elsewhere," Tania says. To ensure they continue to have good experiences, Tania says the team will often contact outside services to fill them in on the details and advocate for the young person.

Looking back on the past eight years, Tania says she is proud of the care she and her teammates have provided. **"I think we do an extremely good job of providing child-centred, child-appropriate, trauma-informed services with a highly underserved, disengaged group of young people,"** she says. **"It can be emotionally draining and highly stressful, but we support each other as a team."**

**"There is a very high prevalence of substance use amongst people with mental illness," he says. "Then the addiction starts to exacerbate the mental illness as well."**

## **GPs and Nurses in our Residential AOD Services**

Our GPs and Nurses provide an essential service in our residential programs, enabling young people to safely manage withdrawal from substances and ensuring that they have access to the right level of intervention and care.

Our primary health care is subject to expert clinical governance and is supported by our Principal Medical Advisor.

**Whilst in residential care, the often unmet primary health needs of young people are attended to through:**

- Family planning and reproductive health checks
- Immunisation
- Dental health checks
- Eye care
- General physical check-ups and treatment for unaddressed injuries
- Mental health medication reviews

# Dr Lekan Ogunleye

Principal Medical Advisor



Dr Lekan Ogunleye has seen how mental health struggles and substance use often go hand in hand. The addiction specialist says it's often like the chicken and the egg – you can't tell which one came first. "There is a very high prevalence of substance use amongst people with mental illness," he says. "Then the addiction starts to exacerbate the mental illness as well." But too often, the two issues are treated separately. "That's what drove my passion, you know - you can have it all," he says. "Treating not just the mental health issues, but also the alcohol or substance use issues."

Lekan is the Principal Medical Advisor at YSAS, overseeing the medical care provided by doctors and nurses. He says having medical staff at drug and alcohol residential sites is vital. "I think that medical knowledge is important for [understanding] a young developing mind," he says. "It helps to pick up on the early signs of particular medical or physical health issues." He remembers one young person whose use of multiple substances was starting to impact her health. "She was constantly nauseated, shaking... she couldn't function." Despite this, she was resistant to medical treatment. A YSAS GP was able to assess her alongside an outreach worker, and through that picked up some hormonal changes that were also impacting her physical health. "So this would have been a young person who otherwise wouldn't have had access to a medical opinion," Lekan says.

Lekan brings many different perspectives to his work. "I think having not just a medical understanding, but also a psychological, social, spiritual and biological understanding is important," he says. He often participates in clinical reviews, where workers from different disciplines come together to discuss how best to support a young person. Lekan says the approach needs to be multidisciplinary partly because young people and their needs are so diverse. "You see young people from all walks of life, and I think that diversity provides a level of uniqueness as well, where you are able to individualise care for the young person."

One of Lekan's favourite parts of the job is training other staff. "It's been rewarding," he says, "being able to contribute to their education and hopefully imparting knowledge and refining the training that we have now." He is particularly passionate about teaching the developmental stages young people are going through, and how that connects with substance use and mental health. "The changes that are rapidly happening within them, and how that then translates to the behaviour that we see, the interactions that we have with them, [and] how vulnerable they can be," he says. "Understanding that - in the context of the support we provide them - it's quite important."

# Promoting better mental health

## **Each of the services YSAS provides aims to improve young people's mental health and well-being.**

We are fortunate to have a range of services specifically designed to address mental health problems and related concerns. Even so, our mental health services are developmentally responsive and holistic, operating within the YSAS resilience-based practice framework.

### **Headspace**

YSAS is the lead agency in consortiums operating headspace centres in Frankston, Collingwood and Rosebud. YSAS is also a consortium partner at headspace centres at Latrobe Valley, Dandenong, Melton, Knox, Geelong and Bendigo.

Through headspace, we support young people with mental health, physical health (including sexual health), alcohol and other drug services, and work and study support. With a focus on early intervention, practitioners working in our headspace centres provide young people support at crucial times and as early as possible – to help get them back on track and strengthen their ability to manage their mental health in the future.

Our headspace centres are guided by Youth Advisory Committees (YACs), comprised of young people who help us evolve to meet the unique needs of young people and those who support them. Our YACs are at the heart of our work, and they play an active role in designing, developing and evaluating our programs.

Our headspaces are partnerships providing access to a wide range of essential services for young people and families. Each is led by a consortium of local organisations.

Our consortium in Frankston and Rosebud is chaired by Kath Ferry and includes:

- Mornington Peninsula Shire Council
- Frankston City Council
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- The Alfred
- Peninsula Health
- Windana/Taskforce
- Mentis Assist
- Peninsula Carer Council

We thank Robe Macindoe from Evolve who departed as Consortium Chair in 2023 after over a decade of excellent service.

In 2023, our consortium in Collingwood was chaired by Councillor Amanda Stone who is a former Mayor of Yarra Council – we thank Amanda for her excellent service as Chair over a sustained period. The consortium is comprised of:

- Jesuit Social Services
- cohealth
- Austin Health
- St Vincent's
- MIND
- Sign for Work



## In 2023, our three headspace centres:



Supported 1456 young people  
to access headspace for the first time



Serviced 2501 young people



Completed 2939 episodes of care



Delivered 10667  
occasions of services

In 2023, 34.1% of the young people we worked with identified as LGBTIQ+, reflecting our brilliant and sustained connections with these communities.

**"They're so intelligent, they're so creative, they do so much in the face of such difficulty. I wish they didn't have to be as resilient as they are."**

## Passion and pride

Lake Majstorovic and Dr Steph Ryan

Lake Majstorovic is passionate about improving the lives of LGBTIQ+ young people. Growing up as a non-binary person in Victoria's south-east, they experienced first-hand what it's like when mental health services aren't designed for you. "There is a real dearth of understanding and a kind of fear and hesitation from a lot of practitioners about how to work with LGBTIQ+ people." Lake now works at headspace Frankston, running programs, developing training and working as an access clinician. **"There's a real passion and intention in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula area to support these communities. A lot of the centralised services aren't accessible, so we're filling a needed gap."**

Lake runs a social support program called Peninsula Pride, for young people aged between 12 and 25. "We have young people who come into their first session, and they are so withdrawn, so shy, so anxious. Then you see them relax, you see them start to connect with other young people, [and] you hear about the friendships they develop. Just the real difference genuine positive social connection makes for these young people - it's like night and day."

headspace Frankston runs a gender clinic where young people can access support and treatment, including gender-affirming hormones. Dr Steph Ryan, who helps run the clinic, says people in the

local area were having to travel to Melbourne for treatment. "Philosophically, it felt wrong that we weren't able to treat our community." She says it is rewarding "to be part of such an important thing for people, and to have the privilege of that trust. The young people have taught me how to care for them, what their needs are."

Lake's goal is for every clinician to feel comfortable working with LGBTIQ+ young people. It's not about being perfect, but it's important to acknowledge mistakes, and always centre the young person's perspective. "They are the ones who spend every minute of every day with themselves, so they know their own story, and their own experience the best." Steph says many of the mental health challenges LGBTIQ+ young people face stem from societal stigma and discrimination. "The real work needs to be in changing the cultural norms in the wider community."

Despite the serious subject matter of her work, Steph finds young people great fun to work with. "They are pleasure seekers who look for humour and joy in things, irrespective of what can be going on in their world," she says. "I think that's a real survival trait." Lake agrees. "They're so intelligent, they're so creative, they do so much in the face of such difficulty. I wish they didn't have to be as resilient as they are."



## The “Coasting Through” project

Our Aboriginal Health Team in headspace Frankston developed the “Coasting Through” project with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Melbourne’s South. It was established as a way of engaging young people through art and culture to promote their social and emotional wellbeing. Brilliant and original artwork was created on skateboard decks.

Our Aboriginal Health Team, with young people, identified 7 local services that are culturally safe and supportive. A specially painted skateboard was created for each of them and presented at a special ceremony at headspace Frankston. Our former cultural lead Shane Wright, a Kokatha man and Aboriginal artist, created the painting of the beautiful Frankston and Mornington Peninsula area with 7 white circles representing local services young people identified as culturally safe and supportive.

## BounceBack

In Frankston and across the Mornington Peninsula, YSAS provides the BounceBack program that delivers tailored support and care coordination for young people aged 12–25 experiencing severe and complex mental health difficulties, and their families.

Our BounceBack team includes mental health clinicians, psychiatrists and family and peer workers. The team takes a flexible approach, providing outreach in places within the community where the young person feels most comfortable.





## The power of peer support

Alix Fletcher and Zara Coppel

Alix Fletcher will never forget the day she got a call from a peer worker. Her child was struggling with the transition to high school just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and their mental health was declining. "It was a really dark time for us as a family," she says. One day, a family peer worker contacted her as part of the support the family was receiving. "She was so kind and all she said was, 'I've been there before...you are going to be okay'". Alix says they talked four or five times over a few months: "It had a really big impact on me". The experience inspired her to study further and become a family peer worker on the BounceBack team at headspace Frankston.

Peer workers often have lived experiences similar to the people they work with, and provide emotional and social support. Youth peer worker Zara Coppel, who also works on the BounceBack team, says she wishes she had peer support during her own mental health journey. "Just having someone that can say, 'I know this might feel crap, but we can get through it'." She says peer work is a non-clinical role, so young people feel comfortable asking more informal questions. "It gives them space to be scared, to talk to someone with an understanding of the position they're in and speak in ways they might not feel able to in a clinical space."

Alix recently worked with the parent of a young person struggling with their mental health. The parent had never had any formal support for themselves. With her guidance, this parent was able to identify their own needs and is currently applying

for NDIS support. "They said to me, 'I'm just so pleased I'm going to get some help... I didn't think I could get help, and I didn't realise how bad things had gotten,'" she says. "At the end of each day, you walk away and think, 'that was amazing, I'm so pleased I came to work today.'"

Zara agrees the role is incredibly rewarding. She focuses on consistently showing up for the young people she works with, and offering support that aligns with where they are at in their journey. She recently worked with a young person who was very quiet and reserved at the beginning, but eventually, they came out of their shell. "Once we established a connection, their whole demeanour had changed. They were engaged and happy to talk. It was amazing to see how much more comfortable and confident they'd become."

Alix says the whole team works collaboratively and values having the perspective of workers with lived experience. "When I started here, I was on a real mission for parents' voices to be heard, parents of neurodiverse young people in particular," she says. "The clinicians are so open to all suggestions; they value your opinion on different issues." Peer work is slowly becoming a bigger part of mental health services, and Alix and Zara agree it should be used as much as possible. "There has been so much research into the advantages of having peer support at every stage of your journey," Alix says. **"I think hearing from somebody who's been through it before, you believe that the hope is there, that you'll get through it."**



**"It gives them space to be scared, to talk to someone with an understanding of the position they're in and speak in ways they might not feel able to in a clinical space."**

# Justice work

**We recognise that society's deep structural inequalities and experiences of poverty, trauma and discrimination create conditions in which young people have a higher likelihood of becoming involved in crime.**

We know that the best way to keep young people out of the criminal justice system is to give them early support that connects them to pro-social relationships and activities within their family and community. When children and young people are struggling to stay connected to school and starting to come in contact with police, our crime prevention workers are positioned to engage and provide intensive, wrap-around support that keeps them on a positive path.

## **The Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP)**

EYOP is a partnership with Victoria Police, designed to support young people who are:

- In custody or have a history of offending
- Disengaged from school, peers and family
- Involved in high-risk behaviours
- Victims of crime

365 nights a year an EYOP youth worker is available for police to call on in Wyndham, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Dandenong, Casey and Pakenham.

Engagement with EYOP starts immediately after the first police contact with an at-risk young person. Our EYOP youth workers aim to engage with these at-risk young people and their families to assess their needs before further offences or serious crimes take place.

The program provides young people with support and referrals to services tailored to their individual needs. It also refers young victims of crime to support services and works with them to reduce the likelihood of future victimisation.

The Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science (CFBS) at Swinburne University has been engaged to evaluate the EYOP initiative by monitoring the program's effectiveness and providing evidence-based service improvements.

In 2023, our EYOP workers:

- Had 1784 engagements with young people in contact with police
- Made 761 referrals to health and welfare services
- Provided 633 consultations on the management of a young person's circumstances

# Stability and growth

Akash Nadar

**"Now I can be like, 'This is why this work is important, this is why we need more of it.' Because it will be so important for other young people."**



There's an old saying in social work: if you want to help people, you have to meet them where they are. For Akash Nadar\* that meant heading over to his parent's house in the back of a police van.

The year was 2019, and Akash's home life, which had been difficult since he was a teenager, reached the point where the police were called to intervene. Akash, who was 17 at the time, remembers feeling anxious about the encounter. "When you see police officers, you generally have a negative connotation," he says. "You're like, 'Well shit, what did I do?'" Akash was worried the police would only escalate the situation. But his feelings started to change when Meagan and Dave stepped out of the police car.

The duo, both counsellors, were part of the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP), which paired YSAS caseworkers with police officers in situations involving at-risk youth. The idea was to use police call-outs as a chance to connect young people with support services they might not otherwise seek out. And with Akash, they had found the perfect opportunity to help.

"I remember Meagan asking me all these questions," Akash says. "She was like, 'What do you think would help this situation?'" Meagan and Dave listened, and in between the police work, let Akash

know about the support services he could tap into. After Akash told them he'd moved out of his parent's place and was shuffling between crisis housing options, they linked him in with long-term accommodation.

Akash credits that help with putting him on the right path. "That was the first place where I actually had stable accommodation," he says. Eventually, that stability enabled him to refocus on his studies (he'd had to drop out of high school before finishing year 12), which led to him landing a job in fintech that he loves. His relationship with his parents is on the mend, too. "I think there's more understanding from both sides," he says. "So really, it's all good."

Today, Akash is so positive about his experience with EYOP he'll tell anyone who wants to listen. In 2022, this meant telling the Minister for Youth Justice herself, along with other representatives from the State Government. "Meagan reached out and said we'd love to have you talk at this event. And I was down for it. Because I've been through it," Akash explains.

"Now I can be like, 'This is why this work is important, this is why we need more of it.' Because it will be so important for other young people."

\*Not their real name

# The Youth Support Service and Pivot

**The Youth Support Service and Pivot are different programs, but they have a common approach to crime prevention that enables young people to achieve the following outcomes:**

- Stronger connection to family, community, and culture
- Improved attendance at school, work, or study
- Reduction in negative impacts of substance use, mental health and/or physical health issues
- Increased positive peer relationships
- Engagement in pro-social recreational activities
- Stabilisation of living circumstances and finances
- Reduction in contact with police and/or the justice system

**YSS (Youth Support Service)** provides young people aged 10 to 17 with intensive case management support for up to six months. Referrals come from Victoria Police, Children's Court Youth Diversion, EYOP and schools. Our YSS youth workers operate in Gippsland, Ringwood, Dandenong, Frankston, the Mornington Peninsula, Sunshine and Collingwood.

Since 2011, the YSS program has engaged over 10,600 young people. Evaluations by Swinburne University's Centre for Forensic Behavioural Sciences and KPMG have found the program successfully reduces young people's engagement with police and the youth justice system.

In 2023, our YSS teams provided 1004 young people and their families with intensive support for up to six months. 80 of these young people received intensive support on two occasions.

**Pivot** works with young people aged 14-22 years who have committed serious offences, often on repeated occasions. Pivot is run in partnership with Taskforce Community Agency, Jesuit Social Services, Mission Australia and Kids First Australia and supports young people residing in the Dandenong, Casey, Frankston and Mornington Peninsula LGAs. The support is long-term, helping to create meaningful and positive change in young people's lives.

# No two days are the same

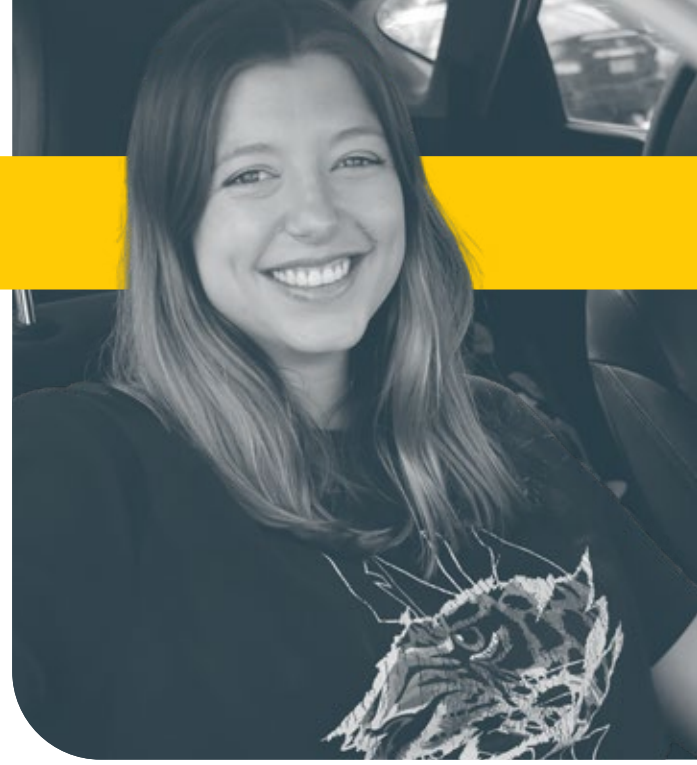
Taylah Gibbs

No two days are the same for outreach worker Taylah Gibbs. Her job with the Youth Support Service is to visit young people wherever they feel most comfortable. That could be at their home or their school, or she might take them to an appointment, or pick them up from soccer practice. She says many young people just don't feel comfortable in white-walled clinical spaces, like a doctor's or psychologist's office. "Being able to meet with young people in the community, at a park, shooting some hoops or going out for a bite to eat, the engagement is going to be better."

Taylah works with young people aged 10 to 17 who have had contact with police, for issues including minor crime, bullying, family violence or drug and alcohol use. "We work with them for no longer than six months... establishing some connections and community, supporting them to identify goals they might want to work towards," she says.

Many of Taylah's clients are dealing with immense disadvantages, including poverty, discrimination and trauma. The scale of these problems can feel impossible, so Taylah helps them focus on making small, positive changes. "It might be getting their learners, enrolling in TAFE, or doing CV and interview prep work," she says. "The young person might be being bullied at school, so it's about connecting with the school to ensure their safety

**"He didn't have access to basic needs, so no money, he was relying on other people to have a roof over his head. So once we kind of put those things in place, making change was easy for him."**



plan is happening and doing lots of self-esteem and confidence work." Taylah knows that nurturing a young person's passions can be healing. "Whether it's art or music or sports, I try and link them into something where they have that separate social connection from outside of school."

Taylah has seen first-hand how these practical changes can dramatically improve young people's lives. She remembers one client who had just been kicked out of the family home. He really wanted to make change, but there were just so many barriers. He didn't have access to basic needs, so no money, [and] he was relying on other people to have a roof over his head. So once we kind of put those things in place, making change was easy for him." Her client is now a dad, with a full-time job and his own private rental with his partner. "It was just awesome to see his transition."

One of Taylah's favourite parts of her job is advocating on her client's behalf. She remembers one client who was transitioning genders, but their family was struggling to use their preferred pronouns and name. "I think the dad wanted to be supportive, but he was struggling." After many difficult conversations, she was able to help the family understand why using pronouns was important. "It took quite a few sessions with them, but it made such a huge difference to that young person, and how they were feeling." Taylah finds her work rewarding, but she knows that most of the hard work is done by her clients. **"At the end of the day, I'm like - you've done this, you've got yourself here, I've just helped you navigate [the] systems,"** she says.

# Inclusion and equity in practice

We are committed to people with diverse backgrounds and identities being included, represented, and having the opportunity to participate equally in the life of our organisation and the communities we serve.

While it is not possible to fully comprehend the complexity of all human experience, we learn so much through including and building relationships of mutual trust and respect with First Nations peoples, people with disabilities, people who are LGBTIQA+, people of colour, and people from various cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. We are also committed to gender equity.

Being open to learning helps us to understand how systems of power and privilege can significantly contribute to marginalisation, disadvantage, and long-term harm. We strive to create conditions where everyone can feel safe, enfranchised and valued.

In 2023 YSAS developed an Inclusion and Equity committee with a clear plan for improvement. We also have a range of services that are delivered with and for people from backgrounds and identities that are too often subject to marginalisation and discrimination.

## **Transformer and the Youth Empowerment Project**

Transformer and the Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) are services specifically designed with and for young people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, who are experiencing problems related to their drug and alcohol use.

Transformer runs out of Dandenong, providing services to young people in Melbourne's south east growth corridor and YEP runs out of Sunshine, servicing Melbourne's west.

Many of the young people supported by Transformer and YEP are also dealing with homelessness, complex relationship issues (including family violence), immigration difficulties and justice-related problems.

Transformer and YEP use assertive outreach to connect with young people from new and emerging communities as well as their peers and families. Each service works in practical ways to increase access to resources, encourage pro-social community connection, strengthen family relationships and support young people to engage in education, employment and other meaningful activities.

## **The Zone**

The Zone is an Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) treatment program for young people and families that is delivered as a joint initiative by YSAS, Odyssey House Victoria and Drummond Street Services in partnership with the North West Melbourne Primary Health Network.

The Zone offers young people from LGBTIQA+, African and Pasifika communities inclusive, culturally safe, specialist AOD youth services that embrace and respond to diversity. Young people from these communities and their families regularly encounter discrimination and are less likely to seek mainstream AOD treatment.

The Zone is delivered for young people aged 10-25 years of age and families who work, live, or have connections in the North West Melbourne region.

## Muslim Youth, Adult & Families program

Melbourne's Muslim community makes a massive contribution to cultural life in Melbourne's Northern suburbs. There is much to be proud of. In some ways, this adds to the stigma or shame felt by Muslim families where a child or loved one has developed problems with substance use. This can push problems underground and make them hard to detect.

That's why MYAF, a program designed for Muslim young people and families endorsed by the Islamic Council of Victoria, is critical to supporting families from the Islamic community who are experiencing alcohol and drug-related issues.



# A constant, supportive presence

Cihan Tohumcuer

**"Having that connection with your worker... the rapport can maybe develop quicker. We encourage them to reconnect with God and with faith, because that can be a massive protective factor."**

Support for young people often takes a one-size-fits-all approach. Youth worker Cihan Tohumcuer has seen how this cookie-cutter model has left Victoria's Muslim community behind. Cihan is Muslim himself, and grew up in Melbourne's north watching many of his brothers and cousins using and dealing drugs. "Back in those days, especially with the Turkish and Middle Eastern community, we didn't really know about any kind of support services out there," he says. "It was just a massive problem in the family and community."

Cihan works for the Muslim Youth, Adult and Families program, a drug and alcohol service specifically designed to support the Islamic community. It's run by a consortium of services including YSAS, and it's also linked in with the local mosque, which refers young people to the program. The workers are mostly Muslim themselves, and have religious knowledge. "Having that connection with your worker... the rapport can maybe develop quicker. We encourage them to reconnect with God and with faith, because that can be a massive protective factor."

Cihan says many of the older members of the Islamic community are dealing with trauma that can be passed down to younger generations. "Whether it's Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt — there's so many things that have been happening in the last few decades with war and invasion," he says.



Cultural factors can also stop some people from seeking help. "They will refuse support, and they will refuse to accept that they have had a traumatic experience."

Cihan likes to take a pragmatic approach to his work. "I will be firm, but in a calm, gentle way," he says. He encourages his clients to reflect on their actions, and what they want out of life. He is also a constant, supportive presence, regardless of what happens. "I'm hoping that will plant the seed to get them to stop and think maybe I should stop doing this stuff," he says.

He remembers one 13-year-old he worked with who was really struggling. "He would steal anything, break into anyone's home, use any kind of drug. I realised this kid's not going to make any changes soon, but I'll still keep working with him just to kind of have that relationship." The young person has now stopped using and has a job with the local mosque, where he also goes regularly to pray. "It just makes me feel really good to see a young person that's been through some pretty heavy stuff, and then eventually they just feel like okay, that's enough."

**"How many programs do you get to use a theory that changed your worldview? I get to work with, support and hang out with queer, black, brown kids in any combination in between."**



## A light bulb moment

Marcus Hough

When Marcus Hough first learnt about intersectionality, it was a light bulb moment. "It's a theory from black feminists who are telling about a subjective experience they've had... about what it means to be a black woman, to be queer," they say. For Marcus, an African American queer person with lived experience of poverty and addiction, the theory helped them better understand their own difficult experiences in the world, and how having intersecting identities can increase a person's experience of discrimination.

When Marcus first heard about The Zone, they couldn't wait to put their passion for intersectionality into action. The Zone is a unique program that supports diverse young people struggling with alcohol and drug use. The program focuses on supporting African Australians, Pasifika communities and LGBTIQ+ young people, and many of the workers come from those communities. Marcus has a connection to all three. "I'm part of the African diaspora, and I'm out as queer and non-binary," they say. "I play American football, and a lot of the people that I play with, who actually welcomed me the most [when I came to] Australia was the Pasifika community."

Marcus says most services are designed for straight, cisgender Anglo people. "The scientists, the doctors, the psychologists, so many of the people who come up with the theories - they are the demographic in mind." The Zone is trying to create that same experience for people who have traditionally been ignored and marginalised.

**"That's the big thing with the lived experience workforce - you understand it, and it reduces stigma and judgement,"** Marcus says. **"There's a lot to be said for not having to explain things in depth."**

Marcus was recently working with a young Samoan man whose offending had led to child protection becoming involved. Although his mother spoke conversational English, Marcus and a fellow worker fluent in Samoan visited the family to explain the situation in more detail. "We're actually explaining to the mum why child protection is involved, and unpacking that it's nothing to do with what she's done as a mum. Now [that] it's being explained to her in her native language, the level of understanding and nuance starts to come together."

Work at The Zone varies a lot from day to day. Recently Marcus took a trans female client bra shopping. "That was kind of a riot, because I'm assigned male at birth, [and] she's assigned male at birth, and we have no idea how messy that section of the store actually is. But that can be a really trying experience... just going and being stared at when you're picking out your underwear." Marcus says the best part of the job is getting to work with so many diverse young people. "How many programs do you get to use a theory that changed your worldview? I get to work with, support and hang out with queer, black, brown kids in any combination in between."

# Family and community work

Young people's connections with family and their communities predate and will endure beyond their engagement with YSAS. We include 'chosen families', who are groups of people considered to be family regardless of biological and legal definitions.

YSAS practitioners seek to include families as much as possible when appropriate, as the evidence is clear that this increases the likelihood of positive and sustainable outcomes. We work to improve the ability and willingness of family members and supporters to emotionally and practically support their loved ones through the ups and downs of life.

Besides our broader commitment to include families and communities in our services, YSAS also delivers many family and community-specific programs.

## **Felton Bequest – Support and early intervention for families at risk of substance use related harm**

YSAS received a major grant from the Felton Bequest to further develop and evaluate our **Family and Youth Early Intervention Program (FaYEIP)** in Melbourne's south-eastern growth corridor.

The evaluation findings published in 2023 were compelling.

For young people aged 10 to 18:

- More than 70% reduced their progression to more harmful and/or entrenched substance use
- More than 85% improved family connections
- More than 60% improved education and/or community connections

For families:

- 95% of families improved their confidence and capacity to support their child
- More than 90% of families were more confident in knowing how and where to get help
- YSAS is now well-positioned to build on these outcomes and deliver FaYEIP in other areas

## **Reconnect**

Based in Ringwood, covering the eastern metropolitan region, Reconnect supports young people aged 12 – 18 years who have significant drug and/or alcohol problems and are at risk of family disconnection and homelessness. Reconnect focuses on improving connections with family, work, education and community, while addressing the triggers and drivers of substance-use related problems.

## **Putting Families First (PFF)**

The Putting Families First (PFF) program works to streamline support for families in Melbourne's Brimbank-Melton area who are involved in the child protection and criminal justice systems. There is an emphasis on supporting First Nation's families and those who are from African and Pasifika backgrounds.

Run in partnership with OzChild, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, the Australian African Foundation for Retention and Opportunity (AAFRO) and Charis Youth and Community, the PFF program addresses legal, financial, housing, health, mental health, AOD and family violence concerns and brings together the best possible services for young people and their families. PFF adopts a community-driven approach aimed at keeping families together and supporting them to overcome the challenges they face.

# Mob Run This

Scott Krakouer

*In NAIDOC week 2023 YSAS and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) co-hosted the 1200-person community event along the Werribee River in the City of Wyndham called 'Mob Run This'.*

Sport has been a part of Scott Krakouer's life for longer than he can remember. The son of an AFL athlete, Scott began playing football when he was just five. He always enjoyed the rush that came from winning. But as he got older, he came to appreciate sport's less direct benefits. "Playing sport definitely kept me out of trouble as a youth," he says. Later, when Scott started work as a Youth and Family Worker at YSAS, he wondered if it might do the same for others.

Today, Scott, a Minang Noongar man, spends much of his time working with Indigenous young people in Melbourne's west, where he runs a sports program to help young people stay out of the justice system. "The kids come in to do boxing or gym circuit or basketball," he explains. But young people aren't the only ones in attendance. "The police come as well, just to engage and play with them," Scott says. "It's about building healthier connections."

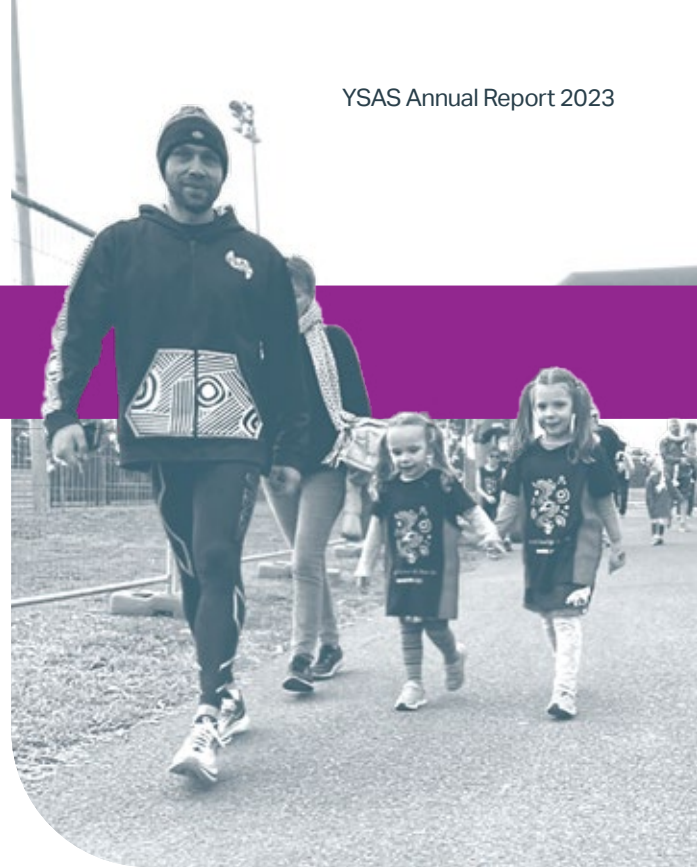
For Scott, the benefits of the program are threefold: "Playing a bit of sport helps the kids with their physical and mental health. It also gives them something fun to do." (Scott says many of the young people he encounters only offend because they're bored.) And finally, "it helps them build more positive connections with peers and adults."

According to Scott, this last point may be the most important. "A lot of these kids have had pretty negative experiences with police. So it's about getting them to hang out and build more trust, so the kids see the police as people, and the police don't just see the kids as offenders." All that from

a few rounds of basketball? Scott says he's seen the effects with his own eyes: teenagers and police playing together, then talking over dinner, then walking away with different perspectives of one another.

Sport has played a big role in the rest of Scott's work, too. In early 2022, he started to worry about the broader Indigenous community around Melbourne's west. "Because of COVID, there hadn't been a NAIDOC event for about three years," Scott explains. He believed the community needed something cultural to bring them together. At the same time, he wanted to do something to encourage people to look after their physical health.

The solution he arrived at was Mob Run This, a fun run on the lands of the Kulin Nation along the Werribee River. "I wanted to provide something where the community could come together, connect culturally and do something good for their physical and mental health," Scott says. Getting this going involved a lot of legwork; professional partnerships had to be forged and financing secured. But in the end, Scott, who had no prior event management experience, says the day was a success. "To put on an event that gets over 600 community members active, it was probably my most rewarding day at YSAS so far."



**"The decisions we've had to make, if you haven't gone through it, you just don't get it. Some of the things that we talk about, you could never ever say to your friends or your siblings."**

## The YSAS Family Reference Group

Being a parent of a child with a substance use problem can be isolating. For Jess\*, that was the hardest part. "You're trying to find supports or services, but you don't necessarily find that within your family or your friendship group," she says. "There's a bit of stigma and shame and embarrassment, that I must be a bad parent because my child is going off the rails." Jess, Emily\* and Anna\* are part of a support group for parents called the Family Reference Group. **"We're no longer isolated because we have other people who know what we're going through,"** says Jess.

The Family Reference Group was initially set up to provide feedback to YSAS about how our services could better meet the needs of families. Jess, Emily and Anna quickly became close friends. "We were just lucky that we all hit it off and bonded over how extremely chaotic life had been," says Jess. "We don't necessarily always just talk about what's happening with our children," says Emily. "It can be about what's happening with us, new jobs or holidays, funny things that have happened."

Anna says the group understands what she's going through better than anyone. "The decisions we've had to make, if you haven't gone through it, you just don't get it." Emily says, "some of the things that we talk about, you could never ever say to your friends or your siblings". The group have nicknamed themselves the 'Mothers in Arms'. They recently attended a workshop called Tuning into Teens and joked that they were the Tuning into Teens: Hardcore Edition.

"We joke about how nice it would be if our issue was with screen time," says Emily. "It's all in jest, and it's purely just getting it off our chests."

The group is filled with praise for the youth workers who have helped their young people. "Having the worker there talking to my child, gave me that minute to breathe," says Anna. One time a YSAS youth worker arrived at Jess's house, but her child wouldn't come out of their bedroom. "And the YSAS worker just went and sat on the other side of the bedroom window on the decking, and did the whole appointment via text message," she says. "It was so simple, but not every service would do that."

All three women wish there were more groups out there like the Family Reference Group. "I think parents who feel less isolated and [are] more able to talk about what's going on, can probably support their child a lot better," says Jess. She urges struggling parents to hang in there. "Things do change, even though sometimes you can't see the end." Emily says maintaining a positive connection with your child is the most important thing, no matter what happens. Seeking help is also key.

**"I think for us to be in this group really shows that we're not bad parents," says Emily. "We're actually excellent parents because we are doing everything we can."**

\*Not their real names



**"Family members of the young people we work with are often faced with expectations from society that don't fit with their reality. They are also used to being offered an overwhelming amount of, sometimes contradictory, professional opinion. With this group, we have created a space to look critically at those sometimes harmful expectations."**

**Esther Benz, Family Reference Group facilitator**

# Research and practice development

**The team collaborates with universities and research partners to advance the fields of youth AOD, crime prevention and mental health.**

Our Research and Practice Development team aims to provide the Youth Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) workforce and wider community with access to current and up-to-date resources, evidence-based training opportunities, and research and publications that support the upward trajectory for young people. Our research is collaborative and always involves the voices of young people who use our services.

The team collaborates with universities and research partners to advance the fields of youth AOD, crime prevention and mental health. Our research helps us incorporate evidence-based best practice into our work so we can better care for and support young people and their families. We publish the results of our research projects so other organisations can make sure their work is based on the best available evidence.

We also provide industry-leading Youth AOD training informed by the latest research and over 25 years of direct practice. We provide training to key organisations in the sector including Berry Street, Youth Justice, Child Protection, Child Protection West, Launch Housing, the Centre

for Excellence and Child and Family Welfare. We also partnered with the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) to deliver the youth component of the ELEVATE Training Program to Victoria's AOD sector.

Below are the key research and practice development projects that YSAS and partners undertook in 2023.

## **Resource landscapes**

### **Resource landscapes for young people leaving residential alcohol and drug services**

In collaboration with UNSW, La Trobe University, Kings College London and the Ted Noffs Foundation, this study identified resourcing opportunities for young people after exiting residential AOD treatment, to understand how resources are arranged and aligned in ways that maximise positive outcomes in young people's substance use.

Resource Landscapes was funded through an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant.

**Publications:**

- Caluzzi, G., MacLean, S.J., Gray, R. M., Skattebol, J, Bryant J (2023). "I just wanted a change, a positive change": Locating hope for young people engaged with residential alcohol and drug services in Victoria, Australia. *Sociology of Health and Illness*. DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.13680.
- Willoughby, M., Janca, E., Kwon, S., Johnston, B., Collins, T., Kinner, S., Johns, D., Galant, D., Glover-Wright, C., Borschmann, R., (2023) Interventions to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Justice Involved Young Women: A Scoping Review. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse* DOI: 10.1177/15248380231171183
- Bryant, J., Caluzzi, G., Bruun, A., Sundbery, J., Ferry, M., Gray, R. M., Skattebol J., MacLean, S. (2022). The problem of over-medicalisation: How AOD disease models perpetuate inequity for young people with multiple disadvantage. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 103.
- MacLean, S. J., Caluzzi, G., Ferry, M., Bruun, A., Skattebol, J., Neale, J., & Bryant, J. (2022). Why we stopped using the term 'aftercare'. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 41(1), 3-6. doi:10.1111/dar.13332

**GRACE study****'Can Extended-Release Guanfacine Improve Outcomes in Young People Seeking Treatment for Problematic Cannabis Use?**

In collaboration with Melbourne University, the GRACE study is a randomised controlled trial that explores whether extended-release guanfacine can help young people who have problems with cannabis use to get in control of their behaviour and make the most out of other psycho-social and clinical treatments. There are no effective medications for people with cannabis problems.

The study is due to be completed in 2025 and is funded by the State Government's 'Alcohol and Drug Research and Innovation Agenda' (ADRIA).

**Systematic Review****The efficacy of interventions targeting functional outcomes in young people with substance use problems**

In collaboration with the Centre for Youth Mental Health, the Melbourne University Substance Use Research Group and Orygen, this Systematic Review identifies interventions/programs (or characteristics of intervention/programs) that are effective in producing functional recovery in young people with substance use problems, where functional recovery is broadly defined as encompassing (1) global functioning, (2) educational or vocational functioning, (3) social functioning, social connectedness or relationships, (4) quality of life and/or (5) independent living.

This review is scheduled to be published in 2024.

**ACEs study****Adverse childhood experiences, morbidity, mortality and resilience in socially excluded populations: protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis**

In collaboration with Melbourne University and the MCRI Justice Health group, this study addresses the significant health inequities faced by socially excluded populations, defined by homelessness, substance use disorder, sex work, or criminal justice system contact, and explores how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) contribute to these disparities.

This review is scheduled to be published in 2024.

**Intermin publication:**

- Campbell, A. C., Pearce, L. A., Willoughby, M. Borschmann, R., Young, J., Bruun, A., Sundbery, J., Kinner, S. A. (2023). Adverse childhood experiences, morbidity, mortality and resilience in socially excluded populations: protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open*.

# Addressing family violence: a 'whole of organisation' approach

**In 2018, YSAS began examining the intersections between youth substance use and sexual, intimate partner and family violence.**

Initially funded as a project by Family Safety Victoria (FSV), this work has included a range of projects spanning from mapping the family violence capability needs of YSAS Youth and Youth Alcohol and other Drug (AOD) services, to designing and implementing workforce training, as well as other research and advocacy activities.

Undertaken by YSAS Research and Practice team's Bianca Johnston, this work has found that young people have unique support, safety and resilience needs because of the intersections between their young age, their substance use, and family, sexual and intimate partner violence. Drugs and alcohol may be used as a form of coping, responding to, and at times surviving the impacts of violence. However, drugs and alcohol can also be used as mechanisms of power and control through substance-use coercion. Our work has sought to develop a deeper understanding of how these factors impact young people's pathways through Youth and Youth AOD support and services. This work recognizes that there are complex intersections, and that young people require unique approaches that are different to both children and adults.

There are important opportunities within Youth and Youth AOD services to provide intervention, support, prevention and healing work for young

people whose substance use is impacted by family, sexual and intimate partner violence. YSAS Research and Practice has piloted a capacity-building curriculum with two groups of YSAS workforce members – the YSAS First Wave and the YSAS Family Violence and Sexual Assault Training (FVSAT) group. We have partnered with No to Violence to develop and deliver training about working with young men who use intimate partner violence.

We have also collaborated with the Justice Health Group to review and identify interventions designed to prevent or respond to violence against justice-involved young women. This research, funded by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, was published in the International Journal of Trauma, Violence and Abuse in 2023. Since 2018, Bianca has advocated and shared her understanding of this issue in a variety of forums around the country. She has also delivered training across Australia and collaborated with the Bunjilwarra Koori Youth AOD Healing Service in the delivery and evaluation of the Stronger Sisters Healing Camps in 2022 and 2023.

As this body of work continues to grow, it is uncovering important learnings about how we can best support young people, their families, and their communities.



# Creating the conditions for our services to thrive

## Quality and Service Development

Quality and Service Development at YSAS is comprised of 4 teams, united by one common goal - to continuously improve our service offerings for young people and families.

These teams include:

### Youth Participation

Ensures the young people who use our services have a say in how our services work.

### Compliance and Quality

Ensures that we meet all our legislative and contractual obligations to run a fit-for-purpose service for young people and provide the systems and processes for continuous learning and improvement.

### Data Management & Analytics

Gathers and analyses information about our services, making sure we comply with our reporting obligations to our funders and ensuring we understand the effectiveness of our work and the needs and characteristics of the young people we work with.

### Learning

Equips staff with the training, knowledge and skills they need to work effectively with young people, families and communities.

Together these teams gather information about how our services work, analyse what needs to improve and collaborate with practitioners and programs to implement the changes needed.

A major project our **Quality and Service**

**Development** team is working on is updating the systems we use to record client information. The new system, called Y-CIS, will help us better record, understand and improve our work and continue to meet our external reporting obligations.

YSAS has always met our accreditation standards, but in 2024 not only did we do this, but we were also nominated for a commendation for our industry-leading processes that offer young people and others opportunities to provide feedback and participate in decision-making at YSAS. QIP, our accreditors, also requested to use our evidence-backed Practice Framework as an example of best practice.

In 2023 we published our Resilience Based Practice Framework, which outlines the principles that guide our work. As an important way of implementing this, we have strengthened and are supporting supervision, case review and reflective practice across our services. We are proud that every project undertaken by our Practice and Service Development teams is now done in true collaboration with our services, ensuring we are all working together towards the common goal of improving the lives of young people.

## Finance and Corporate Services

Our organisational support services are the backbone of YSAS. They do the work needed to allow our staff on the ground - including managers, team leaders and youth workers - to focus on supporting young people. Our organisational support services include:

### Human Resources

Our team works hard to make YSAS an employer of choice and a great place to work. In 2023 we introduced several new initiatives, including providing staff with five weeks of leave per year, and introducing Awards and Recognition prizes to celebrate the achievements of our incredible workforce.

### IT

Our team keeps all our technology and equipment working effectively and efficiently. With cyber security an increasingly big issue, a major focus in 2023 was making sure our systems are safe and secure.

### Business Support

Our team takes care of many projects that support the overall governance of YSAS. In 2023 the team brought to life the 2022 - 2025 Strategic Plan so that all staff understand how our strategy translates to supporting young people.

### Finance

Our team works hard to provide stewardship of the funds entrusted to YSAS by funders. They monitor and track expenditure and income to ensure that funders are confident the money they provide is appropriately used to provide all of YSAS' vital services.

### Legal & Compliance

Our team ensures our policies and procedures are up-to-date and followed correctly. They keep us compliant with the relevant legislation and contracts, enabling us to continue getting the vital funding we need to run our services.

# Advocacy and communications

## Creating change alongside partner organisations

Standing with young people to advocate for their rights and needs has been at the heart of our work at YSAS since day one. It's the A in our name. Before 1998 young people were expected to fit into an adult drug treatment system that wasn't designed or built for them. We created a new approach to deal with this problem. And our purpose has remained the same ever since: providing an excellent, evidence-based early intervention service that is developmentally appropriate and free from stigma.

But our work can't just be about youth-specific service delivery on its own - we know that resources and opportunities are not distributed equally in our society. To balance the scales, system-level policy change is critical. In partnership with lived and living experience Youth Peer Advocates, YSAS works hard to influence coalition-led campaigns that fight for a fairer justice system, more crisis accommodation and meaningful drug reform.

### **Raise the Age**

YSAS joined with other legal, health and family violence prevention organisations and experts to fight for the age of criminal responsibility to increase from 10 to 14 in Victoria. Thanks to the hard-fought campaign led by Change the Record and Smart Justice 4 Young People the Victorian Government raised the age to 12, an important first step. YSAS was proud to back in First Nations experts to guarantee this diversion of young people from the criminal justice system into care.

### **Youth2 Housing Alliance**

Homelessness can make it impossible for many young people to get their lives back on track. YSAS headspace Frankston and Rosebud clinicians and workers knew a permanent solution was needed, so banded together to Chair the Youth 2 Housing Alliance with 11 local organisations in the Mornington Peninsula, resulting in an Education First Youth Foyer being funded in Frankston.

### **Drug Checking Advocacy**

In October 2023, YSAS joined 77 other health and community agencies and the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association in an open letter and social media campaign, calling on the Victorian Government to urgently implement a drug checking and enhanced public alert system. We are thrilled the government has listened to these calls and is now funding a drug checking trial.

### **The Youth Housing and Homelessness Alliance**

Alongside the Youth Housing and Homelessness Alliance we put pressure on the State Government to respond to the 51 recommendations in the 2021 Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. The alliance, headed by Youth Affairs Council Victoria, focused particularly on the development of a new youth housing model to meet the specific and unique needs of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. In February 2024 the Victorian Government supported 45 of the 51 recommendations in full or in principle in their response to the Inquiry.

### Advocacy through our enhanced digital strategy

2023 was a huge year for YSAS' digital impact. By harnessing digital tools, we've streamlined access to resources and strengthened our connection to the community we serve. The launch of the new website in November 2023 marked a pivotal moment for YSAS, representing our commitment to ensuring our service information is easy to navigate and available to those who need it most.

2023 was also the first full year of having social media at YSAS. Across our five social media channels we reached 593,378 people and achieved 41,428 engagements in the form of likes, comments, shares and saves. The viral TikTok site tour of the Fitzroy Withdrawal Unit reached many current, past and future clients of YSAS who filled the comment section with their experiences and appreciation of our services.

### Target Zero

We joined the Target Zero coalition (led by West Justice) aimed at eradicating youth criminalisation and the overrepresentation of First Nations, African and Pasifika young people, and those living in residential care in the justice system.



# Where to from here

## The YSAS Strategic Plan 2022-2025

Every year we aspire to improve. This means delivering services that are more effective and becoming better equipped to deliver on our purpose as an organisation. We will continue to work at creating the conditions where young people are valued and included in their communities and have every opportunity to thrive.

2023 was the first year of a new strategic plan for YSAS aimed at 'excellence in practice'. Excellence in practice demands that we continually learn from our experiences and apply the best available evidence about what works. We strive to provide accessible and culturally meaningful services for young people and families of all backgrounds and identities.

We are ensuring that the lived and living experience of staff and partners and those who use our services is harnessed to better understand the reality of the challenges young people face and to co-create solutions that drive improvement.



## Our strategic plan has four pillars:



# 1

### **Walking with First Nations Peoples**

We are committed to connecting with Aboriginal peoples and communities and learning how best to support self-determination and create culturally safe and relevant services for First Nation's young people and families.

# 2

### **Delivering more effective services**

Our services and programs will continuously evolve to respond to the ever-changing needs of young people and their families. We will develop efficiencies, better measure outcomes for young people and families and understand how they can be enhanced.

# 3

### **Using our voices to deliver greater social impact**

YSAS will better understand the social impact delivered through the positive outcomes that our services enable young people and families to achieve. We will create more opportunities for young people and families to co-produce those outcomes, design more effective services and advocate for what they need in ways that matter to them.

# 4

### **Enabling our people to achieve more**

Our people are fundamental to our success, and we need to support and nurture them as they support and nurture our clients. We will create an inspiring workplace culture that staff and volunteers from all backgrounds and identities can feel a part of and contribute to. We'll strengthen our systems, infrastructure and processes to support our people to do their best.

We thank our shareholders Jesuit Social Services, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne and St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, and our Board for supporting the implementation of this plan in 2023 and beyond.





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