

Annual Report 2024

# YESAS



**YOUTH  
SUPPORT +  
ADVOCACY  
SERVICE**

Providing services that matter  
for young people and families

# Acknowledgement of Country

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.



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## Koorie Youth Council Partnership

### Walking alongside First Nations peoples

Koorie Youth Council (KYC) Deputy CEO Leyla Quartermaine has known the power of the Aboriginal community since she was little. "I was raised by my grandmother, but also very much raised by the Victorian Aboriginal community," says the proud Noongar woman. "I'm a pretty big example of it taking a village to raise a child." So it makes sense that she works for an organisation that has Aboriginal community and advocacy at its core.

Gunditjmara woman and CEO Bonnie Dukakis says KYC "is a policy and advocacy organisation that represents and advocates for the rights, voices and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in Victoria." Twenty years after the organisation began, it now has 10 staff, most of whom are young Aboriginal people.

One of KYC's largest initiatives is an annual summit that brings together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from around the state to discuss advocacy issues they care about. Bonnie says it's important to create spaces for youth voices that are not connected to systems, services or youth justice. "It creates the safety to talk about things openly and freely without repercussion or any consequences," she says. KYC also supports Aboriginal organisations to deliver strength-based, place-based mentoring programs.

In 2025, KYC is partnering with YSAS to help improve engagement with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. "It's been a really genuine partnership right from the very beginning," says Leyla. "There's been a genuine commitment

from YSAS to acknowledge our expertise." Bonnie adds, "We are keen to work with like-minded organisations that value the input of young people and their participation in spaces."

The learning in the partnership goes both ways. "For us, it's about understanding the work that YSAS does, and how we can promote the services through our networks," Bonnie explains. "For YSAS, it's about what they can learn from our work with young mob, and how we can provide advice on how that could work better."

Leyla says it's important for like-minded organisations to work together, rather than operating in silos. "Sharing resources and learning, at the end of the day, it's going to benefit the young people who are accessing those services."

Several KYC staff recently toured YSAS sites in Dandenong, Bunjilwarra and headspace Frankston. "We visited the Dandenong day program, and that was incredible," Leyla says. "There is a high percentage of young mob in that area, so we can make sure they know about these spaces."

Leyla is passionate about ensuring non-Aboriginal organisations like YSAS provide culturally safe services. "I think there's a misconception that Aboriginal people have to stay within Aboriginal organisations, but everyone has a responsibility, including YSAS, to service young people that need support," she says. "It's about making sure young people are safe and empowered, and that their cultural identity and strength is acknowledged and celebrated."



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# Foreword

**This report is about YSAS people and their stories. It demonstrates how in 2024 we continue to find meaningful ways to connect with young people and families and work with them to secure a better future.**

We witness so many of the young people and families that we come to know, finding ways to cope with the pernicious influence of poverty, discrimination, and trauma; often without the resources and opportunities that most people in our society take for granted. Even so, the magnitude and complexity of the problems that some young people and families face can be overwhelming, despite their best efforts to cope.

Each of us at YSAS understands that, in the face of overwhelming adversity, we too could need the kind of services that we provide at YSAS. This gives special meaning to our purpose:

**'To enable young people experiencing serious disadvantage to access the resources and opportunities that they require to lead healthy and fulfilling lives'.**

Our YSAS managers, frontline workers, organisational support staff and Board are unified in our commitment to this purpose in ways that work for the diverse range of young people, families and communities that seek our assistance. Together, we are always striving to improve, and we thank the young people and families who participate with us to ensure that our services are accessible, effective, and responsive to their needs. We value and rely on the lived and living experience of those who use our services and our workers.

We also rely on and greatly appreciate the ongoing support of our funders in resourcing our work with young people and families. The State and Federal Governments continue to make a substantial investment in our purpose, and we are heartened by the contribution in 2024 of the Felton Bequest in providing us with a Flagship Grant to further our work with families.

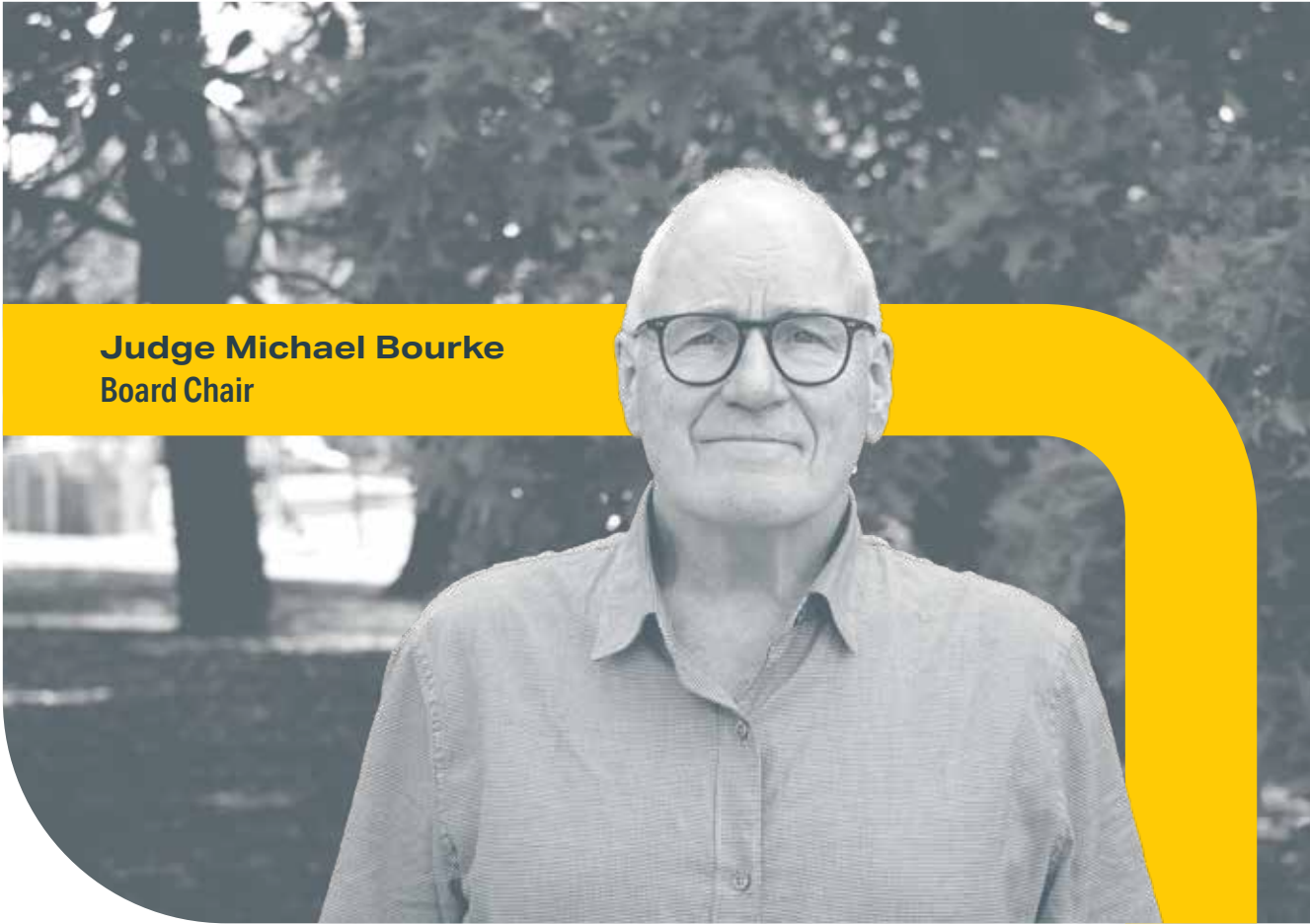
We thank our partners in service delivery, research, and in our advocacy for fair and equitable public policy that is focused on improving the well-being of young people and families.

We greatly appreciate the support of headspace National office and our Peak Bodies - the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria. We also value the collective action facilitated through Smart Justice 4 Young People and the Youth Disability Advocacy Service.

Finally, we are grateful for the ongoing guidance and support provided by our shareholder organisations - The Royal Children's Hospital, St Vincent's Hospital and Jesuit Social Services.



**Andrew Bruun**  
Chief Executive Officer



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



## **Our Vision**

**To create a community where all young people are valued, included and have every opportunity to thrive.**

# Our Directors and Shareholders



**Michael Bourke**  
Board Chair  
Appointed 30th August 2020



**Sean Hanneberry**  
Appointed 9th March 2017  
– 24th February 2025



**Margarita Frederico**  
Appointed 23rd June 2019



**Catherine Buckmaster**  
Appointed 25th August 2019



**Dr Adam Pastor**  
Appointed 30th August 2020



**Jorden Lam**  
Appointed 30th August 2020



**Sarah Ralph**  
Appointed 30th August 2020



**David Murray**  
Appointed 14th March 2021



**Caitlin Gill**  
Appointed 29th May 2023



**Andrew Gay**  
Appointed 11th December 2023



**Sandy Bell**  
Appointed 11th December 2023



**Hugh Tobin**  
Appointed 24th February 2025

### Our Shareholders



**The Royal Children's Hospital**



**St Vincent's Hospital**



**Jesuit Social Services**

# Organisational Support Services: 2024 snapshot

## Creating the conditions for our services to thrive

So much goes into creating the conditions within YSAS for our services to be delivered efficiently for young people and families. We have teams providing organisational support in the areas of Business Support, Human Resources, Workplace Health & Safety, Finance, Information & Technology, Advocacy & Communications, Legal & Compliance, Data Management & Analytics and Quality Assurance.

Most of this work happens behind the scenes by skilled professionals who are as committed to our purpose as our frontline workers.

In 2024, this work was recognised and honoured when YSAS achieved QIP quality accreditation as a Community Service Organisation. Our accreditors requested to use our evidence-informed Practice Framework to share with other organisations as an example of best practice, and we were commended for our industry-leading processes that offer young people and others opportunities to provide feedback and participate in decision-making at YSAS.

Other key achievements in 2024 include:

- Successful implementation of our new Youth-Client Information System (Y-CIS) to help us better record, understand and improve our work and continue to meet our external reporting obligations.
- Full-scale cloud migration and a complete Internet Provider overhaul to ensure faster, more reliable access to essential tools and resources for staff.
- Organisation-wide MS Teams Calling deployment to foster better communication and teamwork across all teams.

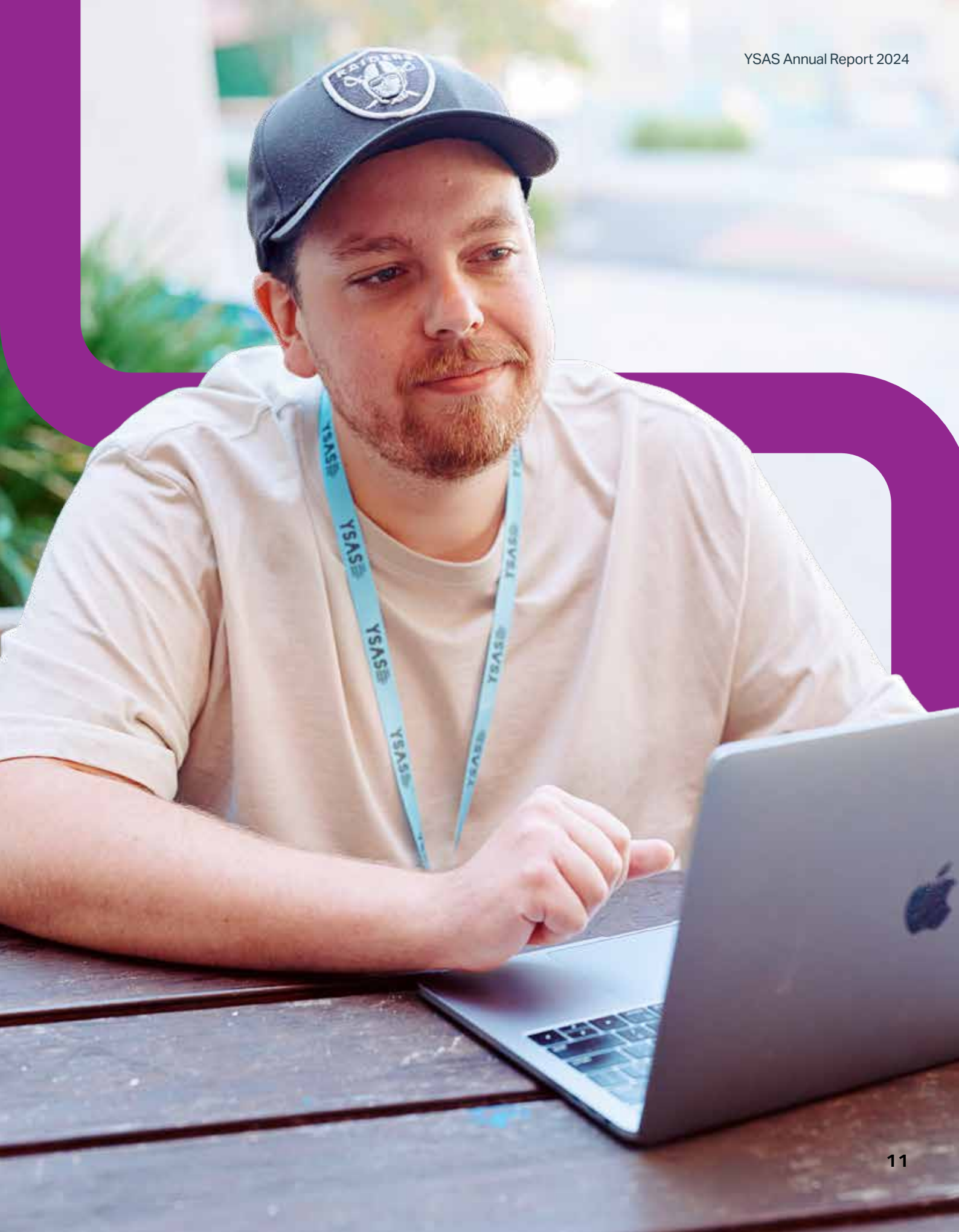
- Introduction of an HR Hub to simplify access to HR services, making processes more user-friendly.
- Payroll process improvements to reduce administrative burdens and ensure accuracy and timeliness.
- A successful Agency Day at the showgrounds that brought the team together to connect and celebrate achievements.

We also relocated our Head Office at a reduced cost, creating a more comfortable and efficient work environment. We thank Telstra for providing us with excellent amenities at a greatly reduced cost, compared to the market.

## Our commitment to Inclusion and Equity

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 building relationships of mutual trust and respect with First Nations peoples, people with disabilities, people who are LGBTIQ+, 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 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.





## Spotlight on: Bianca from Head Office

### A warm, empathetic voice

If you've ever called YSAS Reception, chances are you've spoken to Bianca Walsh. Her warm, calm tone and quick thinking helps callers find the right support fast. "I have to be professional but empathetic," she says. "I need to know when it's okay to interrupt and work out whether they need outreach support or more intensive residential care. I can usually figure that out quite quickly."

Bianca has always loved working. She started delivering papers and doing chemist rounds in Year 5, and she hasn't stopped since. When she discovered YSAS eight years ago, she felt an immediate connection. "It was youth-specific, and I love not-for-profit," she says. "As soon as I saw the ad and had the interview, it felt like a calling."

Connecting with young people comes naturally to Bianca. "I've got nine nieces and nephews, and I have really strong bonds with them," she says. "Young people are the voice of the future—and the now." She also brings personal experience, growing up during Melbourne's heroin epidemic in the 90s. "All my friends went too hard on it and not everyone made it. It was a really hard time."

When she started at YSAS, Bianca was struck by the culture. "It was fantastic. Even people in IT were passionate about the cause," she recalls. She was also inspired by the strong female presence at the organisation. "All the women were friendly and inclusive. I felt more grounded than I had before."

Now, after more than seven years on reception, Bianca has become a go-to source of information. "I'm like a hive of knowledge," she says. But not every call is easy. Some come from distressed young people or family members. She credits an early mentor with teaching her how to reset between calls. "She taught me to mentally clean the slate—just take a deep breath and be fresh for the next one."

People often remember speaking to Bianca, even years later. Just recently, she overheard two teenage boys on a tram talking about a court case. Sensing an opportunity, she gently stepped in and told them about YSAS. One of them called his mum right there and said, "I'm talking to Bianca from YSAS," to which she replied, "I know her—she was the first person we spoke to." The young person then shook Bianca's hand. "I was really proud," she says.

Bianca's role goes well beyond reception. She helps run events, supports projects, and serves as the chief fire warden. But the highlight, she says, is her bond with the executive support team. "Team meetings are fun but productive. We work hard, but I hope it looks seamless."

**"Young people are the voice  
of the future—and the now."**

# Community-based drug and alcohol services:

## 2024 snapshot

### AOD Outreach in 2024

**1462** young people supported

**4681** episodes of care

**48%** of young people were under 18

### Demographics

**9%** Pasifika **8%** African

**10%** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**13%** from other cultural background

## Tackling Alcohol and Other Drug-related harm in the community

YSAS was established as Victoria's flagship Youth Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) 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 online services through YoDAA with statewide coverage and a wide range of services embedded within local communities 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

## Youth AOD Outreach

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.

Our Youth AOD Outreach workers are experts in engaging young people and delivering evidence-based interventions to reduce alcohol and other drug (AOD) related harm. Through assertive outreach, our workers 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 also 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.

Our Youth AOD Outreach teams invest in their communities to ensure they are inclusive for young people and are capable of providing the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. We have deep connections with networks of other health and welfare providers, Centrelink, community legal centres, local government, schools, local traders, politicians and police.

Our teams outpost workers in courts, local schools, headspace centres, homeless services in Corrections and Youth Justice offices. We are also represented on Child Protection High Risk Adolescent and Transitioning Out of Care panels.

Across all our teams we have relationships with local community Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other community-led organisations like AAFRO. We work collaboratively with the Centre for Multicultural Youth and their South Sudanese Community Support Group, Komak (Afghan Community) and Le Mana (Pacific Island Community).

Our teams provide harm reduction-based AOD education Flexible Learning Options (FLO) and secondary schools to support their student wellbeing and local service days.

Youth AOD Outreach teams also promote the engagement of young people in pro-social recreational activities, co-facilitating programs with The Outdoor Experience (TOE) program run by Jesuit Social Services and the Twinning Project soccer program working with women in custody and RecLink.

In 2024, YSAS continued to develop our brief intervention AOD program within Youth Justice for First Nations and mainstream young people. We also successfully partnered with Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) to deliver Youth Enhanced Service (YES) in Wonthaggi.



# Community-based AOD programs

## 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 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 community legal services, employment services and Centrelink.

## 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 to address substance use

related behaviour and risks. Direct care is also provided for young people in Out of Home Care to address AOD-related problems and to reduce harm.

## 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.

## 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 Western Melbourne Primary Health Network (NWMPHN). The Zone offers young people from LGBTIQ+, 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 AOD-related problems.



# The ERIC program

## Emotional skills for life's challenges

Emotional regulation is something most of us struggle with at different times, especially when we are young. "We know that adolescence is a period of time where you have less agency, drivers that differ from adults and there are more developmental changes going on," says Kellie Ferris, Senior Trainer and Practice Consultant at YSAS. "For our young people at YSAS who have often had trauma and too few opportunities to meet their needs, there can be a lot of challenges."

The ERIC program – which stands for Emotional Regulation and Impulse Control – supports young people in managing emotions and impulsivity and making decisions. It's designed for young people with a range of mental health and drug and alcohol concerns.

Kellie says the program, which was created in partnership with Deakin University and YSAS, brings together over 20+ strategies, including motivational interviewing, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and compassion-focused therapies. "It was a big collaborative piece that drew on lots of experience to inform something that offers flexibility".

"We are never saying that the feelings are not to be felt, or are not okay," says Kellie. "What we're saying is there's a bunch of different tools and ways that you can respond to those feelings that might have more desirable results."

There are two main elements of the program. "One is addressing those feelings at the time and supporting people to respond to those feelings," Kellie says. "And the other part is about understanding yourself and what your core beliefs are. It's looking at values, and how you want to behave in the world in a way that reflects those values."

It can be used as a traditional group program, in one-on-one sessions, or in residential settings. "You can take a conversational approach, dealing with something in the moment," Kellie says. "Or you can have quite a complex conversation about something that deals with bigger picture things."

The program is structured into modules so young people can build on their knowledge progressively.

Kellie particularly likes group work with ERIC. "There's something about groups that offers young people something workers sometimes can't offer, like peer-based connection," she says. Creating dedicated spaces separate from day-to-day operations is important. "It can be a really good opportunity for us to get to know just how reflective, intelligent and insightful our young people are. Without those moments, we can miss those bits that demonstrate what a lot of their strengths are."

Ultimately, the ERIC program supports young people to live in a way that's more connected to their values. "I think for all of us, if we don't have the skills, tools and capabilities of sitting with discomfort, we can't put our full minds to making decisions that align with our values," she says.

### What young people who've done ERIC say:

- *"Anger tells me something needs to stop."*
- *"It's good to pull it apart to look at what the urge actually is. It's not to use, it's much deeper than that."*
- *"It makes sense as to why I feel like that and how it's not necessarily a bad thing. It's about when it's useful."*
- *"I work in a shop and sometimes I want to leave because I'm getting stressed. I can see that just counting the number of things someone gets might help me distract and do my job at the same time."*
- *"I haven't even thought about my bigger dreams. I'm always just stuck in SMART goals and going to Centrelink. I need to think more about the big picture and what I want. It's like I've forgotten to do that, this is really good to think about."*

# Victoria's First Drug Checking Service

## Keeping drug users safe

- In 2024, YSAS joined with The Loop Australia, Harm Reduction Victoria, Melbourne Health and Youth Projects to deliver Victoria's drug checking trial alongside the Victorian Government.
- Drug checking is a harm reduction measure where people can submit small amounts of substances to help them determine the contents and strength, so they can make informed choices about what they consume.
- The 18-month trial includes running 10 mobile services at festivals and events, and setting up a fixed site later in 2025.



# Spotlight on: Sarah Hiley

**"I feel so privileged to be part of this drug checking service, with the chance to make a real difference in reducing harm."**



Sarah Hiley knows how life-saving harm reduction can be. She's worked with people who use drugs and alcohol for over 20 years, most recently overseeing Melbourne's Medically Supervised Injecting Rooms and other AOD programs run by the North Richmond Community Health Centre. For her, harm reduction measures like ensuring people who use drugs can inject safely are a no-brainer. "Prohibition hasn't stopped people from using drugs," she says. "If someone is going to take drugs, let's try to reduce the risk as much as possible."

She knew that drug checking (sometimes called pill testing) would help make Victorians safer, by letting them know the contents and strength of their drugs. So, when she was asked to help run Victoria's first-ever drug checking trial with The Loop Australia, alongside YSAS, Harm Reduction Victoria and funded by the Victorian Department of Health, she jumped at the chance. "I feel so privileged to be part of this drug checking service, with the chance to make a real difference in reducing harm," she says.

Sarah leads the implementation of the trial. This includes running a drug checking service at 10 Victorian festivals and setting up a fixed drug checking site in inner Melbourne. The service tests the contents and strength of most pills, capsules, powders, crystals or liquids, identifying dangerous synthetic opioids like fentanyl and nitazenes. Healthcare and Peer workers then talk service users through the results, providing them with tailored information that helps people make safer choices. The service is confidential and anonymous.

Getting the service up and running was no easy feat – the team had just four weeks between the public announcement and delivering their first service at Beyond The Valley music festival over New Year's. Organising the festival involved everything from hiring staff, buying equipment and creating signage,

to organising accommodation and preparing to speak to the media the day before. "I remember Christmas Day morning being on the beach with my partner, he was holding my media statement, and he was like, 'go again, you missed this out, go again'."

After all the hard work, Sarah says it was a "beautiful, overwhelming feeling" to see a queue of people waiting to drop off their samples 10 minutes before the service opened at Beyond The Valley. "There were a lot of young people, and to be able to give them that credible, factual, evidence-based information so they could make informed decisions based on that was pretty incredible."

The statistics speak for themselves. At Beyond The Valley, the team tested over 600 samples, and more than 70 per cent of patrons said it was the first time they had ever had an open, judgment-free discussion about drug and alcohol safety with a health professional. 40 per cent of festivalgoers also said they would use a smaller amount of their drugs following those discussions. Sarah says the lead organisations had the perfect mix of skills and knowledge to ensure the service was a success. "People have given us a lot of trust, and have also been really open in discussing their experiences and wanting to hear back information from us," Sarah says.

The next big milestone for the trial is the fixed site, which will open later this year. Sarah says it will help make the service more accessible. "The fixed service will give us that expansion so that anyone in Melbourne can come and get drugs checked, they don't need to have bought a ticket or be able to afford to go to a festival." Sarah says she's continually energised by the positive impact drug checking is having on Victorians. "It's a huge leap forward for Victoria, and another step in the right direction for harm reduction."

# Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice – YoDAA

**YoDAA, Victoria’s Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice service, is a simple and efficient way for young people, families and the community to get timely therapeutic support and information about alcohol and drug-related challenges.**

YoDAA is an advice line and a website, staffed by qualified youth and social workers with a wealth of knowledge and contacts to facilitate linkages to services. If a referral to another service like a residential rehab or withdrawal service is needed, they’ll do the research required to ensure each young person is referred to the right place – even

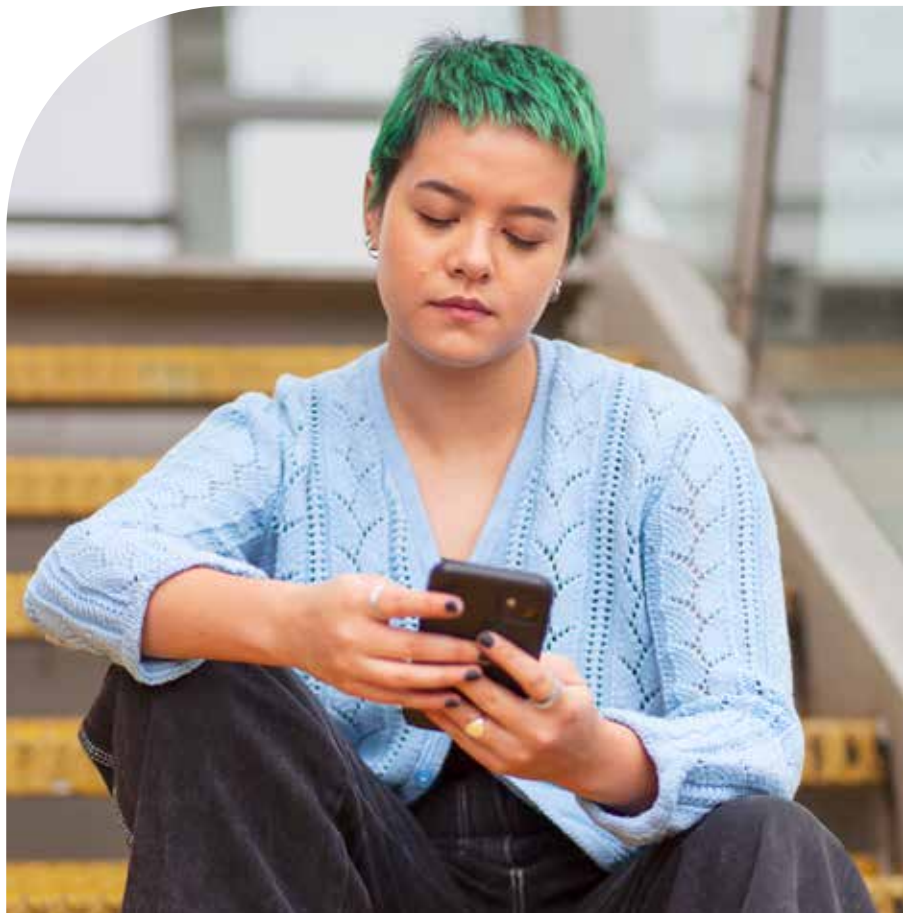
if that takes days and many calls to different services. YoDAA’s focus is on drugs and alcohol, but many of the calls also touch on mental health and family violence, and staff provide support and referrals for those issues too.

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. YoDAA also works with school wellbeing staff and other workers, so they can better help the young people in their care.

In 2024 YoDAA had

**3,664**

phone contacts



# Spotlight on: Kat from YoDAA



**"It could be a parent, a worker or a young person that's really in need."**

## Thinking outside the box

When Kat Kretzschmar answers the phone for the Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA) line, she's prepared for anything. "It could be a parent, a worker or a young person that's really in need," the Senior YoDAA Practitioner says. YoDAA is Australia's only youth-focused drug and alcohol support line, providing information, harm minimisation and referrals. "It's like a stopgap between services," she says. "I feel like I might just be on the phone, but I've given them some really helpful information."

Kat grew up in Tasmania, watching family members struggle with drug and alcohol use. "I was drawn to the work because when I was younger and experimenting with drugs, there weren't a lot of services," she says. "So I was very enthusiastic about supporting young people and helping them not feel shame about it."

In the 10 years Kat has been at YSAS, she's worked in almost every area, including detox, outreach, family programs and management. The most important skill, she says, is connection. "Music is usually the first thing I connect on. If you can connect on those sorts of things that aren't triggering, you can then talk about most things because they feel so much more comfortable."

Kat often has to think outside the box in her work. "I had one young person who was very resistant to wanting to do anything," she says. "So I sat down and just started drawing." After a while the young

person asked if she could draw something too. "And then we just showed each other our drawings and that actually started the connection."

She says that many young people don't have much agency in their lives, so it's important not to force them into anything. "Once they start talking to you and realise we're not asking them to change, we're just asking them to think about what might be impacting them in a negative way, they become more interested."

Kat is currently the senior worker at YoDAA, which involves answering the phones and assisting the manager to support the team. When she answers the phone she's always trying to look beyond the alcohol or drug use. "When there's a phone call, you might hear that the young person is taking a lot of drugs, but you'll ask what else is going on? Are they feeling safe?"

Kat says YSAS has a 'beautiful spirit'. "I think everyone comes from that place of just wanting to be there for young people." She says it's a privilege when young people share their personal, sometimes traumatic, experiences with her. "I love the fact that young people invite me into their world and want to share part of their life with me," she says. "It is a privilege to be invited into that."

# Residential care and support: 2024 snapshot

**310** young people supported

**561** resi programs completed

**26%** under 18 years old

## Demographics

**23%** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**7%** from other cultural background



## Safe spaces to stabilise and grow

### **YSAS provides safe, age-appropriate residential programs for young people who are seeking to gain control over their substance use.**

In 2024, 24% of young people participating in YSAS residential programs were Aboriginal.

#### **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.

### **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.

### **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.

## **Bunjilwarra – a partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)**

Bunjilwarra is a 12-bed residential healing service for young people and families from First Nation communities in Victoria. We are grateful to have VAHS as our partners and couldn't run the service without them.

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.

## **Investment in Bunjilwarra**

In 2024, Bunjilwarra continued projects 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)

## **Thanks to Deloitte**

In 2024, our collaboration with Deloitte continued with their staff nominating YSAS as the focus of their 'Impact Day', whereby staff volunteered their time and effort to make upgrades to the amenity of our Residential Care facilities in Fitzroy and Etham.

# Spotlight on: Trish from Birribi



## Connecting through food

Trish Serratore grew up surrounded by the healing power of food. Born into a big Italian family, her dad owned a bakery and worked as a delivery man for one of the first Italian cheese factories in Melbourne.

"Like many Italian families, we were always obsessed with food," Trish says. "It's fun, it's delicious, and it's just a joyous way to come together."

Trish was working as a chef when her brother-in-law, a counsellor at the YSAS Birribi Residential Rehabilitation, mentioned that a kitchen supervisor position had become available. "He thought I'd be good at it because I'm a people person, happy to engage with anyone," she says. "I'm the type of person who would talk to a stranger on the train."

Nineteen years later, Trish is now an iconic member of the YSAS Birribi team, responsible for meal planning, purchasing and preparation. "I spend 70 per cent of the day behind the kitchen bench, so I get to talk to the young people a lot," she says. Trish also runs groups and programs where young people help with cooking. "It's all about imparting life skills, and making sure that people are fed and watered on budget."

Her role extends beyond food. "Sometimes it's the first time these young people get to experience that sort of family table, where staff will sit down and work stops," she says. "It's about modelling what it's like to share a meal together in a safe environment. It brings people together."

Cooking is also about giving back. "When we do the cooking groups, what they are making is feeding the community," she says. "You can see the real sense of achievement about it." It's also a grounding physical activity: "You've got to be focused, because you don't want to hurt yourself."

Trish values the warm relationships she builds with young people at Birribi. "I'm in that sort of space where I don't have to have those hard conversations, but I've been so privileged to hear so many stories, to hear about their headspaces," she says. "There is no pressure in the kitchen, so everything happens organically and on their terms."

Many return as adults to thank her. "We had young people come back as adults to visit recently, and they spoke about their life now and having Birribi as like a golden moment," she says. "One young person said, 'thank you Trish for not only feeding me but teaching me!'"

When young people become dysregulated, Trish focuses on validating their feelings while maintaining routine. "It's creating that sense of normalcy," she says. "All this is happening but we still have to prep dinner because at the end of the day, you are still going to get hungry. I just stay really present and available."

After 19 years, Trish can't imagine working anywhere else. "I adore the work, I like working with young people, and it's a beautiful place to work on a sixteen-acre bush property," she says. "They'll probably carry me out of this place."

**"One young person said, 'thank you Trish for not only feeding me but teaching me!'"**

# North Queensland Youth AOD

For the first time, YSAS will deliver direct care services to young people and families outside of Victoria. We are extremely pleased to have been invited by Youth Empowered Towards Independence (YETI) and Gindaja Treatment & Healing Indigenous Corporation to partner with them in delivering the new North Queensland Youth Alcohol and Drug Service (NQYAODS), based in Cairns.

Commissioned by Queensland Health, the NQYAODS model integrates community-based Youth AOD outreach with a residential rehabilitation program, similar to Bunjilwarra. The service model was devised by Queensland Health after they had a delegation visit Bunjilwarra 3 years ago, and YSAS provided them with extensive information on the service model and the partnership arrangement with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS).



## YETI

The values and practice approach of YSAS and YETI, as a similar youth-serving organisation operating in Cairns, are closely aligned. Our organisations have a deep and long-standing relationship and YETI invited us to partner with them as they do not provide residential care for clients. We have agreed to do so as a subcontractor to YETI, who will be the lead agency in the partnership and run the community-based Youth AOD Outreach component of the NQYAODS.

YETI has deep local knowledge, strong workforce connections and all of the necessary stakeholder relationships in place to make the NQYAODS a success. Both YETI and Gindaja have experience in providing services for Queensland Health.



## Gindaja

Gindaja is a local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) based in the Aboriginal Shire of Yarrabah. Gindaja is the ACCHO responsible for the region in which the service will be established in Cairns and is a respected AOD treatment provider. NQYAODS is expected to work with a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and families. Gindaja will be the cultural lead, providing cultural programming and connections.

Our residential program will be provided in a purpose-built centre for young people from 13 to 18 years, whereas the broader community-based outreach service will be available for young people up to 25 years of age.



The **NQYAODS** will create up to 30 new full-time jobs in North Queensland.

# Mental Health Care: 2024 snapshot

## + HEADSPACE FRANKSTON & ROSEBUD

### STATS

**1796** unique young people served

**2017** episodes of care

**4.2/5** overall average client satisfaction

**8/10** overall average client experience

### DEMOGRAPHICS

**29.1%** LGBTIQA+

**4.6%** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**6%** Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

## + HEADSPACE COLLINGWOOD

### STATS

**785** unique young people served

**903** episodes of care

**4.2/5** overall average client satisfaction

**8.2/10** overall average client experience

### DEMOGRAPHICS

**51.1%** LGBTIQA+

**4.1%** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

**26%** Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

## Supporting mental health and wellbeing

Each of the services YSAS provides aims to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing. We are fortunate to have a range of services specifically designed to address mental health problems and related concerns.

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.

In 2024, we strengthened clinical leadership across our headspace centres and introduced single-session work in our Intake and Access Teams. This has made a very real difference to both the number of young people we have been able to see, and the timeliness of our response to referrals.

## headspace Youth Advisory Committees (YACs)

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 and run engaging community events. Their feedback in relation to improving access to our Medicare-funded counselling services, and reducing wait times has been influential in our prioritising these areas for development.

## headspace Frankston and Rosebud

Frankston continues to be one of the busiest headspace centres in the country, not only through the volume of core activity, but also through providing an extensive range of integrated services through our own service streams and other co-locating agencies.

The suite of services operating from our headspace Frankston site includes our Medicare Funded GP and Counselling Clinics, The Alfred Youth Early Psychosis Service, our own Bounce Back and Youth Community AOD Teams, Peninsula Health Youth Mental Health Team, and the HEY, IPS Vocational and Aboriginal Mental Health programs.

Our headspace Rosebud satellite has for several years been planning a move into the purpose-built Mornington Peninsula Youth Hub, which is now close to being finalised. This move will bring our Rosebud team closer to the broader community of youth services on the Mornington Peninsula and strengthen the connections and pathways we can provide for young people and their families.

## BounceBack

In Frankston and across the Mornington Peninsula, the BounceBack program 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.

## headspace Collingwood

Our Collingwood headspace centre has also developed strongly in 2024, with Dr Ric Haslam taking up the Principal Clinician role and being the second Mental Health Medical Specialist to join the YSAS Workforce following Dr Lekan Ogunleye's appointment as YSAS Principal Addiction Medicine Clinician in 2022.

## headspace Consortiums

Our headspaces are partnerships providing access to a wide range of essential services for young people and families. Our headspace consortiums are collaborative and provide a strategic focus for our centres.

2024 has seen new Chairs appointed with Kath Ferry taking up the role at Frankston, and Dr Steve Carbone at Collingwood. These appointments, along with the Consortium Partnership Reviews conducted by our own Courtney Gould have been a great opportunity to refocus the work of our consortiums going forward.

We look forward to continuing to build collaboration with our co-located service streams, the other services co-located at our centres, our consortium partners, our YACs, the Primary Health Networks who fund our centres, and headspace National, who continue to innovate and strengthen the headspace model.

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

Our consortium in Collingwood is chaired by Dr Steve Carbone and includes:

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

## Spotlight on: Emily from headspace Frankston



### Seeing young people's potential

Emily Baisman never believed she'd make it to university. "I had really severe mental health for a long time," she says. "I had to drop out of school because of it, and then because of issues at home I left home when I was 16."

Emily experienced homelessness and struggled with substance use before meeting a drug and alcohol worker who changed her trajectory. "I think now how important it was that my drug and alcohol worker at that time really believed in me, because at the time no one really did, I definitely didn't," she says. "That really helped me get to where I am today, and I like taking that into my work and seeing people for what they can be."

With her worker's encouragement, Emily began studying and found work in community services while gradually completing her Bachelor of Social Work. "I finished my degree a couple of years ago and then got a job at headspace Frankston," she says. "I was like, this is my dream job."

In her current role with the BounceBack team at headspace Frankston, Emily provides counselling and case management for young people with complex needs. "It might be a few different diagnoses and some trouble at home, or it might be drug and alcohol issues, or it might be domestic violence happening at home," she explains.

The program's flexibility allows her to meet young people where they are. "I like to have them in the driver's seat," she says. She recently worked with a young person who had cycled through the out-of-home care system. "He'd just been let down by worker after worker, and he really didn't want a bar of it," she recalls.

Emily took an unconventional approach, letting him control the dynamic. "I said 'This is my role, these are my boundaries, but other than that I'm here to be what you need me to be.'" Over several months, their relationship transformed.

"He asked to increase his appointments," she says. "He was opening up and telling me things about his life and wanting to change his thinking. At first he was like, 'I'm really cold', but then after a while he was like 'no, I actually really care about people.'" From there, they began discussing his life aspirations. "I think we all need a purpose," she says. "And it can be something really, really tiny as well."

When Emily first entered community services, lived experience wasn't as valued. "They wouldn't want to hire people who had lived experience because they thought they would cause trouble in the workplace," she explains. By contrast, headspace appreciates what workers with lived experience contribute. "You're really respected and valued, and the managers put staff wellbeing first," she says. "It's a really safe place."

**"I think we all need a purpose," Emily says. "And it can be something really, really tiny as well."**

# Individual Placement and Support program



## Empowering young job seekers

Finding your first job can be tough, something Dan\* is currently experiencing firsthand. The 20-year-old has handed out hundreds of resumes on SEEK and in person, hoping someone will give him a shot. "It's quite frustrating and dispiriting to be honest, because 95 per cent of resumes I hand out, I hear nothing back," Dan says. His vocational support worker Natasha Pearson says employees expect a level of experience most young people don't have. "You're meant to have five years' experience but you finished secondary school five minutes ago," she says.

Natasha works for the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program out of headspace Frankston. Young people getting alcohol, drug or mental health support at headspace who identify employment as a goal are referred to the program. Tash says it's a unique model. "I worked in other employment spaces, and sometimes it felt like you find a job and you try to shoehorn the person into it, not really factoring in that long-term success depends on alignment." Her work focuses on supporting young people to identify their short, medium and long-term goals. It's not about rushing into a job that doesn't suit, it's about slowly building the skills, knowledge and connections needed for lasting success.

Dan started by building up his confidence handing out resumes in person. "Being someone like myself who doesn't have much on a resume, it was about prioritising going in, talking to employers as opposed to having everything done on SEEK," Dan says. "I definitely wouldn't be as confident as I am now without the help of Natasha." Dan has also had the opportunity to participate in mock interviews and sit on an interview panel.

Dan says his autism spectrum disorder is like a 'double-edged sword' when it comes to finding a job. "It helps me stay consistent, arrive on time and persevere through adversity, but on the other hand

it creates a lot of inertia towards trying something new," he says. Dan had his heart set on cartography and later a dream job at the Bureau of Meteorology, and Natasha has helped him broaden his interests to include short-term goals like customer service in the IT and automotive industries.

As part of her work, Natasha approaches employers who might be willing to support young people on their job-seeking journey. One day after hitting the pavement she met Noel Brodie, who runs an IT business in the south-eastern suburbs. Noel didn't have a job for Dan, but he was happy to meet with Dan for over two hours to help him understand the industry better, and where he might best fit in. "From a person in the community who understands that employment is very difficult, it's a very generous allocation of time and effort," Natasha says.

Noel continues to connect Dan with contacts and opportunities in the industry. "He was a really impressive young man," Noel says, "but I think that looking at a resume doesn't necessarily give you that. The important thing is to actually go and meet Dan, and that's important for all young people so they get a feel for what's going on."

Dan hasn't found a job yet, but Natasha knows that with persistence he'll get there. "Even though you do get those closed doors, that's fine, how do we go about it in a different way," she says. In the meantime Dan keeps building skills, learning about his dream industries and meeting with employers face-to-face. "At least it's another person I've met, another conversation to help with my soft skills." Natasha agrees. "The brilliant thing about Dan is his absolute consistency with always showing up, having resilience and enthusiasm," she says. "Over the whole time he's been with the program I think he has grown immensely."

\*name has been changed.

# 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 Nations 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.

## **Dr Lekan Ogunleye: Principal Medical Advisor**

Overseeing and supporting the medical care provided by doctors and nurses is our Principal Medical Advisor, Dr Lekan Ogunleye.

## **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 2024, 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.

## **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, which 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.

## **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.

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
- Mental health medication reviews



# Justice for young people: 2024 snapshot

## Supporting positive change

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)**

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 2024, our EYOP workers:

- Had 1694 engagements with young people in contact with police
- Made 996 referrals to health and welfare services
- Provided 598 consultations on the management of a young person's circumstances

During 2024, the EYOP Needs Screener and Case Prioritisation Guide was developed by Swinburne University and implemented by YSAS. The tool assists EYOP Youth Workers to assess the criminogenic risk factors and vulnerability factors that apply to each young person EYOP engages with and to prioritise these needs and refer appropriately in accordance with the Risk Need Responsivity (RNR) Model.

**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.



**YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICE (YSS)**

**842** young people reached

**868** service events

**EMBEDDED YOUTH  
OUTREACH PROGRAM**

**1342** unique interactions  
with young people

**YSS DEMOGRAPHICS**

**10%** Pasifika

**6.5%** African

**6%** Aboriginal and or  
Torres Strait Islander

Evaluations by Swinburne University's Centre for Forensic Behavioural Sciences and KPMG have found that the YSS program successfully reduces young people's engagement with police and the youth justice system.

In 2024, 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.

- 667 completed episodes of care with young people
- Est 800 referrals to support services
- Est 667 support plans developed

YSS North West was part of a Safe Edges pilot which commenced in February 2024. This pilot operated out of Whittlesea, and played a key role as a panel member that accepted the referral of 20 young people who were known to Victoria Police for various forms of knife crime. Key therapeutic work was applied to address the various forms of risks, and appropriate mentoring and case management was undertaken to improve outcomes for young people. The evaluation of this pilot is promising – 85% of young people involved in Safe Edges did not record any further criminogenic behaviour. The comparison/control group showed that approximately 70% of young people not involved with Safe Edges went on to further offend. We are excited to be part of this pilot beyond 2024 and believe it is a key part of Whittlesea's crime prevention initiative.

**PIVOT** works with young people aged 14 to 22 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 local government areas. The support is long-term, helping to create meaningful and positive change in young people's lives.

PIVOT has supported First Nations young people and others from diverse Pasifika, Asian and African cultural backgrounds.

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 Nations 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 supported.

In 2024, PFF were awarded the Robyn Clarke Making a Difference Award.

The **Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project (YCPEIP)** is co-led by Westjustice & Victoria Police. YSAS is a key partner, together with Victoria Legal Aid, the Courts and the Department of Justice & Community Safety. YCPEIP is funded through Victoria's Crime Prevention Innovation Fund to reduce rates of youth offending and re-offending in Wyndham and Brimbank among young people aged 10-24 years by:

- increasing the use of police pre-charge warnings, cautions and diversion recommendations
- streamlining referrals to legal and non-legal support
- providing community legal and non-legal education to young people and their families

YSAS is proud to be member of the **Target Zero** coalition (also led by Westjustice) aimed at eradicating the criminalisation and over-representation in the justice system of First Nations, African and Pasifika young people, and those living in residential care.



# Transformer program

## Transforming the lives of diverse young people

Rose Deng knows how difficult it can be as a newly arrived refugee in Australia. At 6 years old, she came to Australia from Ethiopia via South Sudan, and says, "there weren't a lot of people like me". Growing up in Australia, Rose experienced challenges including bullying, discrimination and family violence, leading to issues with mental health and substance use. "Through having workers, including from YSAS, they've been able to help me improve outcomes for my life."

Rose now supports other migrant and refugee young people as part of the Transformer team at YSAS Dandenong, alongside Team Leader Mal Ouk and Hendric Tuifelasai. The team provide AOD outreach support for culturally and linguistically diverse people and their families in the southeast region, predominantly working with South Sudanese and Pacific Islander people.

Mal says young people of colour are often caught between their traditional family culture and the Australian culture, which can sometimes be in conflict. "For young people it's about developing an identity that honours both of those," he says. Rose says that for many South Sudanese parents and grandparents, mental health and substance use issues are taboo. "Then you've got the children in the Western world, where you can talk about it and there are services, so they are pulled between two different strings."

Rose says that's why Transformer workers connect with the family as well. "I speak with families where I've given them an insight into mental health and AOD," she says. "What it is, what causes it, and how they can approach their children in a more gentle and more understanding way."

Mal says racial profiling is also something that many of the young people deal with. "It's about how to work through that with young people, and try to keep them positive and not get sucked into the hate, because that's the trap of racism," he says. Rose and her colleagues are all from non-white backgrounds, which makes it easier to build trust

with the young people. It also helps with language barriers. "I can speak the same language as some of the families, so I can relay some information that they won't be able to understand," she says. "What it means is improving outcomes for marginalised groups."

Consistency is a key skillset for the Transformer team. Rose has recently been working with a neurodiverse young person with many complex issues, including an unstable home environment and mental health challenges. "Young people can see it when you show up for them and genuinely care," she says. She also focused on giving the young person back some agency in their life. Through this approach, Rose was able to get the young person connected with housing services and on a mental health care plan.

One of the biggest strengths of the Transformer program is its connection to the Day Program at YSAS Dandenong. It's a space where young people can drop in at any time and access food, laundry facilities, recreational spaces and workers available to chat. Rose visited the space herself when she was a young person. "I think it goes back to Maslow's hierarchy, where it meets the physiological needs of food, shelter, safety," she says. "That is a good space, and that's what I felt when I first came to the day program."

Mal says many young people will come to the day program for months before they are ready to talk about their lives and potentially be referred to a program like Transformer. "There's some kids that you might have to just slowly chip away at, and then six months down the line you have a conversation, and then a few months after that they are ready to book in with a program like Transformer," he says. "There's no other way the universe would let that occur without a day program."

**+ IN FY 23-24, 90 TRANSFORMER CLIENTS WERE SURVEYED.**

**90%** male

**99%** were culturally and linguistically diverse

**12%** First Nations background

**+ BEFORE TRANSFORMER**

**100%** experienced AOD risk and harm

**82%** were engaged in the criminal justice system

**83%** were disengaged from education, employment and training

**+ AFTER TRANSFORMER**

**84%** said substance use had reduced

**72%** said engagement with criminal justice system reduced

**72%** said their capacity to meet basic needs and handle a crisis increased

**84%** said their positive social connections had improved

**72%** said they could better set goals and achieve them

**72%** said their self-worth had increased





# Spotlight on: Sharon from EYOP

**"Sometimes we talk about everything but what's going on just to develop that connection."**

## Creating positive change through connection

When Sharon O'Hehir heads out with a police officer on an evening shift with the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP), she embraces the unpredictability. "For most people that would freak them out, but I've always loved change and the unexpected," the EYOP Team Leader says.

Every night, an EYOP worker accompanies a police officer to meet young people aged 10-24 who have encountered police. The young people can be victims, offenders, witnesses, or vulnerable youth. "Probably the most common job for us is a young person's been arrested and they're in the cells or an interview room, and we'll go and talk to them," she explains.

YSAS delivers two EYOP programs in partnership with Victoria Police—one in Dandenong and another around Werribee. When meeting young people, youth workers conduct an assessment using the bespoke EYOP screener (developed by Victoria Police) based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model. The model examines eight criminogenic risk factors, including antisocial behaviour, substance use, family issues, and educational disengagement.

"We assess the young person to see which of those factors are applicable, and what referrals would help address those factors," Sharon says. "If the young person's bored and hasn't got any activities to do, then we do a referral to some sort of recreational option. Or if they're not in school, we might do a referral to an agency that'll help bring them back into education."

The most crucial aspect of Sharon's role is establishing meaningful connections. "Sometimes we talk about everything but what's going on just to develop that connection," she notes. "It's all those skills in listening and hearing what's happening."



A key strength of the EYOP model is the face-to-face connection, often during moments of crisis. When young people are referred to programs without this personal interaction, they often don't engage. "Whereas with EYOP, you've sat there face to face with the young person, and they will take our calls when we follow up the next day."

Sharon believes it's beneficial for young people to have a non-police presence when arrested. "Just not being a police officer is de-escalating the situation, because we are not wearing a uniform," she says. She says she's learnt valuable skills from police officers experienced in working with vulnerable youth. "So we've learnt from them, and they learn from us with our youth worker skills."

She recalls meeting a young person who was arrested on their 18th birthday. "They were crying and really distressed about it," Sharon remembers. "And I said 'this can be the last time you're here... this is an opportunity to sort all that stuff out and to make a decision to move forward'."

After offering advice about handling their court appearance, Sharon was delighted when the young man excitedly shared his positive outcome. "I was at work the next day and he came running up the stairs, he was really happy to tell me what had happened," she says.

Sharon says the negative stereotypes about young offenders are mostly wrong. "The majority of kids are really wanting a different life," she emphasises. "They want to do pro-social things and fit in and get along with their family, and achieve things."

She considers it a privilege to have potentially life-changing conversations with young people during difficult times. "What I feel most privileged about is meeting young people on what could be one of the worst days of their lives, and being able to create some change for them, to really address some of the things that have created their situation."

# Youth Participation:

## 2024 snapshot

### **Our Youth Participation team strives to support young people involved with YSAS to influence decision-making at all levels.**

They support young people to advise our Board, participate in our strategic planning, assist in our hiring processes, and support 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 youth participation at YSAS 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. They contribute strongly to setting the advocacy agenda for YSAS.

headspace Collingwood and Frankston each have a YAC, and in 2024 our Youth Participation team rebooted the central YAC for YSAS – the CREW. We are so pleased to have welcomed the involvement of 10 new recruits.

#### **Youth Partnership Month and Ideas Days**

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 2024, the team Ideas Day greatly increased the number of young people's voices that were heard. We conducted 'Ideas Days' across 15 YSAS sites, where 74 young people shared their views on the key issues that YSAS needs to address, what makes a good YSAS worker and improvements that YSAS can make.

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.

In 2024, we farewelled former Youth Peer Advocate Tamlynn Collins who gained employment as a graduate social worker with Peninsula Health. Our other former Youth Peer Advocate Georgia Willmott became our Youth Participation Practice Leader, and we employed Lucia Herrera and Kayla Marshall to join Daniel Robinson Croft to complete our team of three Youth Peer Advocates. Together, they worked with Georgia and Robyn Freestone from the YSAS Quality and Service development team to refine and document our Youth Peer Advocate lived-living experience employment model, ready for expansion.

Youth Peer Advocate Daniel was central to our advocacy for drug law reform, particularly focused on the decriminalisation of substance use and the successful campaign to make drug checking legal in Victoria. He was prominent in our public advocacy with the media.

In 2024, we also published our Lived and Living Experience Workforce Framework and were successful in our application to become part of the Department of Health-funded Lived-Living Experience Workforce Learning Collaborative.



# The Lived and Living Experience Framework



## Supporting workers with lived experience

**In 2024, YSAS launched our Lived and Living Experience Workforce Framework. It has been designed to guide our efforts to develop and incorporate lived and living experience expertise as a formally recognised, applied and supported skillset within our workforce. The 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.**

The first time Youth Peer Advocate Kayla Marshall met a lived and living experience worker, it changed her life. "I didn't know that those kinds of roles existed," she says. "And just the way he was able to use what he's been through and turn it around in such a positive and helpful way for other people was inspiring." Kayla says the worker was able to truly empathise with her experiences, and his own story of overcoming mental health struggles gave her hope. "That's what inspired me to want to go working in the sector."

Kayla is now helping to develop and implement YSAS' Lived and Living Experience Framework, a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Young people have also consistently told YSAS that they value lived and living experience workers.

Youth Participation Manager Robyn Freestone says YSAS has a long history of youth participation, but has never had a document outlining its approach to embedding a lived and living experience workforce. "Workers and staff need systems to support them," says Robyn. "If a designated lived experience worker comes into the organisation, without systems and processes and scaffolding around them they may not have any confidence that the organisation has really considered how to support them well and nurture them."

Robyn says the framework outlines a longer-term vision for organisational change, especially because lived and living experience in the workforce has historically not been formally recognised. "It's actually about transformational change," she says. "It is about valuing lived experience as an expertise that runs equally alongside academic qualifications."

Without the framework, Robyn notes, business-as-usual practices like police checks can become traumatising. "If we're setting up processes right at the entry point to the organisation that are traumatic experiences, we need to make that process more inclusive, respectful and sensitive."

Kayla and Robyn are currently participating in a Lived and Living Experience Workforce (LLEW) learning collaborative run by experts from SHARC (Self Health Addiction Resource Centre), Yale University and LLEW development expert Dr Louise Byrne, and funded by the Department of Health. The collaborative teaches organisations how to best support workers, including around cultural change, recruitment, and professional development for lived and living experience staff.

"We'll be leading the implementation of things that we learn," Kayla says. YSAS also has an HR team member in the collaborative to help ensure HR processes are informed by a lived and living experience lens.

Robyn credits the increasing prominence of lived and living experience in workplaces to the hard work of consumers over decades. "We stand on the shoulders of giants who have really worked hard to get this stuff in place," she said. "They've worked really, really hard against all sorts of adversity to have lived experience recognised and valued."

Kayla says overall, YSAS is incredibly supportive of lived experience workers. "I've never worked for an organisation that cares so much about youth participation, and empowering young people who want to work in the sector to pursue lived and living experience roles."

**"I've never worked for an organisation that cares so much about youth participation, and empowering young people who want to work in the sector to pursue lived and living experience roles."**

# Ideas Days 2024

## Embedding the voices of young people

Here's what young people said about YSAS and advocacy in 2024.



### 1. What makes a good worker?

- Lived and living experience
- Holistic understanding and awareness
- Non-judgemental and relatable
- Transparency and honesty
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Building trust and consistency
- Human connection and supportive approach
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Cultural and intersectional awareness
- Empathy and active listening



### 2. What's good about YSAS services?

- Harm reduction approach
- Youth voice and advocacy
- Therapeutic and educational support
- Connections with multiple services
- Supportive, non-judgmental environment
- Safe, youth-centred spaces
- Accessibility and flexibility
- Cultural connection and inclusivity
- Lived and living experience workers
- Community connection and outreach



### 3. How could YSAS services support you better?

- **Enhancing time and service accessibility and flexibility**
  - Increase digital and early intervention support options
  - Implement more flexible scheduling
  - Enhance follow-up protocols
  - Improve communicating change
- **Address resource and structural gaps**
  - Advocate for increased housing support
  - Expand employment and educational pathways
  - Broaden legal services
  - Integrate comprehensive healthcare services
  - Expand outreach services and create or connect with drop-in services in underserved areas
- **Increase young people's involvement and cultural relevance**
  - Encourage awareness of feedback mechanisms
  - Expand culturally specific programs
  - Continue consistent cultural competency training
  - Support staff with improving communication and trauma-informed skills



### 4. What barriers/ issues in your community should YSAS advocate to change?

- **Harm reduction and substance use safety initiatives**
  - Naloxone availability and education
  - Safe injecting rooms and drug testing kits
  - Harm reduction education
- **Destigmatisation and public awareness**
  - Challenging stigma in services and media
  - Focus on a range of stigmatised substance use
  - Empowering young people through advocacy
- **Structural change**
  - Housing advocacy
  - Family/carer and community engagement and family violence advocacy
  - Combating racism and social exclusion

Lucia Herrera can still remember their first Ideas Day. They were a client at the time, and they'd been asked to share feedback for YSAS along with young people at YSAS Dandenong. "It was just really fun to hang out with other young people who use the service as well," they say. "I had a chance to talk about things that I wasn't totally happy with, or ways I would have liked for the service to help me better."

Lucia now helps run Ideas Days at YSAS every year, as part of her Youth Peer Advocate role. "There's an 's' at the end now because it's not a single Ideas Day like it used to be." In 2024, Lucia and the Youth Participation team visited 15 YSAS sites across Victoria, getting feedback from 74 young people.

"Ideas Days are so important because YSAS is all about the young people," they say. "I just don't see how we can make sure the service is tailored for young people if we don't speak to young people about it. It's really important for us to make sure the resources are accessible, service delivery is helpful, and that there are different options available depending on what young people need."

The team puts a lot of effort into making sure young people feel comfortable at Ideas Days. They bring snacks and sensory toys, and have started sharing a bit of their own lived experience as well. The team starts out by asking the young people what makes a good YSAS worker, what they like about YSAS and what they think could improve.

Key suggestions this year included making services even more accessible and flexible, addressing resource and structural gaps, increasing young people's involvement in decision-making in the service, and enhancing workers' cultural awareness.

The young people were then asked about the issues in the community that affect them badly and what advocacy areas YSAS should focus on. "This year young people were talking a lot about harm reduction, naloxone and drug checking," they say. "Stigma was a big one too, and tackling that stereotype and negative public perception." Many young people also brought up issues with housing.

Lucia says it's always a privilege to hear young people's stories. "Some young people were so vulnerable and there was so much strength in that," they say. "Then it was just so beautiful to also see another young person acknowledge that, and say 'thank you so much for sharing that with us!'"

Lucia says the ideas are then pulled into a report by YSAS Youth Participation Practice Leader Georgia Willmott. "The young people have some incredible ideas that are super, super helpful," says Lucia. "We use them to plan our 2025 advocacy priorities and what program and service changes we are all doing during the year."

**"I just don't see how we can make sure the service is tailored for young people if we don't speak to young people about it. It's really important for us to make sure the resources are accessible, service delivery is helpful, and that there are different options available depending on what young people need."**



# 2024 AOD Trainee program

## Creating supportive employment pathways

Stacey grew up seeing how helpful YSAS workers can be. "Watching YSAS support my brother really drew me in," she says. "My brother still to this day talks about how crucial the support was. It also gave me a lot of empathy for young people struggling."

Despite dreaming of becoming a support worker, up until recently, Stacey was managing a restaurant with no clear route into the sector. That changed when she got a YSAS traineeship.

Traineeship manager Danny Alcock explains the programme's purpose: "It's an initiative by the department to try and create a pipeline for employment in the drug and alcohol sector."

In 2024, YSAS won state government funding to support three trainees to work and study at the same time. The focus was on candidates facing employment barriers. "We've got three women with lived experience of drug and alcohol and mental health issues, and they're all young mums," Danny says.

Stacey and Cassie, two of the 2024 trainees, were placed at the Frankston and Ringwood YSAS sites, completing their AOD studies at the same time. Their training involved shadowing mentors, attending conferences and gradually taking on small caseloads. "Now they're contributing to team meetings and case reviews," Danny says. "It's been amazing how far they've developed."

Both trainees thrived in their placements. Cassie describes feeling completely at home: "I felt like I really fit in there, they've all been so supportive. I don't think I've ever had a job before that I actually enjoyed getting up in the morning and going to work every day." Stacey says it was truly the most amazing experience: "the team culture was so beautiful and supportive at Frankston and Dandenong. My young people were so amazing."

Beyond site mentors, traineeship coordinator Esther Benz provided additional support. Cassie credits this support as crucial: "She would advocate for us, support us and listen to us." Stacey acknowledges that "my success in this role would not have been possible without the support of Esther and Cody Cochrane-Weiss. I often reflect on whether I would have made it through without the support of my team."

Esther says the trainees enhanced organisational practices: "They're great with critical thinking. We really do need to continually question why, and you definitely want the perspective of someone who has used services."

The skills the trainees learnt were invaluable. "It's important to get the certificate, but it's far outweighed by the ability and the knowledge they've learned in the traineeship," Danny says. Both Stacey and Cassie are looking forward to continuing their careers in the sector, and in 2025, YSAS is supporting four new trainees. "I think continuing the traineeships in the future is going to be really valuable," says Stacey. "I feel privileged and honoured to work for an organisation whose values completely align with me."

**"We really do need to continually question why, and you definitely want the perspective of someone who has used services."**





# Family Matters

In 2024, the **Felton Bequest** has awarded YSAS a Flagship Grant to enable families who care for young people who are involved with YSAS 'Drug and Alcohol' and 'Crime Prevention' programs to:

- Be safe and well
- Maintain protective and mutually supportive relationships with their children
- Develop and access the resources (including services) and opportunities that they require to create a better future with their child

Through this initiative, families come together to provide each other with mutual support that reduces feelings of stigma and isolation. They work with YSAS to provide each other and other families with:

- Information on managing risks and staying safe
- Advice on communicating with and staying connected with their child
- Guidance on navigating the service systems and, where possible, linking them to the ongoing assistance if required

Our Family Reference Group also helps YSAS improve the accessibility and effectiveness of our service offerings and recommends other service system improvements.

## A message from the YSAS Family Reference Group

We're a group of caregivers (you could be a parent, grandparent, aunty, any type of carer to a young person). We support each other and contribute our ideas and views to YSAS. We hope, as people with living experience, to influence how services are provided for families and young people.

The quotes below communicate some of what this group has meant for us:

- *"I couldn't have these conversations with other people. When you speak to someone who's actually gone through similar things. It's just a whole different level of understanding."*
- *"I feel each week is that there is that real sense of community just with us".*
- *"Before I used to not say things or not tell people about what was going on and once we started talking I thought: 'stuff it, I don't care what people think because I know I'm trying to do a good job.' I'm not going to hide or be ashamed, I'm just going to be honest."*
- *"It makes me feel very proud to participate and to hear from YSAS workers how powerful our words are – that makes me feel really good."*



# Research & Practice Development

**The Research and Practice team is integral to 'Quality and Service Development' at YSAS and in building the capacity of health and welfare services to provide care that is accessible and useful for our young people and families.**

## Professional development

The YSAS Research and Practice team delivers professional development for the YSAS workforce and seeks to build the capacity of other service providers to address the needs of our clients in a compassionate and effective way.

Our 'Learning Link' is an internal 'Learning Management System' for our staff and our team also provides them with a comprehensive training calendar and 'Reflective Practice Groups'.

YSAS provides organisations and practitioners outside of YSAS with intensive, in-person training programs working with Youth Justice, Child Protection, Launch Housing, Berry Street and other Out of Home Care providers through the Centre for Excellence and Child and Family Welfare.

In 2024, YSAS was also instrumental in delivering the 'youth component' of the ELEVATE Training Program for the AOD sector in Victoria – funded by the Department of Health.

## Research

YSAS has a Research Reference Group that assesses potential research projects and provides guidance on developing research initiatives and partnerships, ensuring alignment with YSAS values and strategic priorities.

Our team is well supported by:

- Professor Emerita Margarita Frederico – La Trobe University
- Professor Joanne Bryant – University of NSW
- Professor Sarah MacLean – La Trobe University

Further, YSAS has formal, enduring partnerships with Latrobe University and the University of Melbourne through the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Orygen Youth Health.

Below are the key research and practice development projects that YSAS and partners undertook in 2024:

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

The GRACE study is a Victorian Department of Health-funded randomised controlled trial that explores whether extended-release guanfacine can help young people gain control over cannabis use problems and make the most out of other psycho-social and clinical treatments. There are no effective medications for people with cannabis problems. YSAS is partnered with Orygen Youth Health.

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

YSAS partnered with UNSW, Latrobe University, Kings College London and Noffs Foundation to secure an Australian Research Council ARC Linkages Grant to study how resources and opportunities can best be made available to support young people exiting residential AOD treatment to maintain positive health and developmental outcomes.

### **Young Women's experiences of Intimate Partner Violence**

This Monash University PhD Candidature project is focused on understanding more about how young women who have experienced intimate partner violence understand and describe what has happened to them. This research uses mixed methodologies (Qualitative and Creative) and a Practitioner Researcher approach.

### **Improving service system responses for young people who inhale volatile substances in Australia**

Volatile substance use (VSU) involves deliberately inhaling products such as petrol, sprays and glues to become intoxicated. The aim of this partnership project with Latrobe University is to understand young people's experiences of the services they encounter as a result of VSU. The study is being conducted in Victoria and the Northern Territory where different VSU policies apply. The aim is to make recommendations on how services can work together to better support these young people.

### **Interventions for young men and boys using IPV (Intimate Partner Violence) in early relationships.**

Family Safety Victoria has funded a partnership of YSAS, University of Western Sydney, Swinburne University, No to Violence, and Drummond Street to find out how to effectively intervene in the use of intimate partner violence (IPV) by 16 to 25-year-old young men.

### **Preventing violence against young women exposed to the criminal justice system**

Although 70-90% of young women involved with the criminal justice system have experienced violence victimisation, there are few violence prevention programs designed for them. The University of Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI), Murdoch Children's Research Institute – Justice Health Group and YSAS have created an evidence-informed intervention that prevents violence against young women who are involved in the justice system. YSAS Researcher Bianca Johnston and our YSAS Youth Advocate Research Assistant Tamlynn Collins presented findings at the National ACSO Criminal Justice Conference.

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

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. Despite established links between ACEs and adverse health outcomes, their specific impact on socially excluded groups is poorly understood. The study reviews literature from multiple databases to assess the prevalence of ACEs, their relationship with health and mortality outcomes, and the role of resilience in these populations.

### **A systematic review of the efficacy of interventions targeting functional outcomes in young people with substance use problems**

University of Melbourne Substance Use Research Group Orygen partnered with YSAS to deliver this systematic review, which identifies intervention/ 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.

### **Single Session Family Consultation training package with Bouverie Centre**

YSAS and La Trobe University's The Bouverie Centre have developed an approach to Single Session Family Consultation (SSFC) for Youth Services. Together, we are producing an SSFC training module (due for release in July 2025) that will enable widespread take-up of this approach in the interests of promoting better care for families.

# YSAS Agency Day 2024

## Celebrating our work together

**Agency Day 2024 brought all of YSAS together to showcase our work under the theme 'Together We Thrive'.**

Local comedian Aurelia St Clair kept up the vibes as host for the day. Uncle Tony Garvey gave us a wonderful Welcome to Country, reflecting on the importance of conversation post the No vote and how treaty works.

Keynote speaker Bonnie Dukakis shared her journey to becoming CEO of Koorie Youth Council (KYC) and the incredible work that they are doing. We are currently partnering with KYC to improve our work with Aboriginal young people and families, an important step for us to walk alongside First Nations people.

Representatives from each of our service streams then gave an update on their areas, including Mental Health, AOD (Alcohol and Other Drugs), the CREW, Crime Prevention, our Residential sites and Head Office.

Highlights included:

- Videos of young people sharing their positive experiences at YSAS.
- A live panel with our 2024 AOD Trainees, talking about their lived experience and passion for the sector.
- The CREW's moving tribute to Chantelle Hughes, a beloved former CREW member who sadly passed away in 2024.

- A live Q&A with Crime Prevention Manager Ray Jackson about the future of crime prevention.
- Former Bunjiwarra Manager Kylie Weiss reflecting on the joy and privilege of watching Aboriginal young people find and connect with their culture, and how transformative this is.

CEO Andrew Bruun then took the stage to announce our Recognition Award winners.

Congratulations to our winners:

- Values Award:  
**Adam Harrington**, Fitzroy Residential
- Excellence in Practice Award:  
**Kathrine Topilnicki**, Sunshine AOD
- Innovation and Improvement Award:  
**Northern AOD Team**







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