

Jess' story¹

Jess is in her early 20s. Her experience of out-of-home care included periods in kinship care and residential care. She now lives in transitional (supported short-term) housing.

Jess provided a timeline of important events in her life and told us about her experiences and views. This information is presented below in Jess' own words as much as possible. To protect her privacy, some identifying information has been removed.

Timeline

2001–2002	Went into care as a toddler.
Until 2011	In and out of care, kinship, emergency respite
2011–2013	In kinship care
2013	In (psychiatric) hospital, and that's when I entered the residential units. I moved from one to another, had a few temporary placements, but maybe 4–5 units
2014-2016	Was discharged from hospital into a long-term placement, which I stayed in for those two years
2016	Moved to semi-supported accommodation after referral from a psychologist. Stayed there from August until November. Then the only other option was a resi (residential care unit) in [an unfamiliar regional area], which was a long way from where I was, and they only had male staff on at the time they were going to send me. I refused to go to a place I didn't know, without my medication and with only male staff on... After that, the only place they had to put me in a hotel for a night, then they had to put me into a 'high risk' unit.
Mid-Dec 2016– Feb 2017	In the 'high risk' unit, then got a placement in a lead tenant unit with [a funded agency]
Mid-Feb 2017– Oct 31 2017	[The support agency] proposed to fund some private rental, but DHHS refused it. That was the time I moved into my unit now, that was at the end of 2017
From Oct 2017	Now been in this transitional housing with uncertainty around what day I would have to move out. I was supposed to be out, but for some reason the housing worker hasn't heard anything from [the organisation], so we are just continuously looking at other options... It was very stressful thinking I'm gonna be kicked out to nowhere.

Discussion with the Commission

At what age did you leave care?

Officially, I left care at the age of 18, but I was 16 when I first moved out [to lead tenant setting].

¹ 'Jess' is a pseudonym chosen by the young person to protect their privacy.

Was this decision to leave care in your hands?

At the time when you were 16, they started to look for places to move you out to. At the time my psychologist found this place that was housing and was around mental health... So they put in a referral and I was in within like a month.

How'd you feel about that?

Well I was like it's housing and I won't be on the streets so whatever. And it was only very cheap, so I wasn't thinking anything else. But then my resi workers it turns out didn't think it was the right time for me to move out – I've spoken to them since and they said they weren't allowed to say anything to me about how they didn't think it was the right time to move out. It was a bit rushed. Like when I was 14 my housemate from the resi got moved into a hotel when they turned 18 so I was basically just like I don't want that to happen to me.

I was living in a residential unit at the time and we had been looking for somewhere I could move into as a transition out of care and I was offered a spot at a semi-supported accommodation for those aged 16-25 that suffer from mental health issues. The cost was only \$60 a week and you could live there for up to a year. I lived there while still being case managed by [out-of-home care provider] but after three months ended up being moved into a high-risk residential unit in [outer suburbs].

The semi-supported accommodation wasn't suitable for me at time and the only resi that had a bed available [that wasn't far away from my networks] was unfortunately with high-risk kids. After a month in this place I was accepted into the Lead Tenant² program run by a different organisation.

Did you feel you were able to have input into the decision to move?

As for the amount of input I had when I moved out, both times I felt a lot of pressure... I feel as though I didn't get a lot of say. Where I moved to at 18 was the best option as it was the most affordable and secure but unfortunately it was also somewhere I didn't want to live as the other tenant had turned the unit upside down. I did have the choice to turn the property down but at the same time, if I did that, I would have had no place else to go. So, although I did have some choice in where I ended up living, it was very restricted as I really didn't have many options.

Do you know of young people who had a positive experience?

Unfortunately, I don't know of any young people that have had a positive experience with finding housing when they have left care. The ones I know have ended up in refuges and dodgy boarding houses. There was even a situation in which the other young person I was living with was put up in a hotel for the weekend when she turned 18 because she had no place to go. That was almost six years ago.

² Lead tenants are volunteers who live rent-free with young people in a shared household to create a safe and supportive living environment which supports their transition to independent living.

What would you change in the system?

If I could change the way things were within the leaving care system, it would be the amount of support we are provided after we turn 18. Instead of suddenly taking away supports I would have slowly reduced them. We may legally be adults, but most 18-year-olds have family and friends that can support them, we don't often have that luxury.

What is your current situation?

My current accommodation is not very stable. I was originally given a 120 [day] notice stating I needed to be out in July [2019] but was then told I no longer had to worry about the date as I had no place to go and they wouldn't allow me to be homeless.

At this stage, I am still needing to move out. I have been meeting with my housing worker fortnightly since July [2019] but have yet to find somewhere suitable to live. We have re-applied for Office of Housing with a priority application, but I've heard the wait list for priority is up to 4 years.

Due to my anxiety and other mental health issues, shared accommodation isn't suitable for me and private rental is well out of my budget and so I'm stuck on where to go. Although I am able to stay where I am for the time being, I don't know how much longer I can stay here as tenants are only supposed to live here for up to two years and my two years has passed.

What would you like to say to the homelessness inquiry?

I think the Department needs to realise that although we may legally be adults and able to rent at 18, it is extremely hard to get approved for a property with no rental history, especially at such a young age. Yes, there are options out there but there aren't enough. Office of housing has a long wait list, private rental isn't affordable and if you can afford it, it's unlikely we will get accepted due to our age and lack of a rental history. Boarding houses may be a roof over our heads, but they aren't always safe. There are more young people exiting the system than there is housing available.

I believe the Government needs to increase the age young people leave care, as well as re-thinking how quickly they reduce our support network once we are coming of age. To add on to this, 17-18 is when most young people are in their final year of school and it is stressful enough for students without the added stress the Government is placing on us when they expect us to find housing.

It definitely needs to be over 18. What family kicks someone out at 18 and says enjoy? Even when you're looking for rentals – when you look at your credit rating it's gonna be lower cos of your age and then when you look at a private rental you won't have a good history, so you won't get picked over someone who's older who will be more responsible or whatever.

What supports would you like?

A lot of what I would like is outreach support, not so much to do with housing in particular... like also I don't know what – like I know in the south eastern programs we have the 'Better Futures' program. Springboard used to exist but now it doesn't... Monash has taken over the

Better Futures, but they should have just stayed with Springboard. I feel like they had the ability to do outreach etc, but now they have a much higher client load, and less workers, plus there is all these limits on what they can pay for etc. I was going to miss out on a great educational opportunity as there were difficulties accessing the funding.

I have a Better Futures worker. For a period of time I had a Springboard and a Better Futures worker, then they rolled into one. It was better when I had one of each because it kept things separately. When the program was changing over, they were obviously still learning how the program was working which meant delays and things... like I guess it's helpful in some senses but it woulda made more sense to keep [it] separate. I know now it just means they have way more client load and not as many workers which makes things more stressful not only for us but for the workers I suppose.

I think with Better Futures there's a higher expectation for us to do everything. Like they have funding, but they can't come out and give us practical support and help us out, but they will pay for things, I feel like it's like a human credit card.

If I could say one thing to the Government, it would be for them to put themselves in our shoes. Imagine what our lives would have had to be like to end up in care, imagine the difficulties we have faced and then imagine the difficulties we continue to face because the Government isn't doing enough to support us.

I would also like to add that even affordable housing isn't affordable. A one-bedroom unit under the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) is no cheaper than any other one-two bedroom unit that is not under NRAS.

What's the ideal scenario from your point of view now?

Something safe, affordable that isn't falling apart... pretty much... just the basic things... don't really want a mansion or anything.