

Barry*: My story

I have been in care since early 2018. However, Child Protection has been involved with my family on and off since 2008. I have one sibling who is younger than me who's in foster care.

My experiences have led to me being in kinship care, foster care, and residential care. Out of the three, my most positive experience has been residential care. I think Residential Care is the best because you know where you stand from the start.

My family is as dysfunctional as the Gallagher's from *Shameless*, but that doesn't mean I want to forget my roots. Family remains family. My experiences have meant that neither of my parents were able to be responsible for me. My father is deceased, my step-father is a child molester, but through all of that bad, I've got good.

When news first broke that I was going to a residential care unit, well it was like a cat trying to bark, it wasn't going to happen. I tried everything I could to not go. I'd never been to one before so my case manager (CM) was trying to say, 'you'll be fine.' After all of the stories I heard, my plan wasn't to go. The alternative was a date with the boys in blue. When I was taken to my first residential unit, my expectations were very different to reality. After being in residential care for over a year and being through a couple of different houses, I can say that I love residential care.

I'm terrified to leave residential care. When the day pops around that I get kicked to the curb, I wish there was a way around it. Reality is I have to leave someday, we all do. Residential care has and always will be a big part of my life. It's been crucial to my development in every way possible. Residential care has made me the person I am

today. I've been in residential care longer than other care settings and it's helped me in so many ways, it's given me so many great memories, it's given me a temporary family and when the day comes that I move on, I don't think I'll be ready for it. I don't know if I'll ever be ready to be alone. It's going to be a really hard day.

For when that day that comes along that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Uniting move me on, they have supports in place. I've got better futures, I've got carers slowly teaching me how to cook, swim. I've got the L2P Program which'll help me get my driver's license in the near future. Plus, the relationships I have now, I'm sure I'll still have them when I leave so I'll still be able to fall back on them when things go up shit creek or if I'm feeling lonely and need a chat. As for a support I'd like, I'm not sure whether DHHS do this or not, I think it'd be nice if once a week or fortnight, a carer from your old residential unit swung past and checked in. Made sure you were okay and gave you support if you needed it.

Deciding what my out-of-home care (OoHC) experience looks like just depends. My old CM thinking that he was Jesus never gave me a say — he didn't even tell me what was going on until the last minute. Ever since crossing over to Uniting and DHHS being the big brother, I've had more of a say. The adults around me actually listen to what I have to say. Even in the situations where I haven't had a say, I've still trusted my CM, my house's team leader, the therapeutic specialist and Uniting's residential services manager in all decisions made on my behalf. I know that they always have my best interests at heart so if they make a decision, I trust it.

I think that the Government announcing people can be in residential care until they're 21 is the best thing that they have ever announced. Eighteen is a stupid age to leave care. If you were at home living a normal life any caring parent isn't going to kick you to the curb and that's how it should work for OoHC. If you're ready at 18 and your care team agree then, 'ciao'; but if you need [to stay] until you're 21 and your care team agree, then just stick around and your care team can find you a supportive placement that'll suit you. Reality is, no teen especially a OoHC teen is ready to get out of dodge at 18. They may say they are but it's not always the truth and sometimes they might not be safe on their own. Our brain doesn't stop developing until we're 25. Twenty-one is closer to 25, so I think the closer to 25 we get out of Dodge the better. As for if it'll personally impact me, I hope that Uniting and my care team realise that I'm scared and need to be in care as long as I can ride it out. I'm scared of being alone especially with how my mental health is. Sure, right now it's fine but it can go from being fine to being unpredictable. Life isn't always peaches and cream, so I could be good one day and hanging the next.

If you're still in care when you pass 18, additional supports should be provided. Sure, you're living in care but more could be offered. Like how they do it now, when you turn 16 they start giving you the L2Ps, teaching you how to cook basic stuff, helping you budget your Centrelink, etc. When we turn 18, it should be similar but more advanced. For example, they should do driving lessons with us, they should make us do things more independent, like transport if we're going to the shops or appointments or anything. We need independent skills, because we're not going to have a ride at our

disposal all of the time. I also think that they should heavily assist us in getting a job so that on top of Centrelink we have a stable income, so that we have the money for a place to live.

I think that if the young person (YP) were being vocal about not having a place to go to when we get the boot, the department could offer temp housing even if it's a Housing Commission house, it's something. If the YP isn't being vocal, there might be reasons they're not speaking up. Mainly embarrassment. I know I'd be embarrassed — also stubborn — so I wouldn't say anything. YP need to know that there's support if they need or want it.

If I had the opportunity to talk to the people designing the extended leaving care program? Well, I'd make sure that they're thinking about us not

themselves. Politicians need to know their policies affect our life directly.

If agencies are offering OoHC for the ages 18 to 21, feedback must be sought from the YP that are affected. What can the department do in the last four years of their life in care? Make sure that the YP know that someone is looking out.

My hope for the future? What is it I desire? A lasting legacy. I want to be the first in my family to not waste their life. I want to accomplish something.

I aspire to be better, and as much as I spend most of my time being critical of DHHS, they've turned me into who I am today. My care team, my experiences in OoHC, and my former Assistant Principal, they've turned me into a better man. They've turned me into someone

honest, someone who genuinely cares for the people around him, someone who would walk through hell for the people he cares for, someone selfless. Someone that would face their greatest fear and sacrifice themselves for a loved one or someone they care for.

Someone that tries to help people if they need it, no matter if they've wronged him before or if it's a complete stranger. Someone that when people talk about him, they use him as a good example. Someone that one day can help YP overcome the same challenges I've overcome. Shitty parents and DHHS. I can only hope that that is what the future holds. No one knows what the future holds. That's what deep down I truly desire.

* Barry is young person living in a therapeutic residential Care home managed by Uniting Vic.Tas

