



*Thriving Families Project  
Evaluation Report:*

# FROM CRISIS TO THRIVING

March 2021

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## Thriving Families Project Evaluation Report: From Crisis to Thriving

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## Executive Summary

### Context and program description

YFS initiated the Thriving Families Project in 2019 to trial a new way of working with families experiencing homelessness, that aimed to back and resource families to move from crisis to thriving.

The YFS Board approved the use of reserve funds for two years to develop a small, multi-disciplinary team bringing together a Housing Specialist and Family Coaches. The service design was informed by an extensive review of the literature on what works for homeless families to thrive, interviews with YFS clients about their experiences of the service system, staff consultations and a review of YFS program outcomes. YFS worked in partnership with Logan Together, the Community Services Industry Alliance, the Yunus Centre at Griffith University and Pathways to Resilience to design the service model.

The Thriving Families Project set out to test two key theories, based on this evidence and experience:

1. **An integrated approach is needed to achieve rapid housing outcomes and provide longer-term support** to address underlying issues and sustain stable housing – leveraging the opportunity that a crisis presents to engage a family in work with a longer-term focus.
2. **Workers who see their role as a resourcer and change agent are likely to maintain families' engagement and motivation** to pursue longer-term change because:
  - a. the family defines what “thriving” means for them
  - b. the worker backs the family to pursue goals that are meaningful for them
  - c. the worker intentionally builds in efforts to help parents and children increase their skills and capacity to cope while working with them on their goals and priorities for change.

Existing government-funded housing or family support programs often address either homelessness or family aspirations but commonly struggle to show long-lasting improvement across both domains, resulting in families churning through the service system.

### Participating families

The Thriving Families Project targets families with children aged 0-5 who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing it for the first time. The team worked with 35 families, including 56 children, in its first 18 months. The majority of participants were young (under 26) single mothers. 20% identified as First Nations. Approximately two thirds were homeless at the time of presentation and one third was at risk of homelessness. Other issues reported by families when they sought support included financial issues, mental health and domestic and family violence concerns.

### Evaluation scope

This evaluation aimed to identify outcomes achieved by the Thriving Families Project, and synthesise key learnings about service design and delivery for future work, in particular:

- what works for homeless families to thrive?
- what is required to deliver effective integrated services?

The evaluation covers the first 18 months of implementation from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2020. Data sources that informed the evaluation include participant, staff and stakeholder interviews, case notes and program data.



## Key findings

### **Outcomes and impact**

Evaluation findings demonstrate significant positive change in the lives of participating families. The service appears to have had transformative impacts for participating parents and their children, with many well on their way to thriving. Participants unanimously indicated they were better off now than they would be without the program. Key impacts were:

- sustained stable housing: 32 of 35 participating families stabilised their housing, most entering tenancies in private rental
- increased personal confidence and capability: all participants reported improvements in self-esteem, coping ability and practical skills
- improved understanding of child development: outcomes included greater parent confidence, closer relationships and enhanced child health and wellbeing
- stronger social connections: many parents increased their network of informal supports, an essential ingredient for sustaining change, as a result of participating in Thriving Families.

The program aimed to resource participants to move from crisis to thriving. The most common theme in parents' description of thriving was "creating a better life for their children", ending cycles of trauma and disadvantage they had experienced themselves. To achieve this, they identified desires to meet basic needs, achieve a sense of wellbeing, have happy healthy children, contribute through purposeful activity and feel optimistic about the future.

For many participating families, the road to thriving is a bumpy one. The stress associated with homelessness and histories of trauma, exclusion and disadvantage have long-lasting impacts that continue to render families vulnerable. This manifested in the Thriving Families Project as participants weathered critical life events, confronted the impacts of trauma and navigated unhealthy or abusive relationships. These challenges reinforce the need to provide longer-term flexible support for families that extends beyond addressing the housing issue.

### **Cost benefit analysis**

The evaluation identified added value associated with the long-term, integrated approach provided by Thriving Families, including enhanced sustainability of outcomes and greater progress towards thriving. In the long term, this is likely to reduce the burden on government-funded services by reducing the likelihood of repeated experiences of homelessness and preventing further entry into tertiary services.

This evaluation's scope and resources did not allow an in-depth analysis of cost benefits, but evidence indicates that the service is cost effective and outcomes achieved are likely to generate long-term savings – or avoided future costs – including through:

- reduction in repetition of homelessness, reducing costs not just in the homelessness system but also flow-on costs in services such as health, justice and welfare
- diversion of participants to private rental rather than public housing, reducing costs to government
- preventing child safety involvement or escalation
- improving employment and education prospects for both parents and children.



## **Learnings: transforming future service delivery**

The Thriving Families Project trial and its evaluation set out to answer two broad questions:

**What works for homeless families to thrive?**

**What is required for effective service integration?**

### **What works for homeless families to thrive?**

Thriving Families demonstrates that the approach used was effective due to two key strengths:

1. Integration of housing and family support: the multi-disciplinary team embodied the 'housing first' principle that rapid housing combined with support will lead to sustained tenancy. Participants engaged with the service because a housing issue prompted action. Meeting that need quickly while gaining families' buy-in to work on causal and inter-related issues and build capacity proved more effective than a siloed approach with a housing service meeting the initial need then referring to a family-focused service for ongoing support.
2. A family resourcing approach for long-term change: coaching-oriented approaches that explicitly aim to resource families for ongoing success generated strong engagement and the potential for long-term change. Through Thriving Families and other initiatives, YFS has developed a Family Resourcing Framework that recognises the need for workers to adapt their way of working depending on a families' circumstances and needs at various times. This includes adopting coaching-oriented approaches in pursuit of parents' goals for themselves and their children and more directive case management approaches in times of crisis or risk. The evaluation identified factors enabling long-term change:

- *responding to needs* – delivering the right services, at the right time and in the right way
- *building relationships* – to engage, support and challenge families
- *parents setting the direction and pace of the work* – enabling choice and control
- *building resilience* – facilitating parents' and children's positive adaptation to adversity
- *working with intention* – applying focused, purposeful effort and attention to build the skills and mindsets necessary for sustained behaviour change
- *individualised support* – tailoring the service to suit varying levels of need, capacity, and motivation
- *navigating the service system* – using a combination of supported referrals and strong partnerships to help each family access mainstream and specialist supports.

### **What is required for effective service integration?**

A unique aspect of this project is the Housing Specialist role that is positioned alongside the Family Coaches. These roles require very different skills and orientations – housing specialists have to work fast and focus on tasks and action, coaches take a long-term view and aim to enable families and build their capacity over time. For the team to harness families' motivation and keep them engaged once they are housed, working together from the start is critical. Integrating these functions well takes concerted effort.



**Factors that the evaluation found effective for delivering integrated services were:**

- *strong leadership and management* – including the investment of resources and support
- *a shared team purpose* – for families to thrive
- *culture and practice* – to harmonise the significant cultural differences between traditional approaches to housing work and family support work
- *conflict management* – to disagree respectfully and value each other's contribution
- *fluid rather than fixed roles and responsibilities* – so the team can support, back up and reinforce each other
- *transparency of information* – so everyone is aware of the families' situation and next steps
- *systems and processes* – that set out key tasks over the support period
- *seamless communication with families* – this appears to have worked well from the families' perspective.

**Implications and application**

The evaluation identified opportunities to improve and expand the current Thriving Families model, as well as elements of the model that could be applied more broadly and learnings that can influence policy, program design and commissioning.

Maintaining the model as a stand-alone service will require attraction of ongoing funding. If this is achieved, the team and future participants may benefit from:

- further developing group activities
- recruiting a First Nations worker to the team, if possible
- refining eligibility, intake and referral processes and timeframes
- developing effective ways to provide ongoing "light touch" or "step down" support for families
- ongoing focus on strategies that promote positive, sustained behaviour change.

Expansion options include trialling the effectiveness of this integrated coaching and specialist model with other cohorts and in other contexts, for example:

- with other groups experiencing homelessness, e.g. young people exiting out of home care
- with groups experiencing crises other than homelessness that could benefit from an approach integrating specialists and workers with a broader relationship-based approach, e.g. substance use or domestic violence
- adding additional specialists to a larger team working with people experiencing homelessness e.g. a domestic violence specialist, employment specialist or family therapist as well as a Housing Specialist.

Options to embed elements of the model in other services at YFS or beyond include:

- adding housing or other specialists to existing generalist services such as family support or youth engagement teams to build integrated service models
- adopting learnings from the development of the family resourcing framework in other teams, adding coaching approaches to their ways of working.

Opportunities to influence policy, program design, and commissioning relate to sharing findings from the Thriving Families trial to encourage greater emphasis on integration and removal of barriers to integration caused by funding or program silos.



## Recommendations

It is recommended that YFS:

1. Continue to develop the Thriving Families model, seeking ongoing funding to continue the team and:
  - a. Refine current elements of Thriving Families, particularly group work, intake processes and the 'step down' phase
  - b. Enhance the service's emphasis on education and employment, functional relationships, 'family-to-family' peer support and therapeutic support
2. Continue to trial innovative service responses across different contexts and cohorts with varied levels of intensity
3. Share and embed learnings across YFS' services, particularly related to early intervention, service integration and the family resourcing approach
4. Advocate for flexible funding across program silo's to design and deliver services based on what works.

## Conclusion

Overall, YFS has successfully developed and implemented an integrated housing and family support service.

This evaluation indicates that Thriving Families:

- is effective in engaging and meeting the needs of families, moving families from crisis to stability and providing a strong foundation for thriving over time
- is cost effective in providing integrated housing and family support services compared to separate provision of support
- could potentially reduce the burden on government funded services through intervening early and preventing further entry into tertiary services.





## 1. INTRODUCTION

YFS backs vulnerable people to overcome adversity and to thrive. Underpinning this purpose is the recognition that integrated ways of working are required to address complex issues and barriers facing vulnerable families. To this end, Thriving Families was designed to test an integrated approach to working with families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, with a view to inform further service integration and innovation at YFS.

Thriving Families was funded by the YFS Board for two years (July 2019 - June 2020) from reserve funds to give the project the best possible chance of success. Self-funding the project allowed it to operate without the constraints of external funding guidelines. YFS worked with Logan Together, the Community Services Industry Alliance, the Yunus Centre at Griffith University and Pathways to Resilience to design the service model.

Thriving Families aims to create sustainable change for families experiencing homelessness so that they can create stable homes and nurturing family environments where all family members can flourish. The service is delivered through an integrated, long-term, flexible, and aspirational approach that combines a Housing Specialist with Family Coaches. The team works together to provide a fast response to the housing crisis coupled with ongoing support to address underlying and emerging issues and equip families to deal with future adversity.

Thriving Families has been operating for 18 months and has supported 35 families in that time. This evaluation aims to identify any impacts resulting from Thriving Families and key learnings about effective service design and delivery.

This report presents the findings of the evaluation, documenting why YFS initiated the project, how it was designed, what it involved and who benefited. The evaluation reviews sources including program data and input from participants and stakeholders to analyse the impact and value achieved.

The report identifies learnings for YFS and others about how to improve, expand and embed the elements that contributed to positive outcomes from the project. It makes recommendations to improve YFS services across the board, and advocate for changes to funding and policy.







## 2. EVALUATION APPROACH

This evaluation aims to:

- identify any changes resulting from program activities
- identify learnings about working effectively with homeless families to achieve positive sustainable change
- identify learnings about the design and delivery of integrated services
- assess the overall effectiveness of Thriving Families relative to other initiatives.

The evaluation builds on learnings from the interim evaluation (completed in May 2020).

It covers the first 18 months of implementation from 1 July 2019 to 31 December 2020.

The evaluation drew on a range of data sources, including:

- ongoing learning and reflection
- staff interviews (5)
- participant interviews (12)
- stakeholder interviews (9)
- case studies (3)
- case note review (35)
- analysis of program data.

Participant and stakeholder interviews were conducted by independent evaluators to ensure integrity of responses.

Program data and qualitative feedback were triangulated for coherency of findings. There was a high level of consistency across data sources, lending validity to the findings.

A detailed methodology is available in Appendix A.



## 3. CONTEXT

- Thriving Families was based on an extensive developmental process, drawing on evidence, experience and the voice of families.
- The service model comprises a multi-disciplinary team of a Housing Specialist and Family Coaches
- It aims to intervene early in people's experience of homelessness and the service system
- The integrated, long-term approach is designed to address immediate, underlying, and emerging issues
- Workers use a family resourcing framework based on building relationships and skills as the foundation for sustainable change.

### 3.1 SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

*What would it take for vulnerable families to thrive?* This question guided the development of Thriving Families. There were several key phases to the development process:

- exploration
- design
- establishment
- initial implementation
- interim evaluation.

A key feature of the project's design and implementation was partnership with stakeholders, who provided valuable insights and support that helped shaped the service. The project is relatively early in its development, given it generally takes up to four years to fully conceptualise and implement a new program or service (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). Accordingly, Thriving Families continues to evolve as it incorporates new learnings and refines its approach.

#### 3.1.1 Exploration

In 2018, YFS together with the Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA) and Logan Together began exploring innovative ways to effectively help vulnerable people achieve long-term change. This exploration built on the learnings of YFS' Sure Steps program, an initiative funded by the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy, trialling a family coaching approach to working with families with young children who are living in public housing and experiencing tenancy difficulties. The Sure Steps project reference group (including representatives from YFS, Logan Together, and the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy) subsequently broadened its mandate to focus on innovation strategies for Logan families and was a valuable resource in the exploration phase.

Emphasis was placed on addressing adversity and building capacity in order to meet needs and create a foundation for thriving. This represents a fundamental shift in emphasis from 'managing' families to 'resourcing' them to achieve their own goals. This requires working holistically, across generations, over time. A fragmented service system makes it difficult for organisations to work in this way. Funded programs largely operate in silos focused on particular presenting issues, rather than being structured around the needs of families (Hogan, 2017; McLachlan et al., 2013).





This approach may alleviate the immediate need but fails to address inter-generational cycles of trauma, poverty, and disadvantage.

It was recognised that a more integrated, or 'joined-up' approach to service delivery was required to achieve better outcomes for families. While there is widespread agreement on the value of integration for improving access, efficiency and effectiveness of services, there is little consensus on how to best integrate services and very little evidence documenting successful integration (Brackertz et al., 2016).

Thriving Families was created to test and demonstrate:

- what works for homeless families for thrive
- what it takes to deliver integrated services.

### 3.1.2 Design

Detailed design work for Thriving Families began towards the end of 2018. This was informed by:

- an extensive literature review investigating good practice
- learnings from existing service innovations and integration efforts across YFS
- a review of outcomes data from YFS programs
- interviews with clients about their experiences of the service system
- a person-centred design workshop facilitated by Ingrid Burkett from the Yunus Centre at Griffith University.



### 3.1.3 Establishment

The Thriving Families team was established in mid-2019 consisting of three Family Coaches (2.6 full time equivalents) and a Housing Specialist, overseen by a manager shared with the Sure Steps family coaching team.<sup>1</sup>

The first month included intensive training and team building, including:

- training provided by Pathways to Resilience based on their Early Years Child and Family Wellbeing program (Wings to Fly), adapted for YFS to include working with families
- exploration of housing and family coaching roles
- engagement with community stakeholders and potential referral partners
- development of appropriate tools and resources
- finalisation of the monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy.

This helped to develop a shared understanding and sense of ownership of the project by the implementation team.

<sup>1</sup> Team size was subsequently reduced for the second year of implementation as the Housing Specialist was spread across two teams and one Family Coach resigned.



### **3.1.4 Interim evaluation**

An interim evaluation was prepared in May 2020 to inform the second year of implementation (covering the first nine months of implementation from 1 July 2019 to 31 March 2020). Its focus was on the initial implementation phase, early outcomes, and opportunities for improvements. Key learnings were used to shape future design and direction.

In addition, some successful elements were subsequently incorporated into an existing YFS program. The Step by Step Young Families Program adopted both the focus on resourcing families, and the integration of a Housing Specialist. This provides another opportunity to test and refine what works, this time with a different cohort, and with external funding. Learnings from these two trials will further inform the drive towards integration work across YFS teams. Ultimately it is hoped these learnings will influence government policy, program design and commissioning.

## **3.2 PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

The Thriving Families Project aims to create sustainable change for families experiencing homelessness so that they can create stable homes and nurturing family environments where all family members can flourish. The service targets families with children aged 0-5 who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing it for the first time. Eligible families must have a genuine interest in the service offerings beyond housing.

Key elements incorporated into the service design were:

- an early intervention strategy – both in the experience of homelessness and in the lives of children
- an integrated, long-term approach – to address immediate, underlying, and emerging issues
- a family resourcing framework – based on building relationships and skills as the foundation for sustainable change.

### **3.2.1 Early intervention strategy**

The program adopts an early intervention strategy intended to intervene early in the experience of homelessness and give children the best possible chance of growing up in a positive family environment.

Housing and homelessness is a significant issue in Logan, accounting for approximately half of all contacts to YFS. If unaddressed, homelessness is often repeated as families can cycle in and out of insecure and inappropriate housing (Micah Projects, 2012). Intervening early in families' experience of homelessness increases the likelihood of sustained stable housing.

Homelessness is very damaging for children. It can have a significant impact on children's wellbeing and development, with long-term implications (Dockery, A. et al., 2013; McLachlan, et al., 2013). Intervening early in life offers the best opportunity to disrupt this negative trajectory as 90% of brain development occurs before the age of six (Warren, 2017).

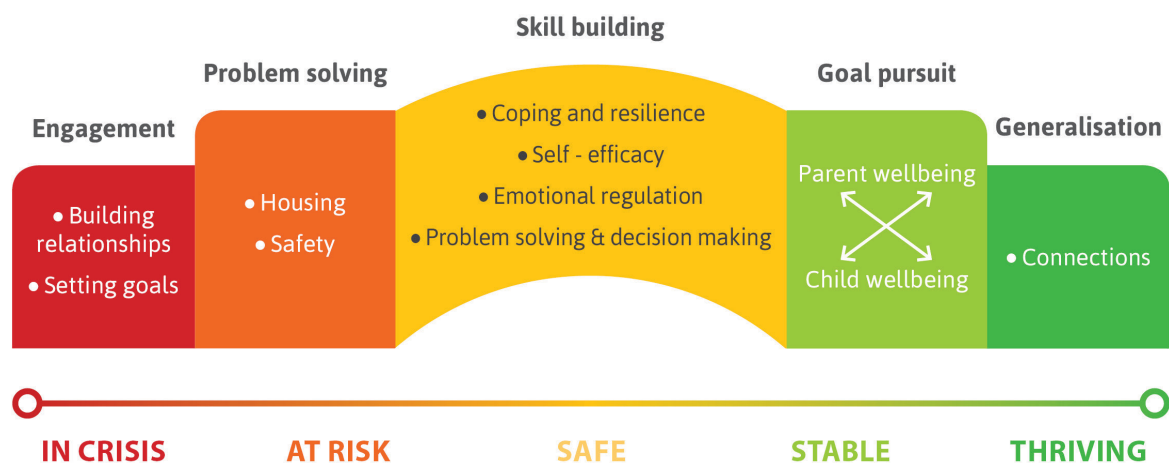


### 3.2.2 Integrated, long-term approach

The program is delivered through an integrated, long-term, flexible, and aspirational approach that combines a Housing Specialist with Family Coaches. The team works together to provide a fast response to the housing crisis coupled with ongoing support to address underlying and emerging issues and equip families to deal with future adversity.

One of the key elements of the model is the intentional skill building component designed to 'bridge the gap' and shift the emphasis from addressing adversity and crisis towards strengthening capacity, resilience, hope and self-efficacy (as depicted in figure 1 below). These are critical enablers of change on the pathway to thriving.

**Figure 1: Service model**



### 3.2.3 Family resourcing framework

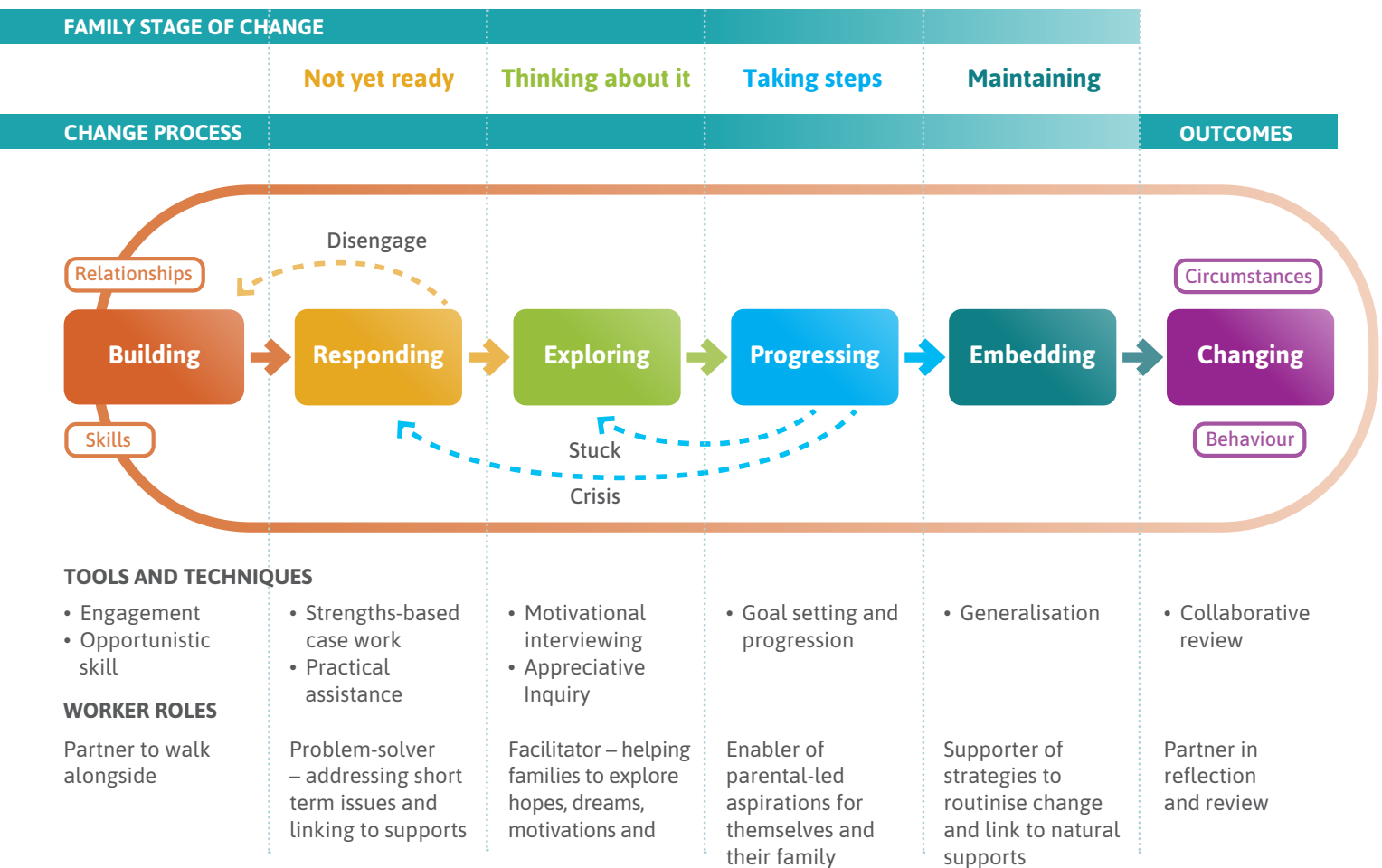
The program supports families along their pathway to thriving by resourcing them with the knowledge, skills, and ability to respond to adversity and pursue goals. Family resourcing:

- is whole-of-family-focused, parent-led, strengths-based, and solutions-focused
- builds relationships and skills as the foundation for change
- recognises that change is not a linear process
- draws on different tools and techniques to suit families' needs and readiness for change, which may include strengths-based case management, motivational interviewing, family coaching and group work
- requires practitioners to adopt different roles in support of families at different times
- requires programs and funders to enable flexible, individualised support.



These principles and practices are encapsulated in YFS' Family Resourcing Framework as depicted below.

**Figure 2: Family resourcing framework**



## 4. PARTICIPATING FAMILIES

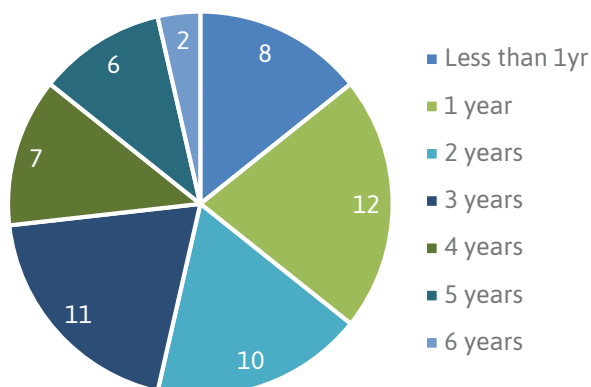
- 35 families participated from July 2019 to December 2020
- Most were single mothers with one or two young children
- Two thirds of families were homeless; the rest were at risk of homelessness
- Most were dealing with significant other issues including financial, mental health and domestic and family violence concerns
- Most had experienced long-term trauma and disadvantage.

### 4.1 PROFILE OF PARTICIPATING FAMILIES

To date, 35 families have participated in Thriving Families. Of these, 20 are currently engaged and 15 have finished working with the program. The majority (80%) of participating families were single parent households (27 single mums and 1 single dad), although several have since re-partnered. The remaining 20% were couples with children. The average age of participating parents was 26, with two thirds of primary carers aged 26 or younger (as at the end of December 2020).

Families typically included one child (17 families) or two children (15 families). Three families had three children. Altogether, 56 children were supported by the program. This includes 10 children who were born during the families' engagement with the program. The majority (73%) of children were aged three or under (as at the end of December 2020), however, children's ages were fairly evenly spread across the early years, as per Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Age of children**



Seven primary carers identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (20%), however, 12 families had at least one Indigenous family member (34%). This is a higher representation of First Nations people than in the Logan population (3.2% in the ABS 2016 Census), however, is on par with other YFS family support programs. Two families were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (6%). This is a lower representation of cultural diversity that the general Logan population (18.2% of Logan residents spoke a language other than English at home in the 2016 Census).



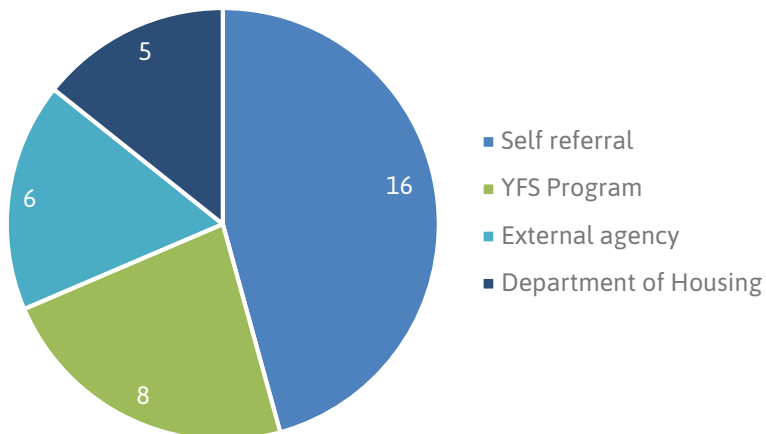




#### 4.1.1. Referral source

Participants most commonly self-referred to YFS' intake and assessment team YFS Connect (accounting for 46% of referrals as per figure 4 below). The remainder were either referred from another YFS program (Intensive Family Support, Assessment and Service Connect, Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare and YFS ParentsNext), external agencies (Wesley Mission, the Benevolent Society, Queensland Health, Kingston East Neighbourhood Group) or the Department of Housing.

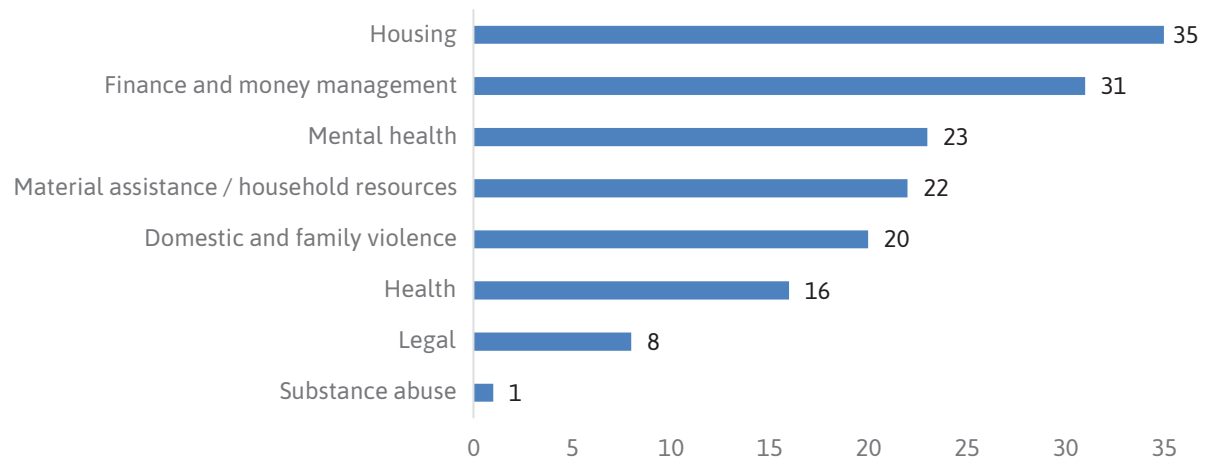
**Figure 4: Referral source**



## 4.2 PRESENTING ISSUES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

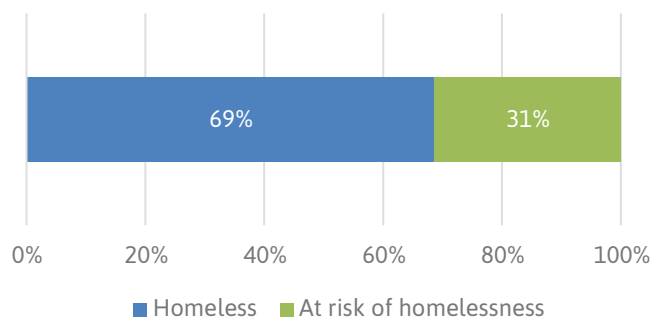
Housing was the primary reason participating families initially sought assistance (as per figure 5 below) with most families experiencing multiple issues.

**Figure 5: Presenting issues**



Approximately two thirds were homeless at the time of presentation and one third was at risk of homelessness (as per figure 6 below).

**Figure 6: Housing status on entry**



Participating families faced deep economic disadvantage. At the start of service:

- 89% presented with a financial and/or money management issue
- 86% reported experiencing financial difficulties in the previous month
- 94% were reliant on Government payments as their main source of income (one family had someone in the household working and one had nil income)
- The average weekly income was \$665, far below the national median of \$1,701 (ABS, 2019), placing all households, except the one working, in the lowest quartile (\$0-\$745 per week) of Logan households (ABS, 2016).

In addition to housing and financial issues, there was also a high prevalence of mental health and domestic and family violence (as shown in figure 5 above). These issues can both contribute to and stem from the experience of homelessness, which is associated with a range of individual risk factors and structural disadvantages (Guarino & Bassuk, 2010). For many participating parents, these vulnerabilities began in childhood. Growing up in chronic adversity disrupts development, undermines coping skills, and increases the risk of violence, poverty, and homelessness in adulthood (Cash et al., 2014). This context of trauma and disadvantage results in complex situations and needs that extend beyond the presenting issues, many of which only emerge later. The project's emphasis on responding to trauma was a response to these realities.

In general, participating families were consistent with the project's intended target group, particularly its early intervention strategy. All participants were either experiencing homelessness for the first time or were at risk of homelessness and all children were aged under six at the time of commencement. However, it is worth noting that early intervention does not necessarily equate to low complexity. Indeed, homelessness is associated with complex causal factors and many participants presented with high and complex needs, as noted above. Yet the high volume of self-referrals suggests participants were highly motivated to change their situation. This aligns with Thriving Families' other eligibility criteria, which is a genuine interest in service offerings (including housing and ongoing support) and a willingness to take part.





## 5. IMPACT: FROM CRISIS TO THRIVING

- Participating families achieved tangible gains and substantial changes at practical and personal levels, with increased stability, capacity, and connections
- Thriving Families appears to have had a profound and transformative impact in the lives of participants and their children, with many well on their way to thriving.

### 5.1 CHANGES RESULTING FROM THRIVING FAMILIES

Participants were asked to describe the changes they have experienced since working with Thriving Families. The changes they identified relate to:

- housing and financial stability
- confidence and capacity
- parenting and child development
- social connections.

Change in these areas was also observed by program staff and stakeholders and is supported by outcomes data.

#### 5.1.1 Housing and financial stability

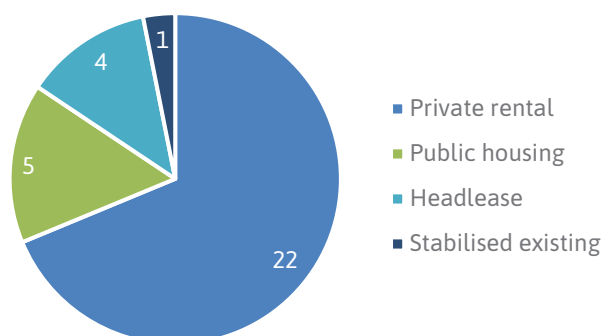
Thriving Families stabilised housing for 32 of 35 participating families, a 91% success rate. By comparison, specialist homelessness services nationally report 68% of clients were housed following support in 2019-20 (AIHW, 2020).

Housing outcomes included 31 new tenancies (the majority in private rentals) and one instance where the existing tenancy was stabilised (see Figure 7).

The predominance of private rental solutions reflects strong partnerships between Thriving Families and a network of local real estate agents, and the Department of Housing's Rent Connect team as well as the families' capacity to pay at Logan prices at the time, and the limited availability of public housing. Private rentals can provide families with more choice, more family-friendly neighbourhoods, but less security of tenure.

Around one third of families moved into public housing or a private rental property headleased by the Department of Housing. These housing solutions were facilitated in partnership between Thriving Families and the department's Logan Housing Service Centre.

**Figure 7: Housing outcomes**



Of the remaining three families, one moved out of the area, one disengaged and one is still engaged in the program but is focusing on other priorities. Thriving Families can rapidly activate housing support, should this become a priority.

Housing and financial stability are closely linked, especially when considering participants' extremely limited financial resources. The program is conscious of housing affordability and works with families around budgeting, setting up Centrepay for rent and electricity and reviewing Centrelink entitlements. This sets families up with the best possible chance of tenancy success (from a financial perspective). Where families have complex financial situations or problem debt, they are referred to a YFS financial counsellor for specialist support.

Participating families described feeling like they were back on their feet, financially secure, able to pay rent, bills and buy food, able to save for Christmas presents or to buy a car.

*“ Having a house with furniture and support to get to where I am are the biggest changes that have happened.”*

*“We’re finally back on our feet... we have a house with a yard, kids are happy, we’re safe, I can afford Christmas presents.”*

*“More stable than ever from when we first started. Back then we struggled to pay rent, put food on the table. Now not a problem and we’re financially secure.”*

The impact of secure housing and a newfound sense of a safe and stable home on the lives of families cannot be understated. One Family Coach observed a significant change in a child's physical health and behaviour resulting from stable housing.

*“One mum has a four year old who is off the scale behaviour wise ... I saw a physical change once housed and the behaviour calmed right down as soon as housing was stable.”*



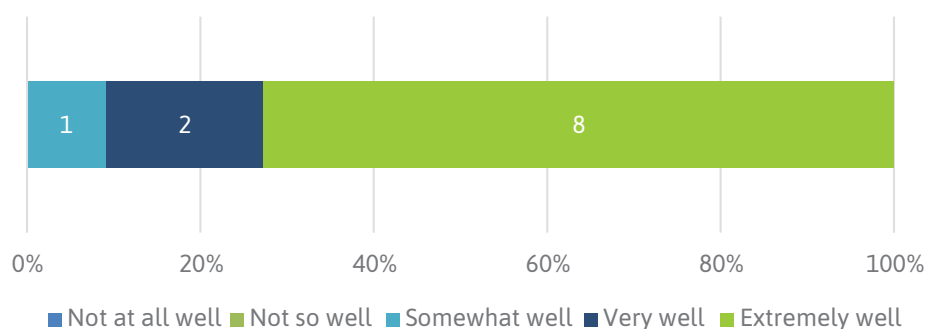
### 5.1.2 Confidence and capability

Thriving Families identifies and creates opportunities for parents to develop their capacity for independence in a scaffolded way. This includes practical skills such as completing a housing application and liaising with real estate agents as well as skills that help build long-term resilience to mitigate future bumps in the road, such as:

- coping with daily stress
- managing negative emotions and anxiety
- caring for self
- experiencing joy
- recognising patterns of behaviour
- believing in self
- dealing with conflict
- communicating
- co-regulating with children
- developing supportive relationships
- advocating for self and child
- initiating and completing tasks
- hope for the future
- planning and prioritising
- goal setting and goal-directed persistence
- decision making
- problem solving.

When asked about how well Thriving Families helped them learn things that will help in the future, all participants responded positively (see figure 8 below).

**Figure 8: Extent of learning**



Key learnings identified by participants, were personal, parental, and practical in nature.

- **Personal capability** – through support, encouragement, and positive reassurance to foster a sense of self-worth. Participants felt they were better able to stand up for themselves and do things on their own.



*[The] family coach encourages and reassures me when I am doing well."*

*"Learning my worth as an individual and as a mum and understanding how important that role is."*

*"I'm capable of more than what I thought I was."*



Participants reported having improved self-care and coping strategies to deal with day-to-day challenges and manage stress and anxiety.

*“I cope better now than I used to... communicate better when I’m calm.”*

*“My mental health mainly... I’ve been able to rebuild as a person and as a mum.”*

*“I used to give up when it got too hard and spiral out of control... I’m a completely different person from last year... more stable and secure”*

*“I’m getting over things a lot better than I used to.”*

- **Parental capability** – including information and advice on age-appropriate development, routines, play, connecting and calming activities.

*“They give me advice and they do know how to answer questions about child development.”*

*“I’m more patient with my son due to advice from them – I was smacking him a lot and I didn’t like it.”*

*“I’ve learnt routine is key for my children.”*

*“I’ve learnt not to be angry at my son, I’m more calm and get to his level.”*

- **Practical capability** – including life skills such as completing housing applications/tenancy agreements, budgeting, gaining a driver’s license and making appointments; and systems navigation which included but was not limited to legal, health, housing, early childhood (parenting programs, childcare) and education systems.

*“[The] Housing Specialist taught me how to do applications... [It’s the] first time I’ve done this on my own.”*

All the participants interviewed described tangible changes resulting from the program. Their lives have taken a positive trajectory since commencing involvement and their capacity to deal with future issues has been strengthened through the development of their knowledge and skills, resilience, coping abilities, self-belief across multiple dimensions.

*“Big change in myself from where I was to where I am now.”*

Parents felt that they have been able to apply what they learnt through their involvement with Thriving Families and that these skills are transferable to their future lives. Emily’s experience provides evidence of this.





### Emily's experience:

A year ago, Emily and her daughter Bella Rose were living in a friend's spare bedroom when Emily found out she was pregnant. Facing homelessness, she connected with YFS' Thriving Families team.

The team helped Emily rent a townhouse. Six months later, Emily used her flawless rental history to upgrade to a four-bedroom house with room for baby Elijah. To secure the larger home, Emily drew from what she learned from the Thriving Families team. Her experiences meant she could fill in the rental application and convince the real estate agent that she was a great tenant, by herself. After moving herself in, Emily completed the entry condition report alone.

Emily is now taking steps to study nursing or social work with backing from her Family Coach.

### 5.1.3 Parenting and child development

As noted above, parents described significant improvements in their knowledge and understanding of child development and parenting skills, resulting in improved confidence, closer relationships and enhanced child health and wellbeing. Key activities supporting these changes include the 'Playtime with Little Ones' Playgroup hosted weekly<sup>2</sup> by Thriving Families (details below), focused parenting programs such as the sleep clinic at the Ellen Barron Family Centre, Circle of Security and 123 Magic, and support to access age-appropriate health and education services. These activities were regarded as invaluable by parents in addressing issues and enhancing parenting knowledge and skills.

Playtime with Little Ones Playgroup		
<p>Playtime included a range of different play activities as well as covering relevant child development topics. The group was held on site at YFS and outdoors in various locations.</p> <p>The group was attended by between one and six families each week.</p>		
Child development topics		Play activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• age-appropriate child development</li> <li>• parenting strategies</li> <li>• the benefits of play</li> <li>• community connections</li> <li>• parent-child interactions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• temperament differences in siblings</li> <li>• emotions and aggression in children</li> <li>• behaviour as communication</li> <li>• healthy eating habits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• music time</li> <li>• imaginary play</li> <li>• parallel play</li> <li>• water play</li> <li>• drawing and painting</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Except during the peak COVID period.





The impact of Thriving Families on parenting and child development is best exemplified by Rhiannon and her son Zeppelin's experience, which shows significant improvements in Zeppelin's sleeping and eating patterns and behaviour, giving Rhiannon a newfound sense of confidence.



### Rhiannon's experience:

Single mum Rhiannon found herself without a home after she and her three-year-old son, Zeppelin, escaped domestic and family violence. Connecting with the Thriving Families team has given Rhiannon the confidence to explore her potential as a parent.

After gaining support to secure a home, Rhiannon met Robyn, a Family Coach. Each week, they check in, take stock and talk goals. "She ignited the pilot light that started making me think about all the potential and possibilities about where I could go, not just as me as a person, but where I can go as a parent."

"It's been really helpful to have someone who knows childhood development, who knows little kids."

Robyn suggested a sleep clinic after finding out that Zeppelin had never slept in his own room. Rhiannon accepted the challenge and enrolled in a sleep program, which she found challenging and rewarding. Since completing the program, Rhiannon has noticed some big changes in Zeppelin's behaviour. "Now, we're not always in my bed and we're not feeding six times a night," she said. "I'll be sitting down eating dinner, and he's now interested in what I'm eating. He tries food. That is so much of an achievement."

With her newfound confidence in parenting, Rhiannon is wanting to pursue a career in early childhood education.

Another participant highlighted how she had gained a deeper understanding of her son and what was driving his behaviour, which helped her to manage that behaviour, stating "*[It's more possible now] to get my son under control and understand him*".

In another example, one participant made a particularly poignant comment around her children's experience "*as soon as they would meet people they would open up a lot about the domestic violence and say we used to live in our car and dad used to bash mum... now when they meet new people they don't do that*". She attributed this to the help she received from Thriving Families.



#### 5.1.4 Social connections

In general, participating families had varying levels of social connection when they commenced. Some were new to the Logan area and did not know anyone and were really isolated (for example those escaping domestic violence). While 71% of program participants said they had a family member they could count on if they needed support, only 37% reported having a friend they could count on.

The absence of social connections and informal supports can have a significant impact as per the example below observed by a Family Coach:

*“One mother lost her job because there was no one to look after her son and she can’t afford childcare. She just needed someone who could drop the kid off at school or look after him once or twice a week. That’s all it would have taken.”*

The coaches have made a number of attempts to connect program participants with one another and the broader community, for example through playgroups, duck feeding in the park or community activities, such as swimming lessons. Tamika and Alex connected at one of these outings organised by Thriving Families and became fast friends. They are able to share experiences and support one another. The value of ‘family-to-family’ peer support is well documented to augment professional support and empower and connect parents (Sultmann, 2019).



#### Tamika and Alex’s experience:

“Being a mum can be lonely as hell,” Tamika said.

Tamika and Alex met at an outdoor activity organised by the Thriving Families team and have developed a strong bond forged out of their common life experiences. Both were at risk of becoming homeless when they made contact with YFS. Both are raising sons alone.

Each week they join Thriving Families’ playgroup and cooking club, but the friendship they have developed sees them meeting up at other times, exchanging parenting stories and supporting each other to achieve their goals.

“Tamika is trying to get her license and save up for a car,” Alex said. “When she buys a car, I can help take her for lessons. We will message each other going, ‘These kids are driving me nuts and I’m going crazy.’ Just to vent that little bit is just so helpful. Then getting a message back going, ‘I know’ – it’s nice to know you’re not alone.”



Another parent described how she and her son used to stay home a lot and isolate themselves but have now found the confidence to go out and participate in community activities: *"I used to isolate myself"*.

While there are positive signs that some parents are beginning to connect with one another and the broader community outside of the formal structure of the program, coaches acknowledge that informal supports are really hard to set up and sustain and are conscious of the need to continue to focus on this component of the program.

## 5.2 TOWARDS THRIVING

The ultimate goal of Thriving Families is to move people beyond crisis and into thriving. Families were asked to describe what thriving meant to them. It was clear from participant responses that there are multi-dimensional, subjective meanings of 'thriving' which are somewhat dependent on personal backgrounds and experiences, for example childhood abuse, prior periods of homelessness, social isolation, disengagement from family. A recurring theme in participant responses was around creating a better life for their children.

*"I want to show my kids you can achieve things as you grow up, be happy, have a good education."*

*"I want to break the cycle of abuse."*

*"[I] want them to experience being a child because I never did."*

Other elements of thriving identified by parents included:

- basic needs such as housing and financial stability, food security and personal safety
- a sense of wellbeing, through mental stability and inner peace and contentment
- happy and healthy children
- quality of life, for example having a yard and a pet
- purposeful activity, such as employment, education or exercise
- hope for the future.

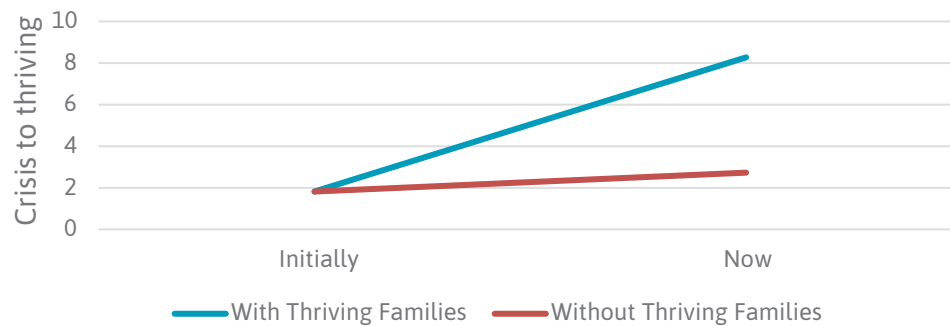
These elements are certainly evident in participating families' lives as described above. During interviews, parents were asked to rate where they felt they were at on a ten-point scale from crisis to thriving when they first started with Thriving Families compared to where they are now and where they would be without the service. Their responses demonstrate significant progress towards thriving in stark contrast to how they envisioned their lives without the service (see figure 9).<sup>3</sup> All participants indicated that without Thriving Families they would be significantly worse off, echoing the sentiment "I don't know where I'd be without them".

<sup>3</sup>Completed by 11 of 12 families. One interview was conducted over the phone with the assistance of a translator making this question unfeasible.





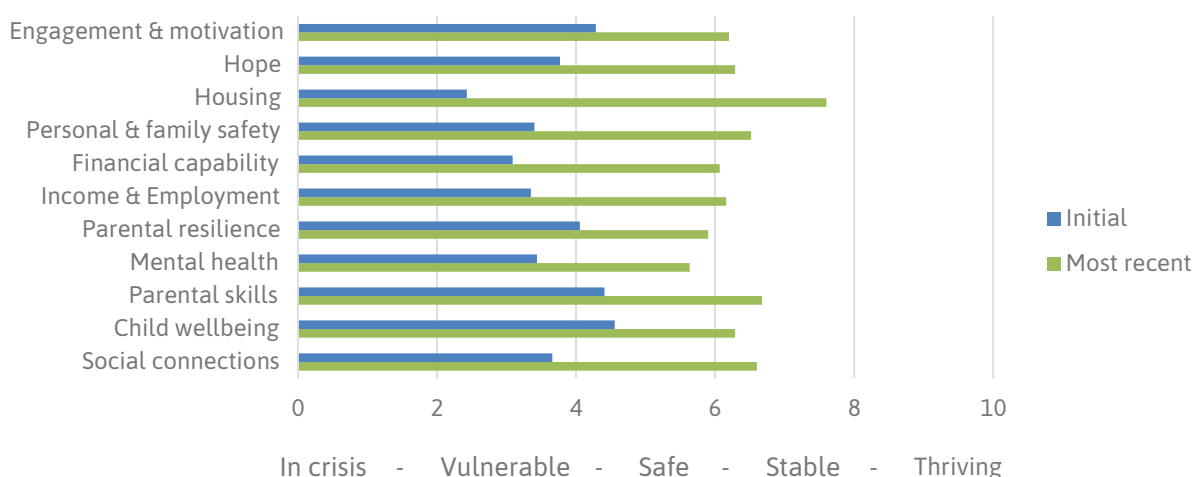
**Figure 9: Families' perception of change from crisis to thriving**



Outcomes data also shows that all families have progressed towards thriving. Thriving Families assesses family progress towards thriving using the Thriving Families Matrix, a tool custom developed by YFS to monitor families' progress along a ten-point continuum from 'in crisis' to 'thriving' (in line with the aspirational intent of the service) across 13 key domains. The matrix is administered throughout families' engagement to measure change over time.

Participating families moved from an average initial rating of 3.71 out of 10 to an average most recent rating of 6.30 out of 10. Not surprisingly, the largest improvements have been to 'housing' as per figure 10 below.<sup>4</sup> Notably, positive change was recorded consistently across all life domains assessed, indicating holistic improvements, which are mutually beneficial and re-enforcing.

**Figure 10: Change in Thriving Domains**



<sup>4</sup> Note the substance abuse and health domains were excluded from the figure as they have a smaller sample size than the other domains. Substance abuse was not applicable for a large proportion of participants and was not rated. The health domain was added in later and has minimal data available at this stage. Data from these domains was included in calculating average scores.



## 6. CHALLENGES: THE BUMPY ROAD TO THRIVING

- Although the overall trajectory is positive, for most families, progress has not been in a simple straight line. The road to thriving is a bumpy one.
- Participating families have experienced a number of critical life events that have disrupted their progression towards goals.
- Trauma, exclusion and disadvantage have long lasting impacts that continue to render families vulnerable.
- Poor mental health, domestic and family violence and unhealthy relationships are major destabilising factors for this cohort.
- The challenges families face reinforces the need to provide longer-term flexible support for families that extends beyond just addressing the housing issue.

### 6.1 CRITICAL LIFE EVENTS

Critical life events have major impacts on people's lives. They include key life course milestones such as a new partner, the birth of a child, relationship breakdown, injury or illness, employment changes, housing transitions and the experience of disasters (Stone, et al., 2015). Such life events typically alter the status quo and trigger further events and can have cumulative, long-lasting impacts. As such, people often don't bounce back to where they were before the event (Flatau et al., 2004). For example, for those with low incomes who already face daily challenges to make ends meet, an unanticipated expense can severely impact on their capacity to sustain housing and can serve as a pathway (back) into homelessness (Seelig et al. 2008; Hulse & Saugeres 2008).

Multiple critical life events were evident for participating families during their time with Thriving Families over the past 18 months, for example a car accident, a domestic violence incident or an ex-partner released from prison. These events triggered other events – inability to pay rent, a breakdown in mental health, safety concerns. Without support, each of these bumps could well have derailed families' progress.

### 6.2 TRAUMA AND DISADVANTAGE

The stress associated with significant adversity (e.g., from trauma, disadvantage, poverty, violence, abuse and homelessness) can have lifelong impacts, affecting people's ability to develop and use core coping skills and their beliefs about themselves, others and the world in which they live (Cash et al., 2014; Guarino & Bassuk, 2010). As reported by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016a; 2016b), this occurs on several levels:

1. The foundations of executive function and self-regulation, core skills for adulthood, are built in early childhood. The development of these core skills may be disrupted with severe early adversity.
2. Severe and frequent stress in adulthood overloads our ability to use the skills we do have. The same person is likely to show diminished cognitive capacity when under significant stress, compared to less stressful circumstances.
3. Frequently experiencing circumstances that seem beyond our control can lead to low self-efficacy (the belief that we can change our circumstances or improve our lives).



This triple threat renders people vulnerable to increased risk of future violence, poverty, homelessness and other traumatic stressors (Cash et al., 2014).

An example of the impact of trauma on decision making is a young Thriving Families participant who when faced with the stress of her tenancy coming to an end, wanted to just pack up her stuff and live in her car, despite being a model tenant and having an excellent rental record. She felt overwhelmed by the options, anxious about the move, pressured from her ex-partner, uncertain about coronavirus and was struggling to manage negative thoughts. All of this stress triggered memories of being homeless. Thriving Families helped her to explore and narrow her options, explained the process and laws that protect her as a tenant and worked alongside to support her choices. With coaching she was able to move into a new property with minimal direct support from Thriving Families (she organised property viewings, rental references and prepared the entry condition report on her own). The prevalence and impact of trauma highlight the need for both practical and therapeutic support.

### 6.3 DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Coaches identified that many of the young mothers participating in the program struggled with confidence and sense of self-worth. Harmful relationships were found to be the main area where “people become unstuck”. Coaches observed many participants were in unhealthy relationships that they struggled to leave, or that they repeated patterns of dysfunctional relationships with new partners.

*“They lack a belief in themselves and that they deserve a better life.”*

*“The biggest issue participants face is relationships and self-worth. We need to focus on the skill building. They get new partners and the relationship patterns repeat again.”*

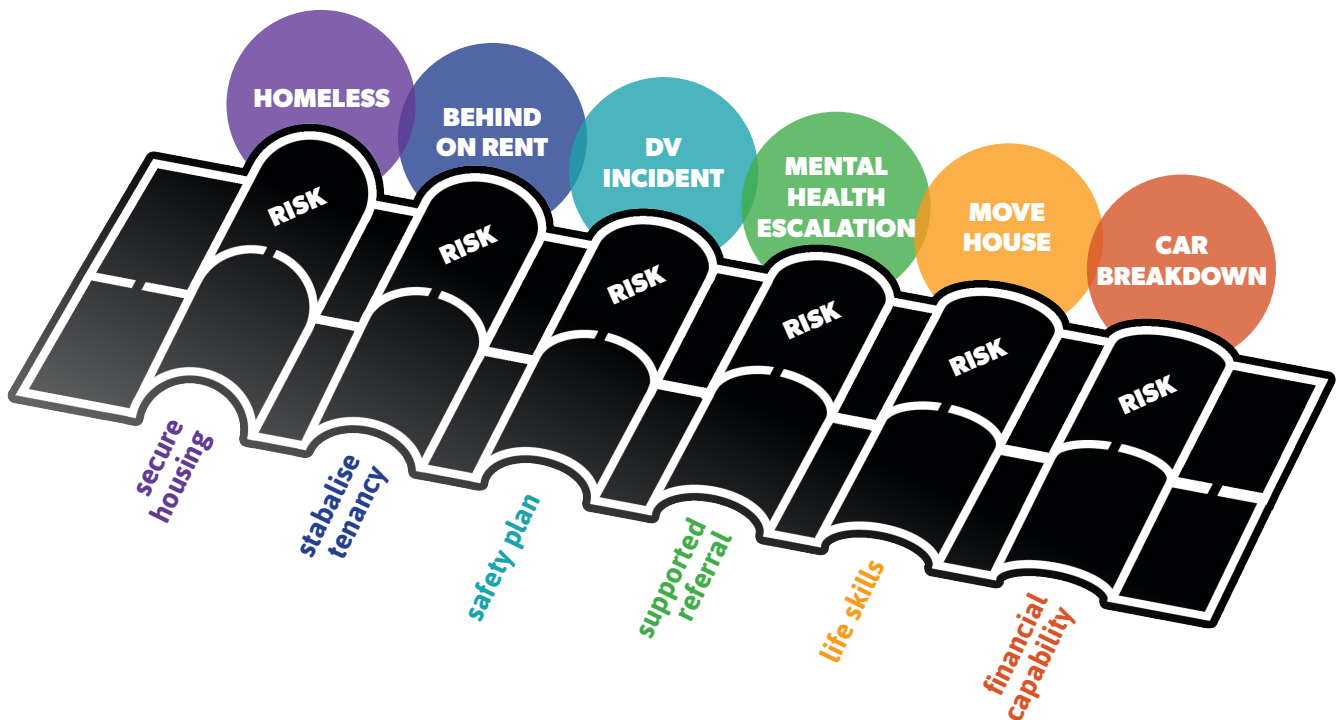
*“They recognise that these relationships are harmful and not what they want... Many have ingrained experiences of relationship dysfunction especially with partners and family... They believe this is what they deserve and have low self-worth.”*

Approximately 70% of the women involved in the program disclosed historic or current experiences of domestic and family violence. This is much higher than the national rates of domestic and family violence. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 17% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner and 23% of women have experienced emotional abuse by a partner (ABS, 2017). While domestic and family violence is the number one reason women and children enter into homelessness in Australia, the prevalence of domestic violence in participating families was higher again than those accessing Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS). In 2019-20, 53% of women aged 18-34 who accessed these services experienced domestic and family violence (AIHW, 2020).

High rates of domestic violence impact on tenancies through property damage (throwing objects, punching walls etc), neighbourhood complaints (yelling and verbal abuse) and unplanned exits (fleeing for safety reasons). Domestic and family violence also has well-documented negative impacts on overall mental health and wellbeing of mothers and children, eroding any sense of security and stability.



## RISK OF HOMELESSNESS INCREASES WITH EVERY SPEEDBUMP



***Ongoing support + skill building = reduced frequency + intensity of speedbumps***

The challenges families face reinforce the need to provide longer-term flexible support for families beyond resolving the initial crisis, to addressing underlying issues and equipping families to resolve emerging issues and pursue their goals. This includes supporting parents into education and employment to mitigate the impact of financial shocks, and providing or linking with therapeutic support to address the impact of trauma and enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy. It can take some time to build motivation and readiness for this type of work (that is, a trusting relationship with a Family Coach and stable foundation from which to pursue higher order goals).



## 7. VALUE ADD: BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL

- The Thriving Families approach shows benefits beyond business as usual approaches to family homelessness
- The combination of rapid housing and ongoing capacity building and support over an extended period promotes the sustainment of housing outcomes
- The coaching approach provides an opportunity for parents to pursue their goals towards a better life for themselves and their children
- Indicative cost benefit analysis suggests that Thriving Families is cost effective and outcomes achieved could potentially reduce the burden on government-funded services by preventing repeated episodes of homelessness, escalation through the child protection system and inter-generational welfare dependence.

### 7.1 SUSTAINING HOUSING OUTCOMES

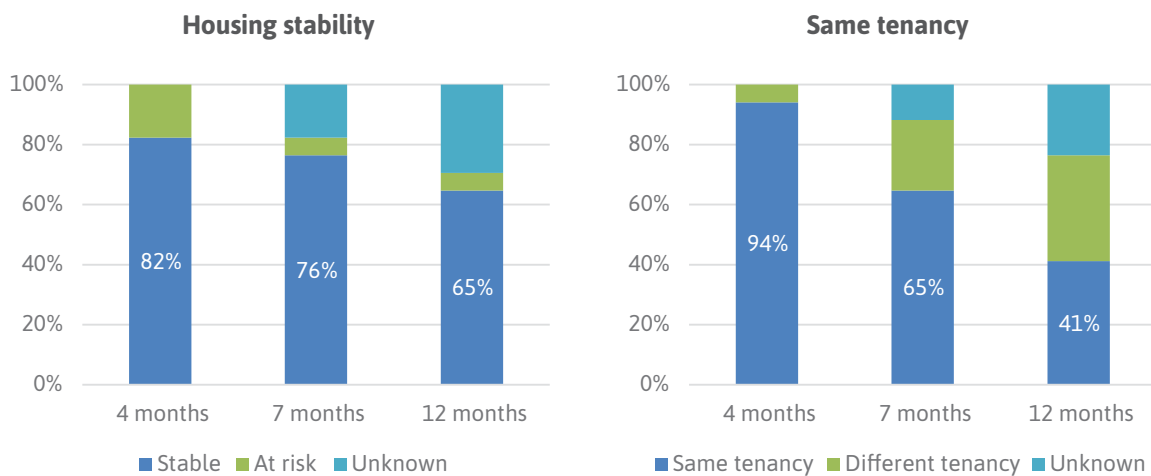
There are three key stages of risk in a private rental cycle: the point of access, maintenance of tenancies, and exit transitions (Stone, et al., 2015). In a fragmented service system, issues associated with these pressure points are often dealt with by different programs and services, with families sometimes falling through the gaps. Most specialist homelessness services (SHS) focus exclusively on the point of access. Their purpose is to assist those homeless or at risk of homelessness into stable tenancies. In order to help as many people as possible out of homelessness, support periods are typically short-term. Nationally, the median length of SHS support was 43 days in 2019-20 (approximately 6 weeks), with 65% of SHS clients supported for three months or less (AIHW, 2020). The challenge is that when supports are cut off too soon, service users cannot access support unless they re-enter the 'crisis service loop' (Melbourne City Mission in Productivity Commission, 2018). It is not surprising that 58% of all SHS clients in 2019-20 had previously requested assistance (since 2011), suggesting at least half of SHS users will be repeat clients (AIHW, 2020).

By sticking with families once they are housed, Thriving Families is able to support them not only to access housing, but to maintain tenancies and manage transitions. Thriving Families has built in check-in points with families at key stages in their tenancy - at four, seven and 12 months since housed to assess the sustainability of the tenancy and if there is any additional support required.<sup>5</sup> Over time participants' housing remained stable, but many had transitioned to a different property through choice or necessity (as demonstrated in figure 11).

<sup>5</sup>Data relating to families housing status four and seven months after being initially housed is available for 29 families. Data relating to families' housing status 12 months after being initially housed is available for 17 of those families. The difference in sample size is because families commenced with the program at different times.



**Figure 11: Tenancy sustainment over 12 months**



At the four-month mark, most families were still doing well, with 82% in stable, affordable and appropriate housing. However, a few were showing early signs of tenancy difficulty, for example they had fallen behind in rent. Because the families were still engaged with the program, there was the opportunity to provide additional support and address these issues as they emerged to sustain the tenancy or enable a positive transition to a new tenancy. Staff observed at the time:

*“We are starting to see some families fall behind due to various circumstances, such as a lost job, a car breakdown or other life event, but we are able to continue and support them, so they do not drop right back down again. This is a big win for the program.”*

After 12 months, 92% of families able to be contacted were in stable housing, with 54% of these still in their original tenancy. Including those families who could not be contacted, 65% were in stable housing, but only 41% were in the same tenancy (includes those families who have ended with the program and whose housing status is unknown, shown in figure 11 above).

In all, 11 families have moved at least once since accessing the initial property (38%) and others have indicated a desire to move but have not yet done so. In some instances, tenancy transitions were driven by external forces (for example, the property was sold, escaping domestic violence) in other instances transitions were driven by choice (for example, to move to a better neighbourhood, accommodate a growing family or to get a pet).

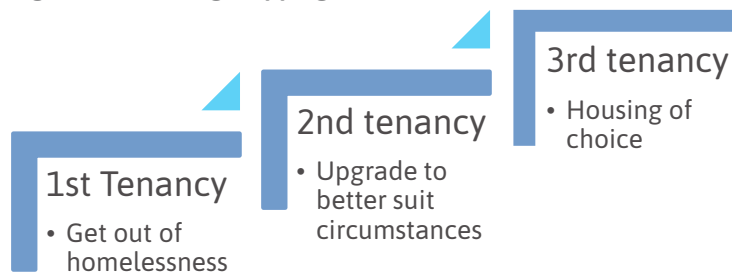
Often families access ‘good enough’ housing initially to get out of homelessness, but it is far from their ideal. Their longer-term goal may be to move out of public housing into private rental or to purchase a home. Thriving Families works around what the family can afford right now whilst planning towards achieving that long-term goal and setting them up for a positive transition in the future by building a positive rental history.

*“Hopefully [I’ll be] in a better position financially so I can afford private rental.”*



Typical housing transitions for participating families were stepping stones towards their ideal housing. However, each transition is a possible fail point without appropriate support. These risk periods are evident in the average support hours provided by the Housing Specialist, with the first month of service the most intensive (the median number of days to house a family was 30). Families presented with significant barriers to accessing housing including poor or no rental history, no identification, TICA listing.<sup>6</sup> Housing support peaked again at around four months as early tenancy difficulties appeared and/or families plan to move at the end of their lease. Support needs then peaked again during months nine and 10 as more families planned to transition to alternative housing.

**Figure 12: Housing stepping stones**



It is clear from Thriving Families that participating families needed ongoing support to maintain their tenancy and to manage tenancy transitions in order to sustain housing outcomes in the long-term. As staff highlighted:

*“Getting people housed is easy, but sustaining tenancies, that’s the hard part. That’s where the teamwork comes in. If there is an issue, we get in early and address it.”*

*“Having ongoing support after housing helps to keep families afloat and sustain tenancies... Having both the coach and the Housing Specialist working alongside helps families to overcome any bumps. That’s what needs to be replicated.”*

*“A short-term intervention is not going to get cut through on the trans-generational trauma or even the recent trauma associated with homelessness. You can’t do that in three months.”*

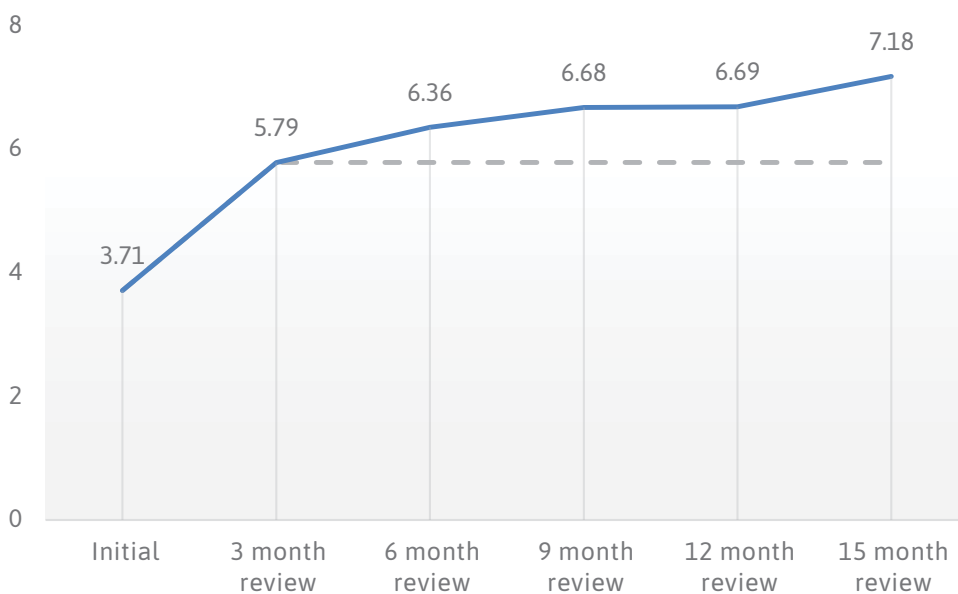
<sup>6</sup>Tenancy databases, such as TICA, hold information about the tenancy history of tenants. They are often used by real estate agents and lessors to decide a tenant’s suitability when assessing tenancy applications. They are sometimes referred to as ‘blacklists’. Someone who is listed on a tenancy database may find it difficult to rent a property.



## 7.2 SPRINGBOARD TO THRIVING

The data demonstrates the value add of long-term support, beyond housing sustainment. Stable housing provides a foundation from which families can thrive if they are resourced appropriately. Repeated point in time assessments using the Thriving Families Matrix show that families continue to reap benefits over time. The longer a family has been involved, the closer they get to thriving. A 24% incremental improvement was recorded for those who had been involved with the program for 15 months compared where they were at after three months of service (the point at which most housing programs would end service).

**Figure 13: Incremental improvements in thriving**



As staff observed:

**“**You can house people in three months, but you can’t keep them housed or contribute towards those longer-term goals.”

Thriving Families works with families to explore their vision for the future and hopes and dreams for their families. The program encourages families to aim high and is committed to supporting them to achieve their goals. As one coach described:

*“We encourage them to think big. What’s in the next three years?  
Do you want to work, study, stay at home with the kids?  
Whatever the goal, it’s yours.”*





Participants described how their involvement in the program has given them a greater sense of what's possible. Their vision for the future has expanded to include longer-term goals focused on future study and/or employment and personal development.

*“I dream about the future, not am I going to make it through the day.”*

*“Since being in Thriving Families it's made me realise what sort of job I want to go into to help people go through what I've been through.”*

*“Hopefully with a career.... [that's] more possible now because of more stability.”*

*“Now I can move from short term to long-term goals.”*

Four participants have already started work or enrolled in a course to further their education. However, the majority of participants identified these goals as high priorities once their children were older and engaged in formal schooling.

*“[I] plan to get into uni in 2022 when he is in prep and hopefully also be working by then.”*

Over time and with the encouragement of the Family Coach, participants were able to contemplate their own needs for personal growth and development, possibly for the first time. Obtaining secure housing and financial stability seem to provide the platform for this to occur.

*“[I've] Always focused on my kids but through Thriving Families [I] want to grow myself which is a better future for my kids.”*

This added value enables families to go from strength to strength, building their internal and external resources over time.

### 7.3 COST SAVINGS

Integrated, ongoing support can potentially reduce the burden on government-funded services in the short and medium term through cost effective service delivery and in the long term through intervening early and preventing further entry into tertiary services.

There is extensive evidence to suggest that early intervention can make a difference by preventing crises, addressing issues before they become too complex to resolve and building strengths and skills to participate in the community. In turn this reduces demand for services and enables better management of existing demands on services. Unfortunately, the demand for tertiary intervention services is overwhelming, and the costs are growing exponentially as shown by the escalating costs of the child safety system. Investment in early intervention can reduce the burden across human services now and in the future, particularly in the housing, child safety and welfare systems.



As a Family Coach observed:

*“Short, sharp interventions may prop a family up for a little while, but then they’ll fall over and services have to start from the beginning and invest all of those resources again. Instead we invest upfront and then withdraw slowly as we build independence and community connectedness.”*

### 7.3.1 Cost effectiveness

An analysis of program costs found that the cost of delivering Thriving Families as an integrated housing and family support program was similar to delivering these services independently. This is not surprising as it is generally acknowledged that integration costs before it pays (Fine et al., 2005). Aside from the usual costs of establishing a new program (recruitment, system set up, etc), there are additional training and supervision costs associated with forging the team culture and practices required to work together effectively and maintain model adherence. However, it is anticipated that delivery costs will decrease over time as the program matures.

There is evidence that the approach is more cost effective than stand-alone family and housing services working with the same family. On a per outcome basis, Thriving Families costs approximately \$20,138 to deliver both a housing outcome and a family wellbeing outcome. By comparison, the achievement of similar outcomes delivered separately would cost approximately \$28,315 (ranging from \$24,364 to \$34,126 depending on the criteria used). This suggests Thriving Families is 29% more cost effective than usual ways of working (ranging from 17% to 41%). This assumes the same rate of retention between separate housing and family support programs as Thriving Families. However, there is a greater likelihood of disengagement when families are referred from a housing service to family support, due to the lack of relationship continuity. Thus, cost effectiveness associated with Thriving Families may be even higher than anticipated.

### 7.3.2 Housing system cost offsets

The program aims to intervene early in families’ experience of homelessness, with a view to preventing long or recurrent stints of homelessness. Moving people out of homelessness quickly is important because the longer people spend homeless, the more likely they are to remain homeless. This is attributed to a scarring effect, whereby the strain of homelessness reduces people’s capacity to get housing and over time, people learn skills that help them to adapt to being homeless (Cobb-Clark et al., 2014). Furthermore, longitudinal research indicates that compared to other age groups, younger people tend to spend less time homeless, but are more likely to cycle in and out of homelessness, making this cohort particularly vulnerable to repeated experiences of homelessness (Bevitt, et al., 2015). This churn effect is extremely costly to families and the service system.

#### Potential long-term cost savings and value generation

Prevention of homelessness:  
\$29,450 per client per year

Diversion from public housing:  
\$9,416 per dwelling per year

Avoided escalation through the child protection system: up to  
\$117,805 per child per year

Improved employment prospects generated through stable housing:  
\$17,784 per person per year



Users of homelessness services are also heavy users of non-homelessness services, such as health, justice and welfare compared to the Australian population in general. Research suggests that a reduction in the usage of non-homelessness services to population levels could result in cost savings of \$29,450 per client per year (Zaretsky, et al., 2013). If Thriving Families was able to realise even half of these savings by reducing the associated costs of homelessness, the program would be cost neutral.

In addition, Thriving Families successfully diverted 22 families (69% of those housed) away from public housing and into private rentals (excluding those in headleased properties and those who have moved out of public housing and into private rental). Based on the national net recurrent cost per dwelling for public housing of \$9,416 (2017-18 dollars, not including per user cost of capital), the program has resulted in an annual direct cost saving of over \$207,000 (Productivity Commission, 2019).

### 7.3.3 Child safety system cost offsets

Approximately 1 in 33 or 3% of Australian children were involved in the child protection system in 2018-19 (AIHW, 2019). Over the past decade expenditure on child protection has increased by 77% in real terms as a result of late intervention (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020). In some jurisdictions such as Victoria, 75% of investment in the child protection system is allocated towards addressing immediate concerns, leaving minimal resources for prevention and early intervention work (Social Ventures Australia, 2019).

Preventing child safety involvement or escalation through the child protection system represents a significant cost saving to government. In 2016-17, the real recurrent expenditure on child protection services ranged from:

- \$103 to \$274 per report
- \$486 to \$2,728 per notification investigated
- \$52,758 to \$117,805 per child in out of home care (AIHW, 2017).

If Thriving Families could prevent even one child escalating through the child protection system, this could result in immediate savings in excess of \$115,000. This does not take into account the lifetime costs associated with the negative impact of childhood trauma, estimated at \$9 - \$24 billion annually (Kezelman et al., 2015), or the long-term ripple effect of involvement in the child protection system on the likelihood of future service dependence (Bilson, et al., 2017).

### 7.3.4 Welfare system cost offsets

Housing stability enables parents to work. Improved employment prospects generated through stable housing (for those looking for work) have been valued at \$17,784 per person (measured by part-time employment at minimum wage) (Ravi & Reinhardt, 2011). While this value creation is yet to be realised for most participants who intend to seek employment once their children are in daycare or school, the potential exists to reduce welfare dependence and increase taxable income (and tax revenue) in the future.



Furthermore, the value created through increased financial inclusion can extend to the next generation. Research shows that children living in persistent poverty or growing up in workless families are significantly more likely to have poor education outcomes, be jobless as adults and need welfare assistance (Cobb-Clark, et al., 2017; DHS, 2011; DPW, 2017; Perales, et al., 2014; Warren, 2017). Working parents increases the likelihood that children will work as adults.

Early education is linked to numerous benefits including improved numeracy and literacy, improved school achievement and higher educational attainment. These are strong predictors of earnings over a lifetime (The Front Project, 2019). Given most brain development occurs before the age of 6, early childhood is a critical intervention point for preventing the multi-generational transfer of disadvantage and lasting impacts of adversity (Warren, 2017). To date, Thriving Families has assisted 11 children to enrol in early childhood education and assisted 18 others with age-appropriate health checks, birth certificates and immunisations in anticipation of entering early learning.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Note this data field was created after the interim evaluation to systematically capture key achievements that had been observed at that point. As such, data is not available for all participating families.



## 8. LEARNINGS: TRANSFORMING SERVICE DELIVERY

- The Thriving Families Project offers considerable insight into what works for homeless families to thrive.
- It demonstrates the benefits of an integrated approach that combines rapid housing delivered by a specialist and ongoing support to address underlying and emerging issues.
- It highlights the potential for a family resourcing model that incorporates family coaching to help families move beyond crisis to a point where they are set up to thrive.
- It documents what it takes to deliver effective integrated services, including culture and system factors.

### 8.1 WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH HOMELESS FAMILIES

The Thriving Families Project trialled an integrated service model that utilised a family resourcing approach. The combination of integration and resourcing combined to generate significant benefits for participating families. Interviews with families, staff and stakeholders identified several elements of the trial that were effective for working with homeless families.

These include:

- responding to needs (initially through the integration of rapid housing, and ongoing support)
- building relationships
- parents setting the direction and pace of the work
- building resilience for both parents and children
- working with intention
- providing individualised support
- navigating the service system.

These critical success factors are explored in more detail below.

#### 8.1.1 Responding to needs

The integration of housing and family support made it possible for the team to solve the initial housing problem quickly and effectively. During the initial phase, the Housing Specialist took immediate action to work with participants to secure housing, which included emergency accommodation and longer-term housing through public and private rental pathways in partnership with the Department of Housing, Rent Connect and local real estate agents. Participants identified that their needs were fully taken into account when housing options were identified for them. The critical timing enabled rapid stabilisation, which had a transformative impact on families.

 *Without them I wouldn't have coped, I would have stayed living in my car"*



Without the expertise of the Housing Specialist, it is unlikely that the team would have been as effective at addressing families' housing crisis. While most workers in family support teams have general housing knowledge and skills, they often do not have enough experience with housing or connections within the housing sector to be able to quickly solve housing problems. In general, family support workers do not have the time to cultivate the same kind of deep working relationships in the housing sector that a specialist holds, because their mandate is much broader. Specialists bring a deeper level of knowledge, expertise, and connections as described by a Family Coach:

*“The Housing Specialist brings insider knowledge and acts as a connector or linker. They are able to navigate the housing world and the everyday person’s understanding of that world.”*

At the same time, the inclusion of ongoing support for families is appealing for partners in the housing sector. Knowing that Family Coaches are part of the service offering lends a degree of confidence that outcomes will be sustained. As a result, real estate agents are more likely to choose a Thriving Families' family over another family in a similar situation but without the support of a team backing them to succeed. Similarly, the Department of Housing is more likely to take a chance on a Thriving Families' family by offering them a headleased property or prioritising public housing applications, where appropriate. Stakeholders from the housing sector described the ongoing support provided by Thriving Families and the team's willingness to work with partners to address any issues as they arose, as a key point of difference contributing to the Project's success.

*“They are different because they stay with the family the whole way. Other programs tend to refer and then leave it up to us.”*

This combination of support enabled the team to effectively meet families' initial housing needs, and established the platform for ongoing support work, primarily delivered by the Family Coach. This included a combination of practical assistance and socio-emotional support that was valued by participants. As families' needs changes, so too did the service offering. Over the course of service, Thriving Families continued to deliver support valued by families, in a way that families valued. This encouraged them to continue in the program even after the initial housing crisis was resolved.

The Thriving Families team recognise that for families to participate they have to see the benefit of being involved. While helping them to get housed is a big win, it is critical that the team continues to deliver the right services at the right time and in the right way for families to stay engaged and work towards longer-term outcomes. As one coach observed:

*“We can’t expect engagement will just happen. We have to give them something they want.”*

Family Coaches capitalise on the momentum established through early success to build motivation.

*“We’re tuned in to hear readiness for change. Any signs of hope – we build on it.”*



### 8.1.2 Building relationships

Relationships are the primary vehicle through which change happens (Pattoni, 2012). Delivering a tangible housing outcome early on made significant inroads into building trust with participants, enabling Family Coaches to continue working with the family after they were housed. This quick win was reinforced through ongoing provision of consistent, responsive support, as noted by participants:

*“A couple of days ago I had suicidal thoughts and reached out to the Family Coach... within 30 minutes she called me and checked I was safe and being cared for by my housemate.”*

*“They will drop what they’re doing and they’ll be there.”*

*“If anything is a bit tough, the Family Coach will come around.”*

Participating families felt that services were delivered in a non-judgmental and supportive way, further facilitating trust and rapport.

*“In other services you can get judged and criticised sometimes but not at YFS.”*

Strong relationships between the families and the team were evident in the descriptions provided by families:

*“Brilliant rapport with the Family Coach and she gets me. I’m a quirky person.”*

*“[They are] like my second family.”*

*“Thriving Families’ were very welcoming and the kids loved them so [it’s] easy to keep going back.”*

Stakeholders also observed strong relationships between the team and the families they support. They cited the team’s ability to form and maintain relationships and keep engagement as a key strength of Thriving Families.

*“Their commitment to families – their ability to help with complexity and maintain engagement.”*

*“Thriving Families is successful in engaging families – forming and maintaining relationships is much better than transactional models.”*

In their feedback, stakeholders highlighted the competence of staff, praising their knowledge, skills, patience, and persistence. Stakeholders used words like ‘dedicated’, ‘hands-on’, ‘approachable’, ‘reliable’, and ‘easy to deal with’ to describe staff. These characteristics went a long way in developing working relationships with partners to the benefit of families (as described in section 8.1.7 in more detail).





In addition to strong relationships with participating families and partner organisations, the depth of the relationships within the team was evident, and clearly contributed to their ability to work together effectively, contributing to the success of the integration effort (as described in section 8.2).

As well as a commitment to and competence in building relationships, the team is able to utilise those relationships to engage, support and challenge families. That is, they work through relationships for the purpose of building the motivation and skills required for transformational change.

### 8.1.3 Parents setting the direction and pace

A core principle of the family resourcing approach developed at YFS is that parents are “in the driver’s seat”, in keeping with trauma-responsive practices. When interviewed, participating families unanimously felt in control of setting the direction and pace of work with Thriving Families, as evident in the following statements:

“[They] told me from the start if you want to put the brakes on, you can.”  
“Very in control, they would give me ideas and then say it was completely up to me.”  
“No pressure – all at my own pace.”  
“It helps to look at one thing at a time instead of six things at once because it’s too overwhelming.”

Participants described how Thriving Families was helping to make their vision real, possible and plausible:

“They help with your goals – make them realistic.”  
“I don’t feel stuck anymore.”

This sense of control can be very empowering, especially for young parents who often report feeling scrutinised, judged and stereotyped as irresponsible, immature and incompetent (McArthur & Barry, 2013). In contrast, Thriving Families treats them as adults, with choice and control. As one staff member described:

“Young parents are empowered. They are so tuned in to see judgement and be given direction – told what to do. We see them as adults. We tell them ‘these are your children and your decisions’. They have been told what to do so much. Instead, we support them to make their own way in the world.”

While parents may be in the driver’s seat, setting the direction and pace of the work, this does not mean that coaches are simply passive passengers in the process. They play an active guiding role, which may involve challenging families at times. As coaches noted:

“It’s not just walking alongside, sometimes you have to say ‘you need to work hard every day and challenge yourself.’”  
“We don’t tell [families] what to do, but we may put things on the table.”





In some circumstances, coaches may need to use their professional judgement and actually step in to take a leading role, especially when there is a crisis. Stepping in and taking the lead in a crisis can reduce the cognitive burden on the family, making it easier for them to get through it. In these circumstances, coaches take the lead, but still operate within an overarching strengths-based and relationship-based framework. While it is important to respect the families' choice about the type and amount of support they would like, this must be balanced with an assessment of risk.

The ability to facilitate change by both challenging and supporting families, while respecting their roles as experts in their own lives, is central to family resourcing. In order to strengthen skills in this area, YFS commissioned transformative change training from Encompass Family and Community.

#### **8.1.4 Building resilience**

One of the core design principles for the Thriving Families Project was an understanding of the need to help adults and children who had experienced trauma develop resilience. Resilience facilitates positive adaptation to adversity. Thriving Families has incorporated resilience building into their model as a central component.

With support from Logan Together, YFS commissioned wellbeing and resilience training experts Pathways to Resilience to mentor the team, including intensive training in trauma and brain development. Pathways to Resilience helped the team learn to work with both parents and children in ways that helped both learn to regulate their responses to stress. YFS' approach to strengthening capacity and building resilience is informed by an understanding of the impact of trauma on brain development and behavioural science literature.

The neurosequential model of brain development contends that brains develop from the bottom up (see figure 14). The ability to regulate emotions, stay calm and feel safe enables us to relate to others and form positive relationships, which provide the foundation for enhanced executive skills - those that enable us to effectively manage the challenges of daily living, to make decisions, solve problems, and progress towards goals (Guare, 2016; Perry, 2018). The way we process information replicates this sequence of brain development. We cannot learn or utilise new executive skills until we feel calm and connected.

Skills need to be acquired gradually in a scaffolded way, by first learning how to regulate one's emotions in the context of a secure and trusting relationship. This is the essence of family coaching. Foundational skills need to be embedded before moving on to more complex skills. This approach of building on existing strengths encourages success, which may have the additional benefit of building hope and motivation for additional change. As observed by a Family Coach:

*“It takes time to learn new skills. For many this is their first tenancy and it probably takes that whole six months just to learn those practical things. They need to be embedded before we can focus on the high up goals.”*



**Figure 14: The neurosequential model of brain development**



Thriving Families works with participants to build their capacity as people and as parents. That is, it builds adult's capacity in order to improve outcomes for both parents and their children (Shonkoff, 2013). However, this is often done by focusing attention on children's developmental stage and needs. By engaging parents around the science of brain development, coaches contextualise children's behaviour as a predictable response to toxic stress. As a result, parents are more compassionate and curious. This opens up new ways of examining and explaining behaviour and promotes openness to change and new possibilities for action. Additionally, as parents gain a deeper understanding of their child's brain state and learn how to help their child regulate, they can reflect on their own regulation and strategies to self-regulate. This 'two generational' approach is effective because parent and child wellbeing is inextricably linked, and benefits are mutually reinforcing (Schmit, 2014).

As noted above, Thriving Families works through relationships to build core skills. This requires a different way of thinking and acting that is less about doing for families and more about being with families. Learning happens through relationships and experiences. In the early years, children develop through reciprocal interactions with the adults who care for them. Responsive 'serve and return' type interactions stimulate brain development and build neural connections that wire the brain to feel safe and secure, building the foundational capabilities that set children up for life. Healthy relationships are also essential for adults (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016a; 2016b). They provide a source of support, and knowing someone cares builds hope and a belief in the possibility of change.

Thriving Families' coaches create positive environments and learning experiences to help parents connect with their children and other parents. These activities foster attachment and connection and stimulate brain development. Positive experiences counterbalance the consequences of adversity. They affect the nature and quality of the brain's developing architecture by influencing which circuits are reinforced and which are pruned due to lack of use. Over time, positive experiences accumulate and can tip a child's life trajectory toward good outcomes, even when a heavy load of adversity is stacked on the other side (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016a; 2016b).



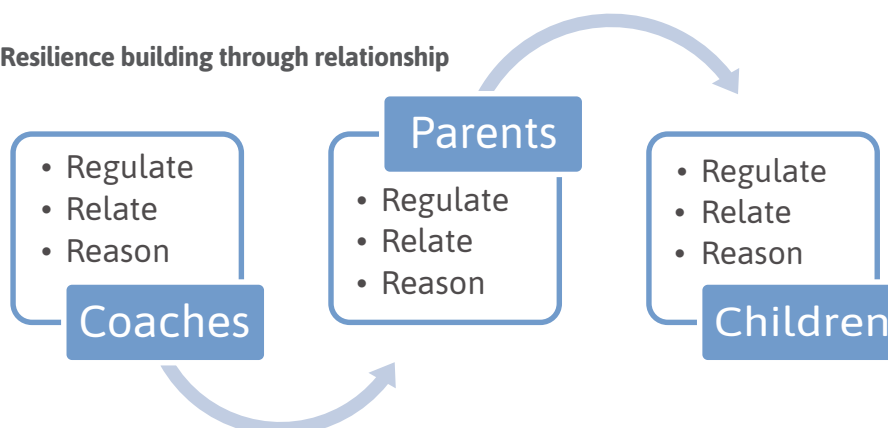
Positive experience is an important protective factor for children. It helps build a bank of happy memories that children can draw from. Thriving Families helps to stimulate positive experience through its playgroup and outings such as duck feeding in the park, while encouraging parents to do the same. During these activities, coaches use descriptive feedback techniques ('I noticed...'), to reflect on what they enjoy about how a child and parent interact. Sharing joyous observations with a parent enables them to reflect on and find joy in their relationship with their child.



In relating to parents, Thriving Families' coaches model the kinds of interactions that promote healthy child development, and provide positive reinforcement when they see parents having such interactions with their children. These relational skills can also be applied to adult relationships. One stakeholder reflected on how a Family Coach was able to build a safe, connected relationship with a parent. This experience of relationship then opened up opportunities to for the parent to safely connect with her community.

This approach of working through relationships to build capacity requires coaches to bring themselves into the work. By being more aware of their own responses and how to self-regulate, coaches can support parents to reflect and regulate, and then support parents to apply that understanding with their child so that they too can learn to self-regulate. This trickle-down effect explains how resilience can be transferred through relationships.

**Figure 15: Resilience building through relationship**



### 8.1.5 Working with intention

The benefits resulting from Thriving Families (or any service) do not accrue automatically. Focused, purposeful effort and attention is required to build the skills and mindsets necessary for sustained behaviour change. In chaotic circumstances, it can be challenging to maintain a focus on skill building. Keeping the focus requires skill building to be at the heart of everything. Even a conversation with Centrelink is an opportunity to model core skills such as communication and conflict management.

Family Coaches observed:

*“It’s not “let’s sit down and I’ll teach you”, it’s about setting up opportunities to learn and then supporting them.”*

*“It’s the difference between ‘how can I help?’ versus ‘how can I build skills?’”*

Coaching models are suitable for focused skills building because they begin with an exploration of goals and motivation and build from there (Ruiz De Luzuriaga, 2015). Family coaching aims to build family capacity by working in partnership with families to ‘foster the achievement of family-identified goals’ (Allen & Huff, 2014: 569). In working towards parent-determined goals, coaches target elements of executive function including:

- helping identify goals and making realistic plans
- planning that is broken down into component steps and supported by reminders
- identifying likely obstacles and strategies for dealing with them
- solving problems collaboratively
- making necessary modifications to plans
- providing frequent positive feedback to reinforce progress.

For families with multiple and complex needs, there may be times when families need help to move to a place where goal-oriented work can be most effective. The reality is that ‘little work on goal-setting or self-reflective observations on one’s own behaviour can be done when a person or a family member is in crisis’ (The Kellogg Foundation, 2019: 23). Coaches need to be able to hold the long-term change agenda and see the opportunities within the crisis – for engagement, observation, relationship building, role modelling, and skill building. In this process, coaches may need to adopt a number of different roles to support families at different stages of change (See Family Resourcing Framework in figure 2). Coaching techniques can be used alongside other practices with aligned values and principles, including strengths-based case management. Navigating these different roles and techniques requires workers to be purposeful and agile.

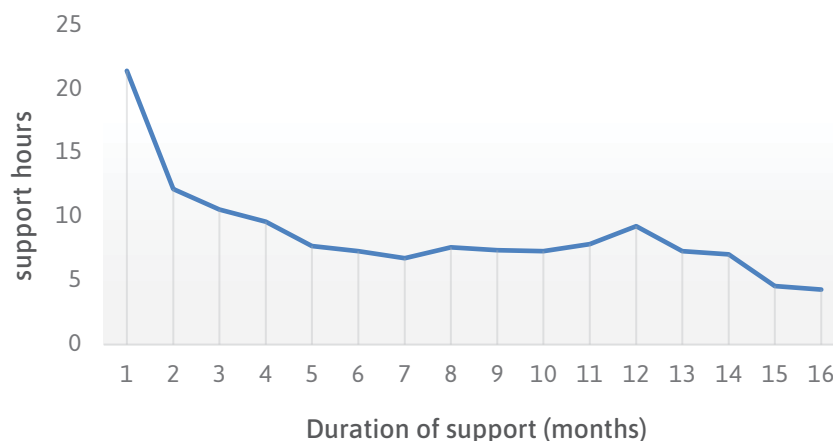


### 8.1.6 Providing individualised support

Thriving Families' customises support to each family. There is no one size-fits-all. Program data validated the tailored approach to meeting individual families' needs and preferences. The focus, duration and level of intensity were not the same for each family. Over the past 18 months, participating families have received an average of nine support hours per month. However, this fluctuated greatly over time and across families, depending on their needs.

The first month for families was the most intensive as the team rallied to rapidly stabilise housing. During this month, families receive an average of 21 support hours. Subsequently, support stabilised at around eight hours per month for the next twelve months before declining to around four hours per month after that, as demonstrated in figure 16 below.

**Figure 16: Average support hours**



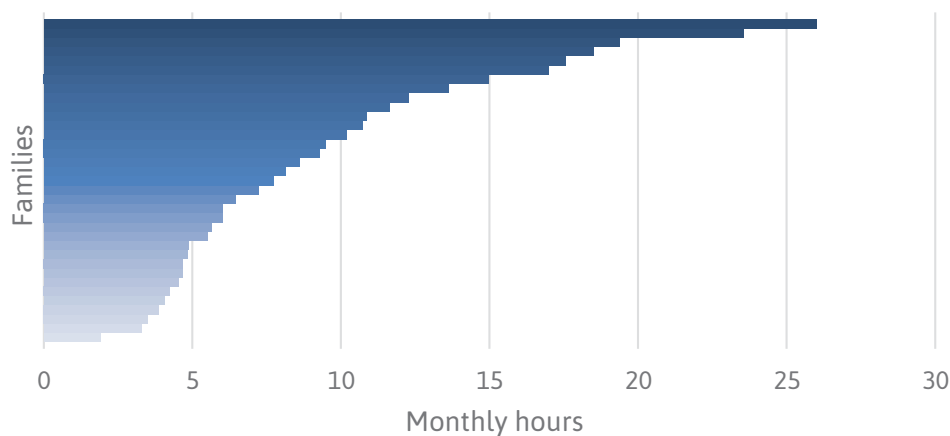
However, on a monthly per family basis, average support hours ranged from two to 26 hours, as per figure 17 below, which suggests participants had varying levels of capacity and skills, engagement, and motivation. On average, the majority had fairly light to moderate needs, however, some had quite intensive support needs, as follows:

- Intensive > 15 hours per month (6 families, 17%)
- Moderate 5-15 hours per month (18 families, 51%)
- Light < 5 hours per month (11 families, 31%).

These levels of need are not mutually exclusive categories as family support needs changed over time. Even for those with moderate needs, occasional peak periods of intensity occurred alongside critical life events, including significant mental health breakdowns, suicidal ideation, and domestic violence incidents.



**Figure 17: Average monthly support hours per family**



This wide variety of support provided suggests that at any one time, coaches are likely to have a mix of clients with low, moderate and intensive needs, and need to be able to adjust support accordingly. Flexible funding is a necessity for this.

The mixed intensity caseload is beneficial in a number of ways:

- it is more sustainable for coaches, reducing the risk of burn out associated with a very intensive caseload
- it enables coaches to invest in families beyond crisis resolution
- it opens up opportunities for peer-to-peer mentorship as parents who are more stable and functional can support other parents. Thriving Families has begun to explore this possibility.
- it keeps the door open to participants who just need occasional 'light touch' check-ins to prevent relapse into difficulty. As observed by a Family Coach in relation to a family that was stable at the time:

*“I can see where it could unravel in the next six months, so I just hang in there with her, but don't do a lot.”*

The optimal duration of support needed by participating families is also variable. Based on the duration of support received by those families who have already exited the service (15 families with an average support period of 7 months) and those currently open (20 families with an average support period of 12 months to date), the probable duration of support for families is up to 18 months (with decreased intensity over time), broken down as follows:

- 20% less than 6 months
- 40% between 6 to 12 months
- 40% 12 to 18 months.





### 8.1.7 Navigating service systems

When asked about the key strengths of the service, a common theme identified by stakeholders was Thriving Families' ability to link families in with the right services and to provide ongoing support to ensure referrals stick. This requires knowledge of the service system, and close working relationships with partner organisations, which were evident from stakeholder feedback. The value for families of effective linking with other services is:

- greater access to appropriate services
- reduced stress associated with trying to access a service
- positive experience that encourages future help-seeking behaviour
- increased knowledge of options and advocacy skills to self-navigate the system.

Service system barriers are well documented, including a 2019 report by Chris Sultmann from Encompass commissioned by Logan Together to examine service access for families linked with YFS' Sure Steps family coaching program. Families with complex needs are likely to require access to multiple and diverse services that cut across different siloed service systems. Yet the services they need may not exist in the area, and they may not be visible or available to the family due to eligibility requirements and intake processes. Once accessed, services may not fully understand families' circumstances or the impact of trauma and may not be responsive to families' needs (Sultmann, 2019).

Vulnerable families are likely to be less equipped than other families to navigate this terrain. Stakeholders observed how Thriving Families both provided services directly and brought in other services as needed. Numerous examples were provided by stakeholders describing how Thriving Families enabled access to services that families may not have otherwise accessed without assistance.

In one example, a partner organisation described how Thriving Families enabled a family to not only access a service but to help embed the benefits. This family was initially not accepted into the service as they had difficulty providing the required referral information. Thriving Families supported them to access the service, complete the program offered by the service, then worked with the family to help them use the strategies they learned through the program in the home while dealing with the usual distractions of family life.

Stakeholders described a combination of supported referrals and ongoing support as helpful for getting referrals to stick and resolving any issues that emerged along the way. This ongoing support enhances trust and confidence from partners.



Stakeholders also described Thriving Families as operating with commitment and follow through, further enhancing their trust and confidence in the service.

*“They are true to their word and they do what they say.”*

*“They care, they are efficient, they follow through.”*

*“If they recommend someone, I don’t question them as I trust them.”*

This facilitated approach not only enables families to access the support that meets their needs, it helps to reduce the stress associated with trying to access support. Working in partnership and streamlining processes can reduce the cognitive burden on parents that are already overloaded by stressful circumstances. Having positive experiences of the service sector can also help to build trust in the system and encourage future service-seeking behaviour, as highlighted by stakeholders:

*“Helping to build families trust in the system.”*

*“Building trust with families who have not had good experiences of accessing and using services – finding the courage to try again.”*

Families described how they would be more likely to reach out for help in the future, regarding help seeking as an opportunity, not something to be ashamed of:

*“Knowing that it’s not hard to get to where you want to be by reaching out and talking.”*

*“Having the support to double check or if I’m feeling down there’s someone to call.”*

*“Having good people around me and support by calling someone to check.”*

*“Not everything is hard and people can help you in situations.”*

With the assistance of Thriving Families, participants also built their knowledge of options and advocacy skills to self-navigate the service system. There were many examples where families relocated and subsequently linked themselves in with supports with minimal assistance from Thriving Families.

*“I now know about organisations out there that will help young families.”*



## 8.2 DELIVERING INTEGRATED SERVICES

A unique aspect of this service is the Housing Specialist role that is positioned alongside the Family Coaches. The findings show that integration works. However, benefits are not guaranteed. These roles require very different skills and orientations – Housing Specialists have to work fast and focus on tasks and action, coaches take a long-term view and aim to enable families and build their capacity over time. For the team to harness families' motivation and keep them engaged once they are housed, working together from the start is critical. Integrating these functions well takes concerted effort and culture change.

The experience from Thriving Families identifies several key elements that have impacted on the integration of services, including:

- leadership and management
- a shared purpose
- culture and practice
- conflict management
- roles and responsibilities
- transparency of information
- systems and processes
- communication with families.

### 8.2.1 Leadership and management

Organisational and programmatic leadership and management was identified as a critical enabler of integration. This includes:

- commitment at an organisational level to support the integration effort, including the investment of resources. YFS put substantial time and money into backing the project. Thriving Families was self-funded through reserve funds, and resources were allocated for service design, team training, reflective supervision and ongoing monitoring, evaluation and learning.
- a program manager who understands integration and demonstrates leadership in navigating the inevitable hurdles associated with trying something new.
- ongoing change management to address any barriers as they emerge and reinforce desired practices.

Without strong leadership and management, the integration effort would not have worked as effectively.



### 8.2.2 A shared purpose

The Thriving Families team was formed with a shared purpose – to resource families to thrive. This was established from the outset through the intensive training and team building period before the service accepted any referrals, and reinforced through practice reflections facilitated by Pathways to Resilience.

Having this shared purpose in mind influenced how the team worked together. Their collective focus was firmly on families. Their decision making was guided by the best outcome for the family and the best next step to take towards that outcome.

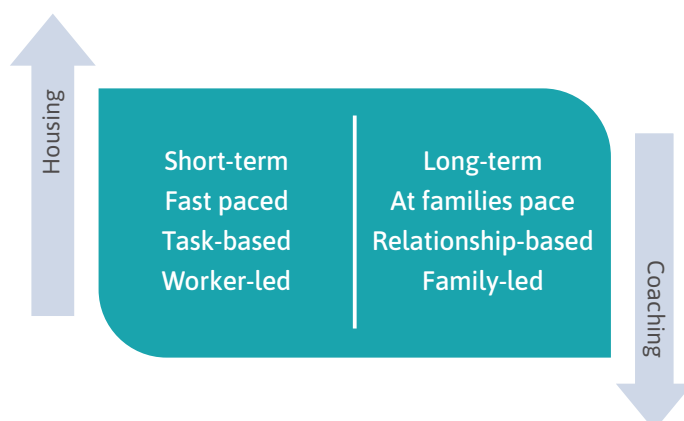
Arguably, in this instance, integration was made easier by the overarching principle of parents setting the direction and pace of the work. When practitioners see themselves not as experts (in relation to families) but as partners in working alongside families, they are less likely to see themselves as experts in relation to one another. This orientation naturally lends itself to an openness to different ways of working in the best interest of the family.

### 8.2.3 Culture and practice

Over time, a strong team culture was developed within Thriving Families. However, there are significant cultural differences between traditional approaches to housing work and family support work. Housing work is typically fast-paced, short-term, directive and task focused. There are specific steps to follow and an order and timeframe in which they must happen. The process is black and white and legally binding. Housing options do not stay available for long. Urgency is critical. Coaching on the other hand is long-term, meets the family where they are at and works at their pace on the goals they have set. As one team member highlighted: *“Housing is about right now. Coaching is about working alongside to get somewhere.”*

Reconciling these two seemingly diametrically opposed approaches is a significant challenge. In fact, it goes to the very heart of integration – figuring out how to work together. In the Thriving Families team, Family Coaches had to learn about housing processes and the Housing Specialist had to learn how to operate within a person-centred, coaching style.

**Figure 18: Differences between housing and family support approaches**



#### **8.2.4 Conflict management**

The Thriving Families team consists of practitioners from a diverse mix of backgrounds, professionally and personally. Each member brings a different perspective. This is one of the strengths of a multi-disciplinary, integrated approach. Inevitably at times, team members may not agree on the way forward. However, they need to be able to “*disagree respectfully*” – to see the other perspective and move forward based on what is best for the family.

Thriving Families’ strengths-based, relational approach is embedded in how they operate, it colours their interactions with families and with each other. They are not afraid to challenge one another, but they are thoughtful in how they challenge. They listen to each other and in turn feel heard. They value each other’s contribution and recognise their work as a whole is more effective when they utilise everyone’s strengths. This appreciative style promotes an open learning culture within the team.

#### **8.2.5 Roles and responsibilities**

While the Housing Specialist and Family Coaches have clear and separate roles, there are some overlapping areas. This is valuable as the team can support, back up and reinforce each other. The division of labour in Thriving Families is not as simple as housing work for the Housing Specialist and coaching work for the coaches. There is an overarching team orientation to the work and utilisation of the expertise and skills within the team to do the work and manage the workload. This means the whole team needs to know where every family is at, have a basic knowledge of core functions, and willingness to step outside of their predefined role at times. Over time, as Family Coaches’ housing expertise has grown, they have been able to take on a wider range of housing tasks. Similarly, as the Housing Specialist learnt more about coaching, they were able to engage families around a range of non-housing issues.

Thus, in Thriving Families, roles and responsibilities are fluid rather than fixed and are constantly redefined and negotiated. Excess rigidity around roles risks creating silos within the team, which defeats the purpose of an integration effort.

#### **8.2.6 Information sharing**

Communication and transparency of information is paramount. To this end, having shared access to the same information management system is advantageous. Thriving Families has also developed visual tools for information sharing. White boards are used to track housing status and any particular issues that may affect the tenancy or longer-term goals. Everyone can see this essential information at a glance and can easily pick up work with a family if the usual person is unavailable for whatever reason.



## 8.2.7 Systems and processes

Because of the urgency of housing, or any crisis response, Thriving Families structured work around this. There are set tasks that occur within each housing phase (establishment, sustainment and transition). Some tasks require specialist expertise, others can be done by a Family Coach (either as part of their usual practice or with guidance from the Housing Specialist). In general, the Housing Specialist leads in the establishment phase and the Family Coach leads in the sustainment and transition phases, however, both roles have different responsibilities in each phase, for example, as per the table below.

**Table 1: Housing activities across phases**

	Establishment phase	Sustainment phase	Transition phase
<b>Housing Specialist role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial needs assessment</li> <li>Housing applications</li> <li>Liaise and leverage relationships with stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rapid response to rent arrears or eviction notices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan for positive transition at end of tenancy</li> </ul>
<b>Family Coach role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Search properties</li> <li>Attend property viewings</li> <li>Coach families around presentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coaching around household management, routines, budgets and tenancy obligations</li> <li>Link with supports (e.g. DFV counselling or financial counsellor)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify long-term housing goals</li> </ul>

It is particularly important that coaches play a visible role in the housing process. Housing is the main reason people in the program have sought out support. To enable ongoing engagement with the Family Coach after housing has been established, coaches (as the primary relationship holder with the family) need to be seen as the face of success. This is perhaps the most critical juncture in Thriving Families' delivery of integrated services – the transition from housing to coaching as the main priority. This is the point at which families are most likely to disengage.

*“Coaches need to overtake the hero status [of the Housing Specialist]. This takes skilled workers who can build relationship and rapport.”*





### 8.2.8 Communication with families

When multiple workers are supporting a family in a team approach, there needs to be clarity around who will contact the family for what purpose. This appears to have worked well from the families' perspective.

Families were asked what it was like working with both a housing specialist and family coach to get a sense of how these roles were understood and viewed by participants. Overall responses were consistent in praising the work of both roles and how they work effectively together when required:



*You can tell that as a team they like working together which makes it nicer."*

*"Not stressful, they worked well together."*

*"They work well together, the whole team helps each other out."*

Although participants were aware that the roles and focus areas for the Housing Specialist and Family Coaches are different, and the Housing Specialist tended to be more involved when they commenced with Thriving Families, the comment was made that the experience from both was consistent:

*"I thought they had the same role because they are invested in you, your family, your needs."*

There was a clear understanding of the differing roles of the Housing Specialist and Family Coaches and no issues were raised about role interface and handover processes. The playgroup was seen as an opportunity for participants to meet with the team as a whole and many participants valued this and enjoyed seeing the positive working relationships within the team.

While this section focuses on the integration of different roles within the Thriving Families' team, the learnings reflect the necessary conditions for integrated work more broadly and are applicable for cross-organisational and multi-agency work too. Thriving Families worked in close partnership with other YFS programs, the Department of Housing, real estate agents and other stakeholders to support and link families with a range of services. The effectiveness of these partnerships was similarly based on strong leadership, shared purpose and practices, and clarity of roles, information and processes.



## 9. IMPLICATIONS: STRENGTHENING AND EXPANDING THE APPROACH

- If Thriving Families continues in its current form, refinement of groupwork, intake processes and step down support, as well as First Nations representation, would be beneficial
- The model is likely to be effective with other cohorts and in other contexts, such as with other groups experiencing homelessness, or with groups experiencing other crises who need long-term support to thrive
- Elements of the model lend themselves to broader application in YFS and other services, particularly the integrated service approach and the family resourcing framework.

The evaluation identified opportunities to improve, expand and embed the current Thriving Families model, as well as elements of the model that could be applied more broadly and learnings that can influence policy, program design and commissioning.

The evaluation identified potential to:

1. Improve the model as is
2. Apply the model to other cohorts and in other contexts
3. Embed elements of the model in other services at YFS or beyond.

Opportunities to influence policy, program design, and commissioning relate to sharing findings from the Thriving Families trial to encourage greater emphasis on integration and removal of barriers to this caused by funding or program siloes.

### 9.1 CONTINUING THRIVING FAMILIES

Maintaining the model as a stand-alone service will require attraction of ongoing funding. If this is achieved, the team and future participants may benefit from:

- further developing group activities
- recruiting a First Nations worker to the team
- refining eligibility, intake and referral processes and timeframes
- developing effective ways to provide ongoing 'light-touch' or 'step down' support for families
- on-going focus on strategies that promote positive, sustained behaviour change.

Feedback on the service from participants, stakeholders and staff was overwhelmingly positive. There were minimal suggestions for improvement.



*To me, they literally go out of their way and beyond – I couldn't say they could do anything better."*



### 9.1.1 Purposeful expansion of groupwork

Regular attendees provided very positive feedback about how the playgroup has contributed to their support network and the value of connecting with other mums, describing it as “a home away from home”. However, a couple of participants voiced reluctance to attend playgroup – one due to self-described social anxiety, another found it difficult to connect with group members because she started a bit later.

One participant suggested they would get more out of the playgroup if it took a more structured approach with more planned activities “for the kids to get involved all together”. This participant also suggested that parents take turns to lead with planning the activities.

One stakeholder also identified a need for continued purposeful focus on the playgroup and how it is used to develop knowledge and understanding of child development strategies and its role in supporting natural connections between participants.



The playgroup developed somewhat organically to suit the needs of participants and appears to have done so effectively. Now it is opportune to review and refine its intent and approach.

There was also a suggestion to expand group work to include:

- a parent support group, with a special focus on building networks with friends and families that are more sustainable than services, possibly with a family-to-family mentorship component.
- a young women’s group with a focus on healthy relationships and self-worth.

Group programs have been found to foster peer interaction, sharing and learning and to improve social support, community connectedness, parenting capacity, parent-child relationships and outcomes for children. They can work particularly well with young parents, who may be more readily influenced by their peers. Group programs can vary considerably in their content, style and activities. They may be delivered by a combination of peers and practitioners (Berthelsen, et al., 2012). Using parents as role models or peer mentors can enhance self-efficacy, sense of satisfaction and pride in being able to offer assistance and provides an opportunity to develop valuable work skills (Boulden, 2010).



### 9.1.2 Supporting First Nations participants

Of the seven participants who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, one was interviewed for this evaluation (the others had either exited the service already or were unavailable to participate in an interview at the time). Feedback on the service received from the First Nations participant was overall positive. However, she commented on how she had initially worked with a First Nations identified Family Coach (who left the team when funding was reduced after 12 months) and that although happy with her current non-Indigenous Family Coach, she felt her previous First Nations Coach had more understanding of cultural ways and “our mob”. From her comments, the interviewer understood that having someone from the same cultural background meant that there were cultural aspects that were implicitly understood. This aspect is important to bear in mind with existing and future First Nations participants in terms of engagement, inclusion and cultural safety in the service.

With feedback from only one of the First Nations identified participants, there is not enough evidence available to assess the overall cultural appropriateness of the service. However, the family resourcing approach adopted by the team is consistent with good practice in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, including an understanding of the inter-generational impact of trauma, building trusting relationships, identifying and building on strengths, providing a mix of supports to meet whole-of-family needs, and collaborative decision making, planning and review (SNAICC, 2016). The approach appears to be effective for engaging First Nations participants in Thriving Families (with 71% participating in the service for at least six months, compared to 75% for non-Indigenous participants) and in promoting positive outcomes (with an average subsequent Thriving Families Matrix rating of 6.25 for First Nations participants, compared to 6.33 for non-Indigenous participants).<sup>8</sup> While the sample size is too small to adequately compare engagement rates or outcomes at this stage, the data that is available is promising.

### 9.1.3 Referral and eligibility criteria

The choice of referral criteria to target young families with limited previous experience of homelessness aligns with the service intent to divert people away from homelessness before it becomes entrenched. The emphasis on children under six aligns with thinking about early brain development – the period where there is the most opportunity to set children on a positive trajectory.

While most stakeholders, participants and staff thought the eligibility criteria worked well, one stakeholder felt the referral criteria for Thriving Families was too narrow, because it targets first time homeless families, suggesting this can appear like Thriving Families is ‘cherry picking’ referrals, choosing those facing the least barriers. In a context with high levels of homelessness and disadvantage, this criterion does limit referrals as many families in Logan have experienced homelessness more than once.

<sup>8</sup>Subsequent ratings aggregate all Thriving Families Matrix ratings recorded after the initial rating to maximise the number of assessments included. However, average subsequent ratings will be affected by the date of commencement and duration of service received, given the overall association of higher ratings over time.



While those with more complex, entrenched needs would likely also benefit from the sort of long-term, integrated support provided by Thriving Families, this cohort does not align with the early intervention intent. A similar integrated approach with a cohort that has more entrenched experience of homelessness would be worth trialling as noted below.

This feedback demonstrates the ongoing pressure services are under to work at the “pointy end” of crisis, with few resources directed to avoiding crises. It is hoped that this evaluation assists to clarify the rationale for early intervention.

Another eligibility criterion that was also questioned was the ‘genuine interest in the service offerings beyond housing’ and the implications of this requirement on intake timeframes. This criterion was selected because engagement is a strong predictor of outcomes, and one of the barriers to engagement is a lack of motivation to change or not feeling ready (Cash et al., 2014). To reap the full benefits of the service, participants need to engage in the coaching component. This is made easier if there is an existing interest that coaches can build upon. Without this, families could simply have their housing needs met by a traditional housing only service. However, it can take one or two conversations to assess families’ level of interest in the non-housing components of the service. This intake process can therefore be slower than a typical housing intake process. It may be worth reviewing the referral, intake and assessment process for homeless families across YFS to ensure they are allocated to the most appropriate service and there are no undue delays in the intake process.

#### **9.1.4 Stepping down process**

To date, Thriving Families has had relatively few families exit the service. Accordingly, the end of support is less well defined and tested than the start of support. Given the service caters to families with mixed levels of support needs, including many who could benefit from ‘light touch’ support to prevent relapse into difficulty, it would be worth considering what the stepping down process should look like. This may include formalising the use of existing elements of the service for this purpose, for example a check in process, group work, or peer support.

#### **9.1.5 Promoting positive, sustained behaviour change**

Backing people to overcome adversity and to thrive means promoting and enabling transformative change. Yet it can be difficult to maintain a focus on holding the long-term change agenda in the context of ongoing support, which is often characterised by critical life events and other destabilising factors which threaten to undermine progress and send families back into crisis. Housing, safety or mental health issues take precedence when they escalate to crisis point. It is unrealistic to expect families not to experience bumps in the road. The purpose of long-term support is to reduce the frequency and intensity of these bumps and build families’ capacity to plan for, manage and bounce back from them. As noted above, this requires an intentional focus that recognises the opportunity in crisis periods and incrementally builds motivation and skills in the stable periods.



The Thriving Families interim evaluation report identified the need for a more purposeful and intentional focus on skill building and goal setting and progression to promote positive, sustained behaviour change. A number of strategies were implemented to strengthen this focus, including:

- adopting a case note structure to reinforce the purpose of each interaction and focus the team's attention on the intent of activities
- revised goal setting and review processes
- utilisation of techniques such as appreciative inquiry and motivational interviewing to guide conversations that explore readiness for change, evoke action and hold parents and coaches accountable throughout the change process.

These strategies appear to have been effective. Evidence for this can be found in the participants' enhanced sense of possibility, which signifies a shift in how they understand themselves and the world; and the establishment of longer-term goals that create a pathway out of poverty and exclusion (such as education and employment), compared to earlier short-term goals that would have an immediate positive impact on participants' day to day lives (such as obtaining a drivers licence). While families have taken many steps and experienced positive change so far, this shift signifies enhanced motivation and readiness to take deeper strides on the pathway towards thriving. Nonetheless, given the centrality of coaching for change in achieving service objectives, it is worth continuing to shine a spotlight on this area of work and explore strategies for enhancement should the program continue.





## 9.2 CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPANSION

Expansion options include trialling the effectiveness of this integrated coaching and specialist model with other cohorts and in other contexts, for example:

- with other groups experiencing homelessness, e.g. young people exiting out of home care
- with groups experiencing crises other than homelessness that could benefit from an approach integrating specialists and workers with a broader relationship-based approach, e.g. substance use or domestic violence
- adding additional specialists to a larger team working with people experiencing homelessness e.g. a domestic violence specialist, employment specialist or family therapist as well as a Housing Specialist.

A common sentiment expressed by participants, stakeholders and staff was the desire to expand the project. Indeed, this was the number one recommendation when asked how Thriving Families could improve. One common comment was that the project could be expanded to work with different cohorts.

These considerations are explored in more detail below.

### 9.2.1 Suitability and adaptability to different cohorts

In general, participants, staff and stakeholders felt the service worked well with the current eligibility criteria. They suggested the service could also work well with different cohorts including:

- older families
- young parents
- families with primary school aged children (current eligibility is under 6)
- single homeless people with mental health issues
- people who have been let down by the service system or need assistance to navigate the service system.

However, transferring the program to a different group would require some consideration of which particular elements of the program would work for different groups and what adaptations would be required. There are a lot of elements to this program that have contributed to its success, as articulated in Section 8 above. These components are complementary, but some are more relevant to particular groups than others.

Most people with complex needs who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness could benefit from a supportive housing approach that combines specialist housing intervention with long-term holistic support to address underlying and emerging issues. However, for single homeless people, for example, there would be no need for the focus on parenting and child development. This would change the shape of the resilience building component of the program, which is currently multi-generational. Similarly, research suggests that while group work is particularly effective for young people, this component may not be relevant or may look different for older families.



It is worth noting that Thriving Families works in the secondary support system, working with families with targeted or complex needs. It is unclear at this stage whether coaching approaches would suit those with either universal or acute needs (see below for a breakdown of support needs).

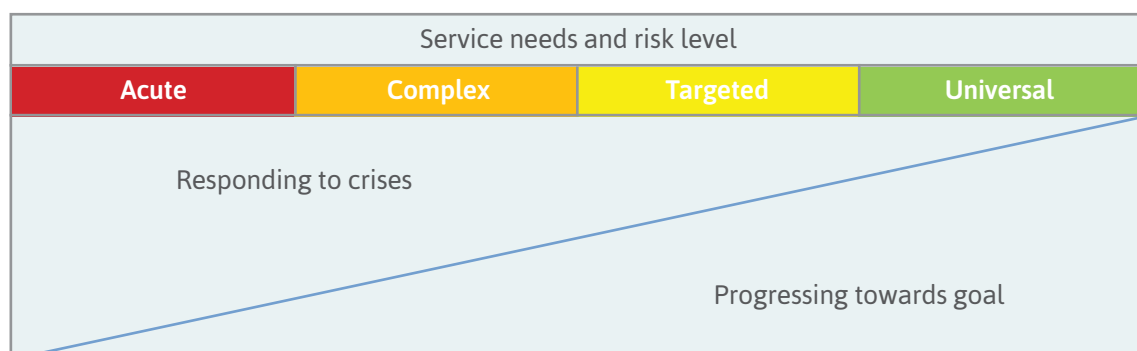
The breadth and intensity of family support needs vary over time, ranging from universal to acute:

- universal – directed towards all families (such as health and education)
- targeted – directed towards groups with special characteristics who may need some additional support (such as low income or young parents)
- complex – directed towards families experiencing multiple, complex issues
- acute – directed towards families experiencing multiple, very complex issues, with imminent safety risks (Bilson, 2017).

The family resourcing approach balances practical and aspirational needs. While the model appears to be able to accommodate different levels of complexity, it is probably not appropriate for those with acute needs where greater emphasis needs to be on responding to crises, preventing abuse and neglect and working with risk. While coaches can (and in some cases do) provide this type of response, it is not aligned with the intent of family resourcing, which is to move beyond safety to thriving and the benefits associated with the aspirational side of the program may not be realised with those at this end of the service spectrum. An intervention targeting families where children or adults are at significant risk of harm is likely to require a more directive case management approach, with the aim imposed by the program rather than the parents.

At the other end of the spectrum, family coaching could be highly effective with families that have more universal needs, through a prevention program (rather than early or late intervention). It may be worth exploring what a coaching model would look like in a non-crisis context, for example through an intervention attached to a maternity hub. This would require a different engagement strategy that the one currently used by Thriving Families, which capitalises on the housing crisis.

**Figure 19: Balancing crisis response and goal progression across intervention levels**



### 9.3 EMBEDDING SERVICE ELEMENTS

Options to embed elements of the model in other services at YFS or beyond include:

- adding housing or other specialists to existing generalist services such as family support or youth engagement teams to build integrated service models
- adopting learning from the development of the family resourcing model in other teams that work with families, adding coaching approaches to their ways of working.

The individualised nature of support provided by the program reinforces that the model cannot simply be picked up and dropped into another context or cohort without taking into account individuals' unique needs. However, components of the model have proven effective in other programs. The family resourcing approach is used by the Sure Steps program, which works with more complex families with a longer history of involvement in the service system (McDonald and Testro, 2019) and is currently being trialled by the Step by Step program which works exclusively with young parents, with promising results.



## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that YFS:

1. Continue to develop the Thriving Families model, seeking ongoing funding to:
  - a. review and **refine** current elements of the approach:
    - the purpose and structure of group work
    - support for First Nations participants
    - intake, assessment and referral processes and timeframes
    - service characteristics when working with families at high, moderate or low intensity, particularly in the 'light touch' or 'step down' phase
    - strategies for promoting positive, sustained behaviour change.
  - b. **enhance** emphasis on the following areas:
    - education and employment as a way out of poverty, given the extent of financial disadvantage
    - low self-worth and relationship dysfunction, given the high rates of repeated domestic and family violence
    - a more formalised 'family-to-family' peer support and mentorship approach, given low levels of social connection and natural supports
    - therapeutic capacity, given the high prevalence of mental health issues and counselling referrals.
2. Continue to **trial innovative service responses** to address local needs and learn about service design and delivery across different contexts and cohorts, for example through:
  - integration of housing specialists into other long-term support programs (such as youth programs)
  - integration of other specialties into long-term support programs (such as employment specialists, domestic violence specialists, group workers, financial counsellors and counsellors)
  - trialling the family resourcing approach with different cohorts and levels of intensity (such as single homelessness individuals or attached to a maternity hub).
3. Share and **embed** learnings across YFS' services, particularly related to:
  - early intervention, to have a shared understanding of the rationale for intervening before issues become entrenched
  - service integration, to inform coordination and collaboration between services
  - the family resourcing approach, to equip people and families to overcome adversity and to thrive.
4. **Advocate for flexible** funding to design and deliver services based on what works.



## 11. CONCLUSION

Thriving Families has had a profound and transformative impact in the lives of participants and their children. This report highlights the tangible gains resulting from the program including increased stability, confidence, capability, and connections, with benefits accrued for both parents and children. Those engaged in the service describe their involvement with Thriving Families as a journey out of crisis and towards thriving. They unanimously indicated they are better off now than they would be without Thriving Families.

Overall, YFS has successfully developed and implemented an integrated housing and family support program. The program was designed based on evidence, and the evaluation findings reaffirm the need for, and value of, long-term, flexible support and resourcing for families.

This evaluation indicates the program:

- is effective in engaging and meeting the needs of families, moving families from crisis to stability and providing a strong foundation for thriving over time
- is cost effective in providing integrated housing and family support services compared to separate provision of support
- could potentially reduce the burden on government-funded services through intervening early and preventing further entry into tertiary services.

Thriving Families is still relatively early in its implementation and continues to learn and evolve to better suit the families it works with. However, even at this early stage, Thriving Families is demonstrating the hallmarks of a highly effective, well regarded early intervention program.

The initiative has provided significant learnings for working effectively with homeless families and delivering integrated services, with possible application across YFS, and beyond.



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## APPENDIX A: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

Thriving Families adopted an action research approach to program monitoring, evaluation, and learning through an ongoing process of planning, doing, reflecting and adapting. This enabled testing of hypotheses in a real-world environment, early identification of issues for timely course correction and continuous improvement of practices. Interviews with participants, staff, stakeholders were also conducted to capture different perspectives on the effectiveness of the service.

The evaluation drew on multiple data sources:

- ongoing learning and reflection
- staff interviews
- participant interviews
- stakeholder interviews
- participants case studies
- program data
- case note review.

### Learning and reflection

Learning and reflection is embedded within program implementation. The primary mechanisms for ongoing learning are regular:

- service delivery review meetings, focused on design and implementation in context
- family reviews, focused on specific families, mapping progress and next steps
- practice reflection (facilitated by Pathways to Resilience), focused on good practice tools and techniques for resourcing families to thrive.

In addition, three workshops were held with the program team to further explore to specific themes:

- collaboration between the Housing Specialist and Family Coaches, with a focus on workload and task distribution (held in January 2020)
- overall progress in each element of the service model, with a focus on engagement, goal setting, and skill building (held in February 2020).<sup>9</sup>
- validation of evaluation findings, implications and recommendations (held in January 2021).

Key reflections and any subsequent practice adaptations from each of these mechanisms, as well as informal conversations, were documented to inform the evaluation.

<sup>9</sup>Family Coaches from the Sure Steps program which has been implementing a coaching model since 2017 were also present to share experiences and provide insights.



### **Staff interviews**

Interviews were held with all program staff in order to obtain individual feedback. Staff were encouraged to provide honest feedback about what was working well and what was not working well and assured that this would not be attributed to them personally.

### **Participant interviews**

Twelve participants were interviewed in December 2020. 11 participants are still engaged with the program and one had recently closed. All were female, mothers. One identified as First Nations and one was from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Eight interviews were conducted in person and four were conducted over the phone as per participants' preference. Interviews were conducted by Encompass Family and Community.

### **Stakeholder interviews**

Nine stakeholders were interviewed in December 2020, including:

- 3 from the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy
- 2 real estate agents
- 2 community services
- 2 partner organisations.

One interview was conducted in person and eight were conducted over the phone as per participants preference. Interviews were conducted by Paul Testo Consultancy Services.

### **Case studies**

Three case studies were prepared by the YFS communications team for inclusion in the evaluation to exemplify families' involvement with the program. The case studies contextualise program data by telling the families' story. Participants consented to share their identity.

### **Program data**

Program data for the first 18 months of operation was analysed to identify the level and type of support provided and any outcomes achieved. Where possible, this has been compared with other YFS program data and external data as a point of reference, to give a sense of how the program is tracking compared to other programs and the likely status quo in relation to business as usual.

### **Case note review**

Case notes were reviewed for all 35 participating families.



### **Strengths and limitations**

The evaluation was based on a wide range of data sources, including feedback from multiple staff, participants and stakeholders. All of the feedback received was consistent and aligned with program data, lending validity to the findings. Ideally, the evaluation would have included more participant feedback, collected at multiple points over the 18-month period, as some participants had already exited the service when interviews were conducted, and their voices are not included. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the impact of coronavirus in 2020. Furthermore, because the service is small and relatively early in its developmental stage, the sample size was not large enough to compare engagement rates or outcomes across the cohort to get a sense of who the program may benefit the most. Having said that, positive change was recorded for all participating families via Thriving Families' outcomes measurement tools and was observable in case notes and reported directly by families themselves. This consistency adds weight to the overall finding that the service is highly effective and has resulted in positive change.

