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A new path for homeless Australian Jewish youth

Questioning an ultra-Orthodox upbringing can leave young people homeless. Pathways wants to create a safe house to protect them.

GIDEON COHEN



Image: Wikimedia

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A startling statistic was unveiled at a community symposium on Jewish youth homelessness held in Melbourne recently: 37 young Jewish people, aged 12-24, are estimated to be homeless or marginally housed each year.

The symposium organised by

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Pathways organisation was introduced by Pathways' CEO and founder, Leah Boulton, who presented the first-ever study on Melbourne's Jewish youth at risk of homelessness. Pathways offers support to young people who are questioning, transitioning out of, or have already left insular religious communities, including Orthodox.


Conducted from January to July of this year, the study consulted young Jewish adults aged 17 and over with lived experience, religious parents, community leaders, and a range of support services including those from the Jewish community and local state government.

Alarming, the study found that little-to-no support frameworks within the community existed to support at-risk Jewish teens. Vital services such as culturally appropriate foster care or a youth safe house were not available for those under the age of 18 who were experiencing abuse or, for those in Orthodox homes, conflict over religious

differences. If such crisis housing did exist, young people would be far more likely to come forward about experiencing abuse or needing assistance.

But that's about to change, according to Pathways.

Until now, most of its services – including social gatherings, LGBTIQ+ support, mentorship and referrals to health professionals and emergency housing - have only been available to those aged 18 and over. This has left few options to vulnerable Jewish minors, especially those in Orthodox communities.



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well.

Dassi Erlich, Pathways, Youth

and Family Program Manager

Now, Pathways is planning to launch a series of programs for teens aged 14 and over. It's the first step in what the organisation calls a "holistic vision" for mitigating and managing the risks of youth homelessness in the Jewish community. "We're opening up to have programs for 14+, which is a very big move for Pathways, because we've only serviced people 18 plus," Dassi Erlich, Pathways' Youth and Family Program Manager, told *The Jewish Independent*.


"What we really want to do is work with families, work with the teenagers that are questioning religion, and their parents as well. We know that that's one of the factors that puts a child at risk of homelessness, so we're hoping to really mitigate that factor."



Pathways symposium at Glen Eira Town Hall, (Instagram)

Following Boulton's presentation at the symposium, Erlich joined a panel of experts to discuss the issue. Also on the panel was Spiritgrow's Rabbi Menachem Wolf, youth homelessness advocate Russell Kaye, who shared his own experiences of growing up Orthodox and experiencing abuse, and Susan Barton, founder and director of Lighthouse, a foundation that provides services and housing for homeless youth.

As the second and third steps in Pathways' vision, the organisation will be partnering with Lighthouse to develop both a Jewish foster care and kinship program and creating a Jewish youth safe house, for which a property has already been secured.



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Dassi Erlich

During the panel discussion, Barton delivered a moving message, saying she felt compelled to help, because members of the Jewish community had always supported her work at Lighthouse, and because she was devastated by October 7 and the rise of antisemitism.

"Our main goals, of course, [is the] house," says Erlich. "I think a big part in making sure this works is getting the whole community behind it."

"That's something that we'll be working very hard on, because I don't think this will work in the community with the shame and stigma that surrounds these issues, without the leadership of the community endorsing it, and making it okay for young people to seek help, and really pushing that message."

Pathways' vision will need heavy funding. The preventative programs will require \$350,000 per year, while the foster care system and safe house will require at least \$350,000 in seed funding per year, for the next three years. Erlich said that following the symposium, the community was already expressing enthusiasm and asking to be involved.

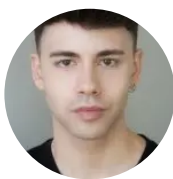
"Everyone that I've spoken to thought that it was brilliantly presented, and they appreciated finding out that information," she said. "This is the first kind of study that's been done on the youth in the community. So that was exciting for a lot of people, and very informative. I think there's quite a buzz in the

community with regards to getting this up and running.”

For Erlich and the team at Pathways, it’s not a question of whether they’ll be moving forward with the vision, but how quickly.

“We’ve already had some people saying that they definitely would like to be a part of funding this. We’ve had a really good response, even a few people saying that they’re thinking about being foster carers.”

About the author



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Gideon Cohen is a journalist and writer based in Melbourne. He writes regularly for Broadsheet and helps edit its partner magazine, Domain Review. He has also been published in Right Now, The Citizen and The Junction.

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