

5<sup>th</sup> July 2018

Committee Secretary  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
[obesitycommittee.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:obesitycommittee.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Secretary,

**RE: Submission to the Select Committee into the Obesity Epidemic in Australia**

**The Problem:**

Children in out-of-home care (OOHC) experience adverse physical and mental health outcomes. These children predominantly reside in home-based care: latest statistics suggest 40% live in foster care (where the child is placed in a private home with a substitute family), 49% in relative/kinship care (where the child is placed with another family member or someone with a pre-existing relationship with the child), and 5% are in third-party parental care; approximately 6% of children are placed in residential care, whereby up to four children, usually aged between 12–17 years, live in a home with professional carers. Our formative research established that children living in residential OOHC are at substantially increased risk of excessive weight gain and associated morbidity. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in Australian OOHC services.

**Our Vision:**

For more than 8 years, our research has been focused on improving the healthy lifestyle behaviours of our most vulnerable children and young people.

**The Solution – The Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEALing) Matters Program**

The core principles of HEALing Matters are ‘healthy body, healthy mind’ and the program uses a trauma informed philosophy to guide carers’ understanding of the link between healthy lifestyle behaviours of young people and improved physical, cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. The HEALing Matters Program, that has been co-designed and informed by extensive stakeholder consultation, is delivered within a framework that is informed by attachment, trauma, neurobiological development and resilience theories. Importantly, HEALing Matters moves beyond a behavioural approach to healthy eating and physical activity and recognises that food and physical activity are a powerful way of demonstrating trust, care, predictability, flexibility and attuned parenting. Specifically, HEALing Matters emphasises how food and activity are a powerful way of demonstrating trust, care, predictability, flexibility, and attuned parenting. Hence, training, resourcing and supporting the sector to positively influence a child’s eating and/or physical activity habits provides an opportunity to: improve carers’ skills to respond appropriately, and therapeutically, to children’s pain-based behaviour; and to prepare children for a healthy future by using food and activity to normalise their experiences, promote socially acceptable behaviours, and a sense of belonging.

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### Case Study: Paul (named changed); Age: 15; Weight: 130kg

I started HEAL with Paul 2 months ago because his weight was becoming a serious health issue. Paul has been in care for approximately 12 months and he has put on 20kg in this time. At the beginning Paul was hesitant to join in with the HEAL program. He stated that he had very low self-esteem, no confidence and he did not like to go out of the house. Paul was not engaged in school and did minimal physical activity; his days were filled with TV and computer games. Paul's HEAL goal was to lose weight. I started getting Paul out of the unit, taking him bowling, cooking with him or just walking around town to help build up his self-esteem. Paul agreed to attend personal training sessions and we also organised a 'Lite n Easy' diet plan to start the following fortnight. Paul also reengaged in an education program at the Neighbourhood house. In the first three weeks since starting his personal training and new eating plan, Paul lost 10cm from his waist. The improvements in his physical and mental wellbeing are noticeable and he states he feels happier in himself. Paul has also started setting goals for when he has lost more weight, for example, he would like to join a basketball team and try swimming. \* Paul lost 30 kg during the life of the study, continued to be reengaged with school and continued eating healthily and being physically active.

### The Policy Context:

Consensus on the urgency and priority for the proposed project is clear: The Victorian "*Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children*", "*Looking After Children Framework*", and "*The Home-based Care Handbook*" and the Federal Government's "*National Standards for Out-of-home Care*"<sup>14</sup> unanimously call for healthy lifestyle interventions to improve the health of children living in OOHC. The Australian Medical Association has also prioritised breaking the cycle of intergenerational vulnerability and dependency through health-related capacity building. However, to date, initiatives to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for young people in OOHC have focused on "problem-oriented" and "illness- focused" approaches. While these are an integral part of a holistic health care plan, evidence tells us that effective prevention reduces the likelihood of the onset of chronic disease such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and asthma, as well as stigmatisation, psychopathology and body dissatisfaction.

After years of efficacy research by our team, we are now working in partnership with the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services to scale up HEALing Matters in residential OOHC across the State.

### What needs to be done next:

We urge the Select Committee to recognize this vulnerable group, understand that despite the wicked nature of the problem (obesity), there are opportunities for impact through co-design and end-user consultation. We are the go to people here. There is no other team in Australia, and internationally, that has developed an obesity prevention program for young people in OOHC. We can partner and scale to deliver HEALing Matters nationally and make an impact now.

### Who we are:

We are a multidisciplinary team with expertise in psychology/behaviour change, endocrinology, obstetrics, dietetics, exercise physiology, public health, maternal health, systems thinking, healthcare improvement, implementation science.

### Where are we based and our collaborative networks:

The Monash Centre for Health Research and Implementation (MCHRI) is a key partnership between Monash Health and Monash University, forming a unique collaborative centre focused on directly delivering improved health outcomes through prevention. MCHRI aims to create, synthesise, implement and translate clinical, health services and public health knowledge to prevent and reduce the rate of chronic disease (with a particular focus on maternal and childhood obesity) and to reduce inequalities in health and wellbeing. We apply population and place-based

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approaches to our work to solve the wicked and complex health and health care problems we face. We house multiple recognised Centres of Excellence and lead national and international networks in this field.

**Our MCHRI expert team includes:**

**Professor Helen Skouteris**

Developmental Psychologist; maternal and child obesity and implementation science expert

**Professor Helena Teede**

Endocrinologist and public health researcher and expert

**Associate Professor Lisa Moran**

Dietician and public health researcher and expert

**Dr Tracy Robinson**

Senior Research Fellow and implementation science and healthcare improvement expert

**Dr Rachael Cox**

Postdoctoral Research Fellow

**Bengianni Pirizanni**

Research Fellow

**Madelaine Smales**

Research Assistant with a lived experience of OOHC

**Dr Lauren Bruce**

Postdoctoral Research Fellow; Health Psychologist

**Dr Lauren Stafford**

Postdoctoral Research Fellow

**Renee O'Donnell**

Research Fellow

**Rachel Breman**

PhD student

**Our National collaborators include:**

- Berry Street
- Baptcare
- Anglicare
- MacKillop Family Services
- UnitingCare Victoria
- VACCA
- VACCHO
- Foster Care Association Victoria
- Foster Care Association Tasmania
- Victorian and Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services
- Nutrition Australia
- Eating Disorders Victoria

We urge you to recommend that this action to prevent obesity, from a systems perspective, in our most vulnerable youth living in OOHC, is prioritized to reverse the intergenerational cycle of poor physical and mental health in this population of Australians. In accordance with the Commonwealth's commitment to improving healthy lifestyle behaviours of children in OOHC, and to reduce their risk of obesity into adulthood, we must implement effective obesity prevention programs into their daily lives; and we must do so urgently.

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Yours faithfully,



Professor Helen Skouteris

*On behalf of all the named clinicians and researcher leaders named here and our national collaborators*

**Attachments:**

HEALing Matters - What is the Healthy Eating Active Living Matters (HEALing Matters) program?

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## What is the Healthy Eating Active Living Matters (HEALing Matters) program?

**HEALing Matters is a Victorian Government funded online training package and knowledge exchange platform for out of home care (OOHC) residential workers and carers. Developed by health and psychology researchers at the Monash Centre for Health Research and Implementation, the program is based on extensive end-user, community service organisations and stakeholder engagement. The primary aim of HEALing Matters is to improve on not only the eating and physical activity habits but also the wellbeing and life skills of young people living in residential care.**

The HEALing Matters program uses a trauma informed philosophy to residential workers' and carers' understanding of the link between healthy lifestyle behaviours of the young people you care for and improved physical, cognitive, social (interpersonal) and emotional outcomes. In doing so, HEALing Matters moves beyond a solely behavioural approach to health and wellbeing and recognises that food and physical activity can be powerful ways of demonstrating trust, predictability and the provision of support and care that is attuned to the needs of the young people. It is through this approach that HEALing Matters is seen as foundational in helping young people develop the necessary life skills required before leaving care.

The HEALing Matters program provides residential workers and carers with a valuable professional development opportunity designed to help them not only improve the eating and physical activity habits of the young people they care for but also with other important factors that form part of the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of residential workers and carers. These include how to respond to pain-based behaviour, develop and maintain strong relationships, create a consistent and productive house environment through shaping routines, and how to avoid burnout by taking care of oneself in what can be a very stressful work environment.

In addition, HEALing Matters includes a wide range of easy-to-use and practical resources, including recipes, shopping tricks and tips, where to find local sporting opportunities, how to encourage incidental exercise, and much more!

Importantly, HEALing Matters and the information and tools provided as part of the online training will assist residential workers and carers—and the agency for which they work—in meeting mandated requirements for the provision of residential OOHC relevant to the provision of healthy food and access to sport and recreation.



## HEALing Matters includes the provision of six professional development modules and three additional resource modules



**Module 1.** This domain covers strategies to help residential workers and carers build a reciprocal relationship with a young person, where they really get to know the young person and, in turn, they get to know and trust the residential workers and carers. Being able to offer personalised care and knowing what is right for a particular young person, will help create a space to explore healthy lifestyle behaviours, non-judgementally.



**Module 2.** This domain covers strategies to help residential workers and carers set consistent routines and expectations. Routines that are predictable are important for development, providing a feeling of safety and security. They can also help a young person to learn how to receive care, and how to show care to others.



**Module 3.** How we 'do food' and the routines and rituals that this involves interlinks with our values, and how we care for others and ourselves. This domain covers strategies that will help residential workers and carers use food to create a homely, family atmosphere inside the residential home, and help young people learn about their relationships with food.



**Module 4.** Participation in both structured and unstructured physical and/or recreation activities provides an everyday opportunity to help young people feel connected, to form new relationships and gain a sense of belonging. This domain covers strategies to help residential workers and carers look for opportunities to help young people build physical activity into their everyday routines.



**Module 5.** This domain covers strategies to help residential workers and carers identify the health care needs of young people in care, as well as behaviour change techniques to help you encourage healthy lifestyle behaviours. In this module, we provide residential workers and carers with the facts, then show them different ways to help achieve a healthy living environment.



**Module 6.** This domain covers strategies to help residential workers and carers reflect on the impact of a young person's behaviour on their own thoughts and feelings and will help them identify opportunities to maintain their own physical, mental and emotional health. More specifically, Module 6 was designed to help residential workers and carers deal with the stress and challenging interactions they often face as a residential worker or carer.



### DISCUSSION BOARD

This is a chance to for residential workers and carers to share their thoughts and experiences including what they have learned or what they might be having difficulty with.



### RECIPES

From breakfast to lunch, dinner and snacks, we have residential workers and carers covered when it comes to healthy and nutritious recipes that are easy and won't break the budget.



### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here residential workers and carers will find a wide range of practical and easy-to-use resources and tools to help them apply what they have learned throughout the modules.