



Jordan's story

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My name is Jordan. I have been working in residential care programs in Queensland for over a decade.

While the issues facing Residential Care are complex, I would like to focus on the working conditions and supports offered to Youth Workers as they attempt to complete their duties. I believe that this is part of the foundational components that require addressing to improve the fidelity of our services. My observations are in no way a reflection of where I am working at present, more an assessment of the industry.

Initially, I would like to briefly describe the physical work conditions faced by youth workers. Not all will be the same, but in my experience, this will describe one of the better situations I have found. The Carers Room I regard as the 'nerve center' of the operation. The room, which would normally be the main bedroom of a normal residential house, usually includes:

- A bed for sleeping;
- A minimum of one computer (but normally two to facilitate the two carers during handover);
- A fridge for both carer's food, and storage for resident's food;
- Storage shelves for cleaning products;
- Sleeping equipment for carers;
- A locked filing cabinet for important documents, resident medications, sharps locked box;
- An alarm that is hooked up to every door including residents' rooms; and
- A safe containing various keys and petty cash.

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The reason to describe this room in detail as opposed to the rest of the house is that this room becomes part of the issue faced by staff in the residential care setting.

As a youth worker, my main objective is to work with the youth in my care to not only address their day-to-day needs, but also to identify and help address a multitude of what is regarded as 'anti-social behaviors'. We are given quality training in the form of behavior management programs to give us the tools to perform our tasks in this youth work.

Unfortunately, due to continual changes in this industry (what we are told are budgetary constraints), youth workers are being asked to take up more admin tasks that have previously been handled by admin professionals.

I do understand the necessity for change in industries as the social environment evolves, however these changes are now having negative effects on not only the outcomes of residents leaving care, but also on the quality and quantity of staff we are able to retain. It is not uncommon now for a youth worker to spend 70 – 80% of their time performing admin and house duties as opposed to working therapeutically with youth.

While youth workers are responsible for accurate and appropriate recording keeping, we are seeing a major creep of admin based duties such as uploading receipts, organising and maintaining audits and health safety schedules, and a variety of other tasks we don't specialise in, that take us away from the tasks that we are valued in for our positions.

Most people that come into our industry don't last long. I have heard that the average expectancy for a youth worker is eighteen months – I don't know if that is true, but I have noticed that in this work, you're either a 'lifer', or a 'fly-by-nighter'. We 'lifers' fight it out and keep going – we tend to get the qualifications to do the work, not just enroll in the course, and we continually seek further training to help our residents. We feel called to the industry and believe we can make a difference.

The problem that has presented is that due to the lack of 'lifers', our workplace conditions are structured so that some costs that would maybe be better spent on staff retention, are withheld to offset the cost of staff replenishment.

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This brings me to the crux of my issue – my shifts run from 14:00 to 22:30. At 22:30, I am clocked off and technically the time is mine. I can now do whatever I would like to do, locked in the carers room until 06:30 when I come back on shift.

By 22:30 I am expected to deal with whatever needs the residents have in that time, cook dinner, regulate showers and hygiene rituals, as well as manage behaviors and take notes. It becomes challenging to manage time when there are escalations for that shift.

At 6:30, I wake up and start prompting residents while starting computers and setting the notes template for each child for that day, and prepping medication. By 07:00, I have residents on the floor getting ready for school, giving meds and noting, getting the residents to school, education programs or returning them to placement for handover at 09:30. This is how a shift is supposed to run.

In reality, for a house to run smoothly, you need youth workers on the floor. You have multiple people placed in an environment that is not their choosing, and they are placed with people they normally don't get along with. Most of the youth we see have already exhausted foster care due to behavior issues, and a large percentage are in the youth justice system.

Proximity is a large part of our behavior management training, however the excess admin duties make this an impossibility in the majority of cases. So, most of us work on the floor until the kids are down, then start our notes and admin after the time we're meant to clock off.

The system has spent the money to train good people to do a good job – but something has gotten lost in the process. We are controlled down to air-conditioner use by accountants, while trying to balance at-risk youths' behavior.

Do I need to say more?