

*“We kept changing;
they kept changing
with us.”*

Evaluation of Melbourne City Mission’s Amplify Program

Summary Report

June 2025

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Key definitions and concepts

Young person	<p>The Amplify Program works specifically with young people aged 15 to 19 years of age. Accordingly, this age group is the focus of the evaluation.</p> <p>The CIJ acknowledges, however, that the systemic barriers to seeking safety and shelter described in the report impact unaccompanied young people more broadly – including those falling outside of the program’s target age range. The focus on young people aged 15 to 19 is in no way intended to diminish the experiences of young people who fall outside of this age range. Nor does this focus suggest that young people outside this age range would not benefit from access to the Amplify program or similar specialist supports for unaccompanied young people with interrelated experiences of family violence and homelessness.</p> <p>The CIJ also notes that the program does accept young people outside the target age range in limited circumstances, including where they have recently aged out of the out-of-home care system or where, for developmental reasons, they are unable to be supported by wider programs and supports.</p>
Unaccompanied	<p>An ‘unaccompanied’ young person refers to any young person who presents to the service system without a protective parent or other guardian. The term can encompass a breadth of circumstances, including young people who have left the family home; those who remain at home but do not have a parent who is able to act protectively towards them; and young people in the out-of-home care system experiencing placement breakdown or otherwise presenting to the service system alone. It also includes young people with children of their own, where the young person is not supported by a protective parent.</p>
Family violence	<p>In line with Victoria’s legislated definition, ‘family violence’ encompasses behaviours that are physically or sexually abusive, emotionally or psychologically abusive, economically abusive, threatening, coercive or other behaviours that control, dominate and cause fear.</p> <p>Family violence may occur within a young person’s family of origin, family of choice and/or an intimate partner relationship, and may occur across multiple relationships, either simultaneously or at different points in the young person’s life.</p>
Homelessness	<p>Homelessness means being without a secure, stable and private space to live. It can include circumstances such as sleeping rough, couch surfing, and living in temporary or unsafe housing situations such as rooming houses, cars or crisis accommodation.</p>

Acronyms

ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
AOD	Alcohol and Other Drugs
AVITH	Adolescent Violence in the Home
CIJ	Centre for Innovative Justice
FVIO	Family Violence Intervention Order
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexual
MARAM	Victoria's Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management framework
MCM	Melbourne City Mission
RAMP	Risk Assessment and Management Panel

Evaluation background

Melbourne City Mission (MCM) – together with family violence researchers and youth advocates – has driven a growing awareness of the needs, experiences and service trajectories of young people who present to the service system as a result of interrelated experiences of family violence and homelessness without the support of a protective parent ('unaccompanied young people').

Despite renewed policy focus since Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) on children and young people as 'victim survivors in their own right', evidence suggests that young people generally – and unaccompanied young people in particular – are routinely failed by existing service responses.

A report published by MCM in 2021 found that young people aged 15 to 19 are especially likely to fall through the gaps. The report highlighted that unaccompanied young people presenting to the family violence system, at best, received responses that were not developmentally appropriate and able to respond to their needs. More often, however, unaccompanied young people were being referred into youth homelessness services for a generalist youth homelessness response. The absence of appropriate referral pathways simply meant that some young people were excluded from services altogether or did not have their family violence risk identified and addressed.

In response to these significant gaps in Victoria's service response, MCM secured funding from Family Safety Victoria and the Commonwealth National Partnership Agreement to develop and pilot a youth-specific family violence case management and capacity building program for young people presenting to the service system without a protective parent. Service delivery commenced in February 2024, with the initial pilot funded until end June 2025.

At the outset of the pilot period, the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) was engaged to evaluate the program's implementation, appropriateness and effectiveness, as well as to distil key learnings from the pilot period about the needs and experiences of unaccompanied young people and the broader system response. Data collection and analysis was qualitative in focus, and included interviews with young people supported through the Amplify program; practitioner focus groups; and de-identified program data and detailed client case studies.

This Summary Report sets out findings from fifteen months of service delivery and proposes future directions to strengthen the program and ensure that it is able to continue to deliver substantial improvements in safety for young people whose needs would otherwise go unmet.

Evaluation findings

Overall, the evaluation found that the Amplify Program has been successfully implemented and clearly responds to the needs of unaccompanied young people, addressing a critical system gap.

The evaluation also found that the program is continually demonstrating capacity to achieve immediate and intermediate outcomes in relation to identifying, validating, making sense of and responding to unaccompanied young people's experiences of family violence, including ongoing family violence risk. These achievements have been able to occur in the context of entrenched, systemic barriers which impede the capacity of unaccompanied young people to access key supports and entitlements, including family violence-related entitlements.

In the absence of the program's intensive, holistic support, the evaluation found that these barriers would almost certainly mean that young people remain unseen and at risk of ongoing harm. Specific findings relating to the evaluation's four domains of inquiry are set out below.

Implementation

The evaluation found that the Amplify Program was able to be implemented rapidly, achieving its service targets and consistently operating at capacity.

Key enablers of program implementation and delivery

The evaluation identified several enablers of the program's successful implementation, which should remain a focus if the program is scaled up or expanded in the future.

Centring the voices of young people

The centring of young people's voices and lived experiences across program design and delivery was a distinguishing feature of the Amplify program. This built on MCM's existing commitment to embedding lived experience across its operations, alongside the organisation's established mechanisms and frameworks for engaging with young people in a safe, supported way. The emphasis on young people's voices spanned initial program design through to the current evaluation, which aimed to centre the voices of Amplify clients.

Clear, effective referral pathways

The Amplify program was able to establish clear and effective referral pathways, including by actively building the capacity of referring programs to identify and assess young people's family violence risk through formal training and secondary consultation. While demand was generally able to be managed through a dynamic approach to caseloads, the program team were required to maintain a waitlist for the duration of the pilot period. Ongoing monitoring of program resourcing was therefore identified as an important consideration to maintain the program's positive impact on young people, while also supporting the wellbeing of program staff.

Recruiting, onboarding and supporting specialist staff

MCM were able to recruit specialist staff with significant family violence expertise, drawn from both professional and lived experience. The evaluation identified a deep, team-wide culture of inclusivity and a shared commitment to young person-centred practice – both of which stood out as key strengths of the program. The program's approach to professional development and wellbeing evolved over the pilot period, with MCM incorporating external clinical supervision and specialised professional development opportunities to reflect the level of risk being managed by the program.

"Because they're a small team ... I think they communicate exceptionally well and there's no grey areas within their practice... If you were to expand this team ... you'd need [people who have] a clear focus about working with young people and ... holding them at the centre of the work." (Program leadership)

Appropriate program resourcing

The evaluation found that the Amplify program is filling a vital gap in service system responses for young people experiencing family violence and homelessness, as reflected through consistently high demand for the program.

Staff wellbeing and retention should also be a focus of any resourcing review, including consideration of the benefits associated with having multiple specialist and peer support roles within the program team. This can reduce the burden on existing staff and open opportunities for peer-to-peer, on-the-job learning.

“Having other peer workers would be pretty nice. Even if it was just one other peer worker to feel like I have someone to bounce ideas off and share a little bit of the pressure with ... I think having that solidarity with other lived experienced workers is very helpful for peer workers in general.” (Amplify practitioner)

Finally, the absence of crisis brokerage was identified as a critical gap in the current program resourcing. Over the pilot period, this gap was able to be addressed through MCM's wider fundraising income, enabling the program team to respond to a range of material needs. Future program resourcing should therefore incorporate brokerage funds to bridge the gap where young people are waiting for other financial assistance and entitlements, as well as to facilitate outreach and engagement.

Partnerships with specialist family violence services

The capacity of the program team to respond to the breadth of needs with which unaccompanied young people presented was strengthened through formal partnerships with wider services, including a specialist family violence service. These partnerships facilitated access to key family violence-related entitlements, such as Flexible Support Packages and crisis accommodation, as well as providing important opportunities for knowledge sharing across sectors.

Suitable accommodation and housing

Finally, while the capacity of the Amplify program to improve young people's access to safe, appropriate housing was not in scope for the program or the evaluation, this was identified as a significant contributing factor in the program's capacity to address family violence risk.

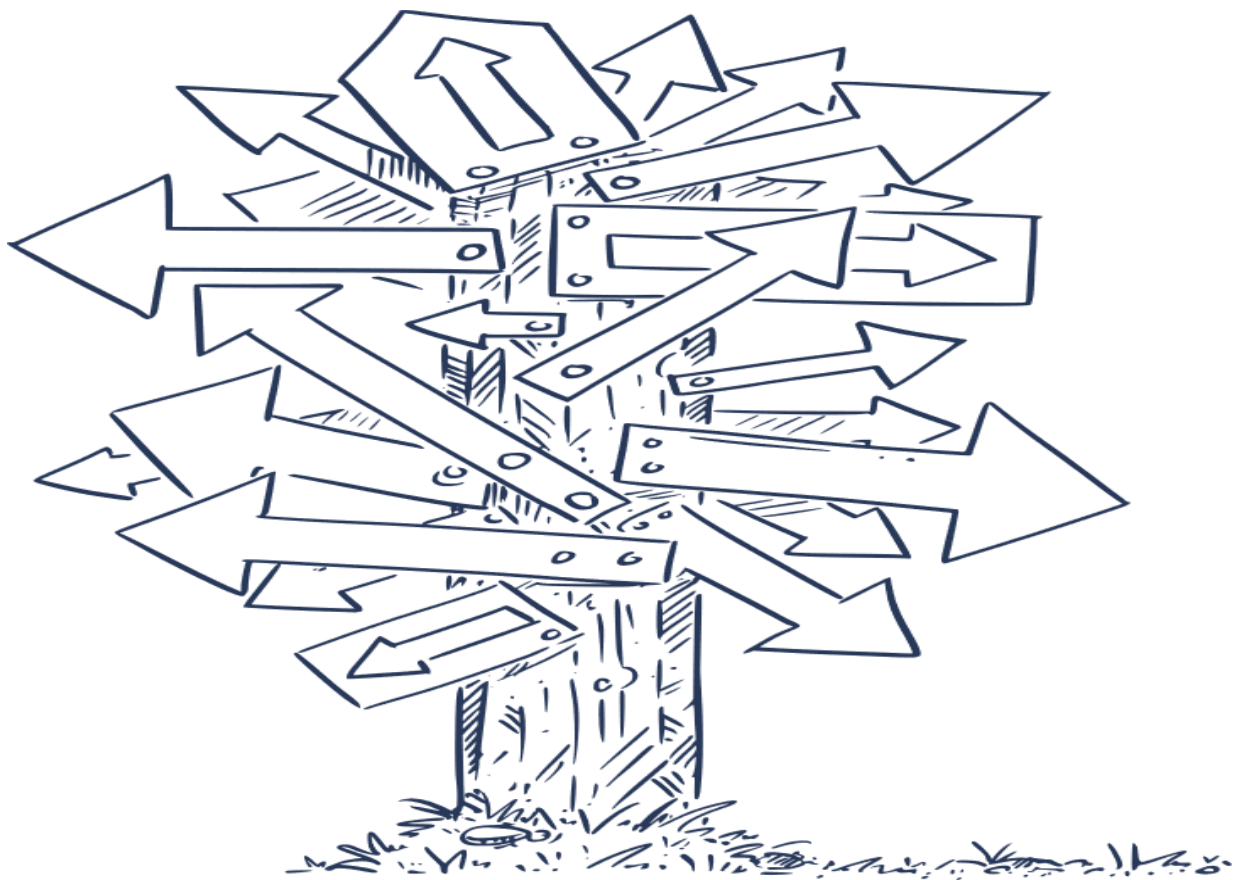
Appropriateness

The evaluation found that the support delivered through the Amplify Program was highly appropriate for unaccompanied young people presenting to the service system as a result of interrelated experiences of family violence and homelessness. Multiple features of the model emerged as being highly responsive to the needs of the target cohort, features which are generally not available through existing service offerings within the specialist family violence and/or youth homelessness systems.

Who is accessing the Amplify program?

The evaluation identified that the Amplify program has consistently met and exceeded its service targets over the pilot period, evidencing both effective referral pathways and significant demand for the program. The Amplify program is experiencing consistent demand, with the program responding almost exclusively to young people experiencing the highest level of family violence risk, as well as intersecting risks associated with homelessness.

- Almost three quarters of young people were experiencing family of origin violence, with over one fifth experiencing intimate partner violence and three young people experiencing both during their period of program engagement.
- Presenting young people were living in a range of unsafe situations, with approximately one third experiencing street-based homelessness or significant transience. Almost one quarter of young people were residing with the person using violence at the point of referral, including in refuge or supported housing settings.
- Approximately three quarters of young people referred to and supported by the program are aged 17 to 19 and almost three quarters identify as female. Notably, almost one fifth identify as non-binary or self-described and approximately one third identify as LGBTQIA+.



Capacity of the program to respond to young people's needs

The evaluation found that the Amplify program was a highly appropriate service offering for its' target cohort. Key features of the model which underpin its capacity to respond in meaningful ways to unaccompanied young people are described below.

Family violence risk and trauma informed

The evaluation found that the program team share a nuanced understanding of young people's unique experiences of family violence risk and harm, as well as the ongoing impacts of family violence trauma for young victim survivors. This specialisation included capacity to share important risk information with wider services (including Child Protection) to promote risk-informed decision making, and provide developmentally tailored supports such as MARAM risk assessment, safety planning and psychoeducation to help young people to make sense of their experiences. In particular, the Amplify program demonstrated a distinct capacity to undertake 'integrated' risk assessment and safety planning which could account for both family violence risk, as well as risks associated with experiences of homelessness, mental ill-health, and alcohol and drug use.

"[T]he siloing is then the problem because, actually, [the young person is] having a holistic experience. They're not having an experience of mental health over here, family violence over here, drug use over here. They're having an experience where they're experiencing everything at the same time." (Amplify practitioner)

The CIJ observed a strong capability among the program team to embed trauma-responsive practice in every part of the case management process, from risk assessment through to transitioning young people out of the program. Amplify practitioners were frequently able to create safe and trusting relationships in which young people were then able to disclose and reflect on their experiences of family violence, as well as changes in dynamic risk.

"[My Amplify practitioner] was very, very supportive, you know, she wasn't like just interested in getting it over with. She was interested in making sure I felt, you know, cared about and respected in our conversations." (Program participant)

In practice, the evaluation found that the capacity to build and maintain trusting relationships with clients was core to the Amplify program's ability to provide meaningful support to young people engaged in the program. This is illustrated in the practice example below:

Practice example (Roya)

Roya is a 16-year-old young person who is experiencing violence in her family of origin. Because of stringent Parenting Orders brought about by Roya's abusive parent, Roya must attend multiple weekly appointments with lawyers, psychologists and other specialists. Understanding that attending these appointments causes stress for Roya, Roya's Amplify practitioner offers to drive her to these appointments and uses their time in the car together as an opportunity to build rapport and trust with Roya in a non-clinical setting. Over time, Roya begins to use her driving time with her Amplify practitioner as a safe place to make disclosures; have broader conversations about her experiences; and speak about her goals for the future.

Developmentally appropriate ways of working

The evaluation found that the Amplify program's flexible, client-centred and readiness-informed model enabled program staff to work with young people in a developmentally appropriate way that clearly distinguished the program from mainstream family violence responses.

The evaluation identified strong evidence of the program's ability of Amplify practitioners to work with young people in a way that centred their individual needs. This included focusing on responding to each young person in the way that worked for them, such as through providing outreach support, as well as through the program's ability to sequence interventions at a pace that was responsive to the young person's readiness. As one Amplify client reflected:

"We kept changing; they kept changing with us." (Amplify client)

Young people engaged in the program described the frequency with which they felt 'overwhelmed' in other service interactions. This contrasted with the distinctiveness of the Amplify program's approach in being guided by the young person's readiness, while pointing them towards important safety interventions and ensuring that they were aware of their entitlements.

"[I said] 'I need support for mental health when I'm in a stable house.' And so, we did that as soon as I got into stable housing. [My Amplify worker] was able to do it at the time I needed it instead of overwhelming me with it whilst I wasn't in stable housing." (Amplify client)

"There were points where I wouldn't necessarily talk. And at those points, [my Amplify worker] would reach out, see how I was doing. You know, if we needed to get something done, [they would] have that gentle reminder, like, 'Hey, remember when you said that you wanted to do this? And when should we get it done?'"
(Amplify client)

The willingness of the Amplify program team to travel to meet clients – despite the program’s broad geographical reach – was found to play a significant role in the overall developmentally appropriate nature of the program model. The evaluation heard strong evidence that the availability of Amplify practitioners to conduct outreach reduced barriers to engagement for clients, particularly those who were transient or had previous negative service experiences. The evaluation found that this approach enabled practitioners to build trust in environments that felt safe and comfortable for young people engaging with the program.

Practice example (James)

James, a neurodiverse young person with co-occurring mental health needs, was repeatedly missing appointments with his Amplify practitioner. Upon exploring the barriers to his engagement in a non-judgemental way, James shared that he found the travel from his home in the outer suburbs, to which he had recently moved to escape family violence, difficult. In response, the practitioner organised for outreach to occur closer to James’s home, reducing friction in a way that meant that he was able to attend more appointments, in turn contributing to his overall safety.

Inclusive, safe and de-stigmatising

Throughout the evaluation, the CIJ observed an inclusive, non-judgmental and de-stigmatising culture in which Amplify practitioners were able to not only support young people’s safety but also encourage young people to develop self-esteem and independence. Importantly, the Amplify program team’s commitment to inclusive practice was bolstered by meaningful action and advocacy on behalf of young people, supporting Amplify clients to feel a sense of safety and confidence in the care that they received. As a result, the evaluation found that the Amplify program team were able to work with young victim survivors in a way that viewed them as a whole person, beyond just their experiences of harm.

“I guess the key fundamentals that make Amplify work is being seen with no judgment, not being seen as a victim.” (Amplify client)

At the same time, the evaluation found that the program team was highly attuned to the impacts of trauma on young people’s development, as well as the different ways in which these impacts could manifest. This de-stigmatising approach was found to be essential to the program’s capacity to work with cohorts that frequently experience service exclusion, including young people using drugs, self-harming, and continuing relationships with people using violence. In one instance, an external practitioner coordinating a Risk Assessment and Management Panel (RAMP), described the ability of the Amplify program team in engaging a young person who was at serious risk of lethality and who had historically disengaged from mainstream family violence services.

“I honestly think that if it hadn’t been for Amplify, I don’t think this young person would have engaged with the service at all. I think that there had been attempts by Orange Door to engage with this person, and that didn’t go well. And I believe there’d also been attempts with Safe Steps to engage this young person, and that also didn’t eventuate.” (RAMP coordinator)

The inclusive, de-stigmatising approach of the Amplify program team was also found to strengthen the program's capacity to provide safe, responsive support to clients who identified as LGBTIQ+. Here, the program team's ability to identify and validate experiences of identity-based abuse within a young person's family of origin was found to be a critical part of the program's ability to provide safe case management for LGBTIQ+ clients, as shown in the practice example below.

Practice example (Lee)

Lee initially engaged with Amplify because of experiences of identity-based abuse in their family of origin regarding their gender identity. After continued rapport-building and psychoeducational support from their Amplify practitioner, Lee stated that getting their name changed by law was an important goal for them in the context of their healing and support needs.

Because Lee had previously disclosed significant experiences of service system distrust, Lee's Amplify practitioner decided to support Lee to undergo the legal name change process personally, rather than referring them to an external service. Going through this process together helped Lee to deepen their relationship with their Amplify practitioner and played a critical role in their overall healing trajectory.

Importantly, the inclusive, de-stigmatising and non-judgemental culture of the Amplify program team contributed to young people feeling seen and recognised as active participants in their support journey – an experience that the evaluation suggested is not consistent across service settings.

"Being looked at as a human; that we know ourselves best because we live with ourselves, like anyone else, is what makes Amplify stand out. And I genuinely can only hope that other places start doing that ... it's a fundamental thing that should be basic." (Amplify client)

Responding to young people where they want to be supported

A final distinguishing feature of the Amplify program model is that it embeds family violence specialisation within the youth homelessness system, where evidence tells us unaccompanied young people are most likely to present. Importantly, more than half of program referrals came from the Frontyard access point – suggesting that, in many cases, unaccompanied young people's experiences of family violence are being successfully identified when they first present to the youth homelessness system.

The evaluation found that the co-location of the Amplify program within the Frontyard youth homelessness access point enabled program staff to engage quickly with young people where they present in crisis. Amplify practitioners observed that this capacity to engage immediately and in-person with young people facilitated subsequent engagement and that, where this had not been able to occur, they often found it more difficult to connect with young people.

"[I]f we can't sort of, like, make that initial contact in person when they're [at Frontyard], it's like, we just become another stranger trying to contact them while they're in crisis. They don't know who we are." (Amplify practitioner)

The co-location model was also identified as a core strength by external practitioners, particularly for young people who had negative associations with mainstream family violence services and would usually be unlikely to consent to receiving family violence support.

"I think the fact that it was co-located with, you know, a youth-friendly service with Melbourne City Mission, and where there was also it was housing as well as family violence, it didn't seem probably as confronting and overwhelming for that young person to engage." (External practitioner)

Overall, the evaluation strongly identified that the design and operationalisation of the Amplify Program is informed by the needs, experiences and service preferences of unaccompanied young people, which in turn led to a range of positive outcomes for young people supported through the program.

Effectiveness

Outcomes for unaccompanied young people

The evaluation found that the Amplify program contributed significantly to a range of positive outcomes for young people engaged in the program.

Young people are identified and connected with support

As a starting point, the evaluation found strong evidence that the Amplify program was able to identify unaccompanied young people with interrelated experiences of family violence and homelessness successfully and then connect them with support. For a cohort whose risk and needs are often invisible to the service system, this emerged as a key foundational outcome.

External practitioners reflected that the existence of the Amplify program had directly led to a young victim survivor being believed, identified and connected with support, often after a long period of service system exclusion. One school principal, who had worked with Amplify in the context of supporting a student who was engaged in the program, stated:

"The situation with the student we were dealing with was quite complex, and it had been investigated for many years to no avail. And I think it was really refreshing to be able to work with someone who didn't just dismiss the young person's concerns." (School principal)

Young people have their experiences recognised

One of the strongest outcomes identified through the evaluation was the success of the Amplify program in recognising young people's experiences of family violence. This was found to be a particularly critical element of the program when young people had experiences of being undermined or disbelieved in previous service system interactions. Young people who participated in interviews reported that their engagement with the Amplify program was the first time that they had felt listened to and validated by any service.

Young people who participated in interviews described the validating and healing impact of having their experiences of harm, including family violence, listened to, documented and recognised. This finding was particularly important given that each of these young people also disclosed past feelings of questioning their own lived experience. This was either because of being gaslit by the person using violence; having their experiences minimised or invalidated during service system interactions; or because their experience of violence did not conform to normative societal representations of family violence dynamics.

"When I did do my MARAM, [my Amplify practitioner] was like, hey, you know, this isn't normal, you know, you don't deserve this at all. You shouldn't experience this. Like it's so simple, but I needed to hear that because I genuinely thought what I was experiencing was normal ... she made me feel like I'm not actually crazy ... I just felt really good about the experience because I was really suffering." (Amplify client)

"I didn't believe I was a victim because, you know, we're all mainly told you know, 'oh you're only a victim if you're in the [intimate] relationship', like, that's what's usually kind of plastered everywhere ... But it's never really about, you know, that kids can be victims as well." (Amplify client)

Importantly, the evaluation found that feeling heard and validated laid important foundations for young people's future healing and recovery and created opportunities for young people to make disclosures. This included disclosures not only about their experiences of family violence, but also about wider experiences of risk and harm, including self-harm and thoughts of suicide, as demonstrated in the practice example below.

Practice example (Pierce)

The Amplify program were working with Pierce around his experiences of family violence. During the period of service engagement, Pierce began to experience significant mental ill-health and went to hospital in relation to suicidal ideation. Upon presenting to hospital, Pierce texted his Amplify practitioner asking for help.

In this instance, the Amplify practitioner shared that information with other workers; conducted a secondary consult with a mental health peer worker; and provided ongoing emotional support to Pierce until he had left hospital and was re-engaged with other supports.

Young people are supported to engage with wider supports, including education

The evaluation also found that the Amplify program is having a clear and direct impact on young people's capacity to engage with wider supports and to build protective and stabilising factors in their lives. The capacity of the Amplify program team to scaffold safe access to wider services emerged as particularly important, with countless examples of the program advocating to ensure a continued lens on both young people's family violence risk, as well as the young person's own goals and preferences.

While school engagement was consistently identified as a key area of support with which Amplify practitioners were assisting, other examples included re-engagement with hobbies, positive relationships, engagement with mental health supports and the development of healthy coping mechanisms. All of these contributed to young people being able to enjoy a 'normal' adolescence and to feel positive and hopeful about their future.

"I can focus on school, you know, like my school has been improving, I can focus on the things that I love doing." (Amplify client)

Young people also explained the significance of Amplify's support in directly and indirectly enabling them to gain employment and financial independence, particularly where they had endured prolonged periods of poverty or had been financially reliant on a person using violence.

"I can happily say that I signed the offer [of employment] yesterday, which has put a lot of my stress at ease ... get[ting] to a place where they've looked at my resume and gone, 'We'll give this [kid] a try.' It's great." (Amplify client)

The evaluation found that the Amplify program team were able to make appropriate, timely referrals to external services, while also supporting young people's engagement with service environments or processes that might otherwise be overwhelming or intimidating, as demonstrated in the practice example below.

Practice example (Esther)

Esther was referred to Amplify because of her experiences of intimate partner violence. When Esther disclosed that she had been in contact with police multiple times while experiencing street-based homelessness, Amplify spoke to Esther and made a referral to a Community Legal Centre. The Community Legal Centre found that Esther had multiple upcoming court matters and was able to work with the Amplify program team to ensure that her legal needs were met without causing undue stress or overwhelm for Esther.

Young people are able to make sense of their experiences

Another key outcome was the capacity of the Amplify program to support young people to reflect on and make sense of their experiences of harm. This support was instrumental for young people who had normalised experiences of family violence over time, or who had blamed themselves for the harm that they had endured. Importantly, the evaluation also found that making senses of their experiences of violence was an important pre-requisite of young people's longer-term recovery and capacity to live the kind of life that they wanted for themselves.

"My goal was when I went in[to the Amplify program] was ... I wanted to get through the stuff that I experienced when I was living with my [abusive parent] ... I wanted to be someone who can communicate. I wanted to be someone who wasn't self-harming. I wanted to be someone who was happy and actually wanted to live and wanted to be around." (Amplify client)

As well as laying the foundations for young people to recover and heal from previous experiences of harm, the evaluation suggested that the psychoeducational support delivered through the program could also reduce the likelihood of future harm. This included by building young people's capacity to recognise and name experiences of violence across other relationships. This finding suggests that the psychoeducational support delivered through the Amplify program has the potential to reduce risk across young people's wider relationships, including within their family of origin and in future intimate relationships. In this way, the program demonstrates capacity not only to reduce current risk, but to disrupt further trajectories of harm.

The impact of the Amplify program's psychoeducation and case management in enabling young people to self-advocate – including in their interactions with wider services – was further identified as a key protective mechanism against future risk.

"You see this sense of empowerment that the young people that have worked with Amplify seem to have ... [Amplify provides] a lot of education and support for young people to understand the violence that they're experiencing [and] gives the young person the capacity to advocate for themselves." (External practitioner)

Young people benefit from peer support

During the pilot period, approximately one quarter of closed clients (24%) received peer support at some stage during their program engagement. The evaluation found that the presence and impact of the Peer Support Worker role was deeply valued by young people, as well as by internal and external practitioners. Peer support was delivered to approximately one quarter of young people engaged with the program, as well as being delivered to all young people on active hold.

On a fundamental level, young people engaged in peer support described the value of working with someone with lived experience of family violence in supporting them to feel comfortable making disclosures, including disclosures of system harm.

"I didn't have the best experience with some mental health services ... I feel like I can't talk to other people [about it]. And I was able to just like talk to [my Peer Support Worker] about it. And like [they] actually agreed with me ... so it made me feel a bit better, that I wasn't like complaining for nothing." (Amplify client)

Amplify practitioners and external practitioners similarly noted the benefits of this role. These included supporting young people to navigate and feel safe in service settings which they otherwise found unsafe or triggering; enhancing the program's capacity to actively 'hold' young people whose support and safety needs had reduced but not completely resolved; as well as building young people's self-esteem and confidence by enabling them to connect with someone who has been through similar experiences.

"The reality is a lot of young people who are experiencing family violence with that have a low self-esteem, have a low self-worth, and [the Peer Support Worker's] support around that is fundamental." (External practitioner)

Young people have their safety needs met

The evaluation found that the Amplify program was often able to address and reduce family violence risk. This was despite significant barriers to accessing key supports, including rapid re-housing and Flexible Support Packages. The ways in which family violence risk was reduced were diverse, responding to the needs, resources and safety goals of each young person – including the extent to which they were able to access alternative, safe housing. Examples of how the Amplify program worked alongside young people to reduce family violence risk are outlined below:

Risk management strategies and actions used within the Amplify program

- Providing safety planning where young people needed to return home to retrieve belongings
- Advocating for separate refuge placements where young people experiencing intimate partner violence had been placed with their partner
- Advocating for priority access to refuge or other emergency accommodation (including adult family violence crisis accommodation) where risk is serious and ongoing
- Advocating to services, including refuges and Centrelink, who wanted to contact an adult perpetrator to seek consent to engage with a young person, verify a disclosure made by the young person (about that adult), or otherwise communicate with them about the young person's whereabouts and attempts to engage with services
- Supporting young people identified as Affected Family Members on FVIOs to feel confident reporting breaches to police, either independently or through a support person
- Supporting young people who were misidentified as the respondent on an FVIO to connect with appropriate legal support
- Conducting 'tech sweeps' to mitigate the risk of technology-enabled surveillance or pursuit by a person using violence
- Consulting with specialist family violence Risk Assessment and Management Panel (RAMP) co-ordinators for young people who are experiencing particularly high-risk family violence
- Engaging in thorough safety planning to support safe, client-led reunification with family members where there had been a rupture or relationship breakdown
- Advocating to Child Protection and holding space for young people to disclose their experiences and goals in that context, resulting in more risk-informed decisions being made

Alongside the specific, practical strategies and actions listed above, rapport building and the development of trusting relationships emerged as perhaps one of the most significant ways in which the Amplify program team were able to meet the safety needs of young people. This included where young people went on to experience violence in subsequent relationships, making a safe touchpoint in the system an important avenue for identifying and responding to future risk and harm.

"The biggest [measure of safety], is building that trusting relationship, so that when things are happening, they feel comfortable telling us that they're happening." (Amplify practitioner)

Alongside its capacity to respond to and meaningfully reduce family violence risk, the evaluation also found that the program is working to reduce mental health risks, including in relation to suicidality and self-harm. This occurred in multiple ways, including by creating safe opportunities for young people to have conversations about trauma and its impacts. Given the rates of suicide among young people experiencing homelessness, this emerged as a critical outcome.

"It definitely lowers the risk of self-harm and suicidality ... It's a no-brainer ... Family violence is a significant driver of homelessness, and the system doesn't really recognise young people as victim survivors in their own right. So, Amplify fills that gap that we've had here forever." (External practitioner)

Unintended outcomes

Unintended outcomes identified through the evaluation were uniformly positive.

Actively contributing to improved housing outcomes

While the Amplify program is not intended to function as a homelessness service, the evaluation found that Amplify practitioners did actively contribute to improved housing outcomes for young people engaged in the program. Program data indicated that, for more than half of closed young people (62%), their housing situation had improved at the point of closure.

The evaluation found that ability of the Amplify program team to work closely with young people to get a more complete picture of their needs, goals and strengths, as well as their capacity to work flexibly and 'follow' young people where they moved across refuges and catchment areas, were integral to improvements in housing outcomes.

Identifying and addressing misidentification

The evaluation found that, despite not being an explicit focus of the program, the Amplify model was able to work holistically and responsively with young victim survivors who had been misidentified as the respondent on an FVIO. Case studies suggested that experiences of misidentification were particularly prominent among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and multicultural clients, especially those from African backgrounds.

The evaluation found that the inclusive, safe and de-stigmatising culture of the program team and the capacity of the Amplify program team to make accurate assessments of family violence risk meant that the program was able to surface experiences of misidentification; build trusting relationships; and tangibly improve safety outcomes for this cohort. This included being highly attuned to the harm caused by young people's prior negative service interactions, as well as experiences of racism and over-policing.

Restoring trust in the service system

Interviews with young people, as well as case studies and practitioner focus groups, indicated that engaging with the Amplify model had a therapeutic effect on young people's relationship to the service system, particularly where the young person had a long history of negative service interactions or had experienced significant system harm. This included young people's experiences of feeling disbelieved, neglected and undermined in their past service system interactions.

Noting the prevalence of these experiences across the program's client cohort, the evaluation found that engagement with the Amplify program often had an unexpected and positive impact on young people's service system engagement. This included in terms of their engagement with the Amplify program itself, as well as their willingness and readiness to engage with wider services. Multiple examples were provided in which young people had declined mental health support at the point of program entry but then actively requested a referral at the point of program exit.

Young people going on to do their own advocacy

Finally, the evaluation found that an important unintended outcome was the ability of young people supported through the program to go on to participate in advocacy and wider lived experience work. Where this had occurred, Amplify practitioners observed the transformative nature of this outcome, particularly given the significant levels of family violence and associated risks that the Amplify client cohort were often navigating.

Outcomes for wider services

The evaluation found that alongside important outcomes for young people engaged with the program, the Amplify program team were also able to achieve significant outcomes in the context of the wider service system. Service data and focus groups indicated that these outcomes were reached through a combination of formal training, secondary consults and co-case management with external services.

Services are more confident and able to identify and respond to risk

The evaluation found that the capacity building support provided by the Amplify program team has clearly increased the confidence and capability of wider MCM services to screen for and identify family violence risk for unaccompanied young people presenting to the youth homelessness system, including the Frontyard access point.

Over the pilot period, the Amplify program delivered six two-day training sessions to 128 internal staff, with a particular focus on building confidence and capability to undertake intermediate MARAM risk assessments where young people are identified as experiencing family violence.

External practitioners who participated in formal training and/or received secondary consults consistently described increased confidence to identify and name family violence risk.

“Definitely one of the outcomes is being able to identify and name some of the behaviour as family violence when working with the young people. That has directly come out of the training that we did and the consultations that we’ve done with Amplify.” (External practitioner)

External practitioners also reflected on the impact of Amplify’s training and secondary consults in improving their understanding of the family violence service system, as well as their confidence and competency in supporting clients to navigate that system to have their needs met.

“It’s just given me so much more confidence to kind of talk about [family violence] in a way [where] the knowledge that I’m sharing with young people is something that can help them then navigate a system.” (External practitioner)

Services are able to work in a more focused way

A key finding in relation to wider service system implications for the Amplify program was the way in which Amplify's specialist, youth-oriented family violence support enabled wider services, particularly mental health services, to work in a more focused way. Several external practitioners reflected that, before the Amplify program was established, they were often, out of necessity, made to step outside of their job description and engage in family violence work for which they did not have the capacity or were otherwise not equipped. As one practitioner working in an acute mental health service observed:

"Before we even had Amplify, [family violence] was usually the prime determinant of their mental health ... so, without having that managed, or solved properly, we couldn't start working on any of the mental health stuff. So, [Amplify] kind of lets us do what we're meant to do, essentially." (External practitioner)

Building knowledge around young people's unique experiences of risk

An emerging finding of the evaluation is that co-case management could provide an opportunity for the Amplify program team to build the capacity of wider services to work appropriately and effectively with unaccompanied young people. While this included building the knowledge of homelessness services to recognise and respond to family violence risk, it also included challenging some of the assumptions and biases held by mainstream family violence services which can otherwise prevent unaccompanied young people from accessing key supports and entitlements.

Learning

The evaluation found that the Amplify Program is contributing to the generation of new knowledge about best practice ways of working with young people who have intersecting needs associated with family violence and homelessness. This knowledge was found to have strengthened the delivery of the program and, in some cases, to have also strengthened system-wide responses to a cohort that too often remains unseen.

Needs and experiences of unaccompanied young people

Unaccompanied young people's experiences of risk and harm

The program delivery and associated evaluation highlighted the unique nature of young people's experiences of family violence, including the significant level of risk that they face and the ways in which this risk is poorly understood across the service system. The evaluation found that young people were often experiencing several intersecting forms of severe risk, including family violence risk, mental health risk, alcohol and drug risk as well as risks associated with homelessness. The Amplify program demonstrated a unique ability to identify and respond to this nuanced risk profile, which would otherwise go unaddressed by the service system.

In particular, the evaluation surfaced the scale and imminence of violence experienced by young people, both across family of origin and intimate partner dynamics. High risk indicators were prevalent among the stories of young people captured for this report and included experiences of strangulation, sexual assault, assault with a weapon, conversion therapy and severe physical assaults leading to hospitalisations and miscarriages.

Young people and practitioners reflected that negative or harmful service interactions – particularly where these were cumulative - could erode a young person's trust in services, and in adults more broadly. In the absence of programs like Amplify, this in turn reduced help-seeking behaviour and contributed to trajectories of further harm.

Unaccompanied young people's experiences seeking support

Poor systemic understanding of risk – and its changing profile as young people move from situations of immediate family violence into homelessness or unsafe housing as well as the mental health toll of these cumulative experiences – was found to result in young people being excluded from services or receiving inadequate support. The evaluation found that young people actively sought help from the service system for their experiences of family violence and homelessness – often bouncing between or being turned away from multiple touchpoints before being connected with the Amplify program.

Practitioners described young people experiencing high levels of service activity without any meaningful response or change in their safety – including cycles of Child Protection opening, investigating and closing files without providing support. These negative service interactions often inhibited help-seeking and disclosure, compounding the invisibility of unaccompanied young people (and their experiences of family violence risk and harm) across the service system.

Every young person engaged with the program reported prior experiences of being disbelieved or having their experiences of harm minimised. This was particularly the case where young people presented to mainstream family violence services.

"I think that young people are not recognised as victim survivors in their own right. I've certainly had some difficulty around working with a young person whose mother was using violence and the response from Orange Door was quite poor. Very poor actually. So much so that we walked out after about half an hour."
(External practitioner)

Housing needs of young people

Consistent with the broader evidence base, the evaluation identified significant overlap between young people's experiences of family violence and homelessness. Across the cohort engaged in the program, young people experienced varying levels of housing instability or homelessness, ranging from street-based homelessness and couch-surfing, to impending evictions or VCAT proceedings. Some young people were preparing to leave situations of violence, while others remained in or had returned to the home where violence was occurring.

The evaluation encountered a considerable gap in suitable accommodation both in terms of the quantity and the nature of available housing options. As described by one Amplify practitioner, the options available through the homelessness system and the wider housing market alike are not currently able to respond flexibly to the individual needs of young people.

“There is no suitable housing. It is so frustrating, like, even the suitable housing isn't suitable. Either they're in a youth refuge [where] they have to come and go within certain times and the workers always have to know where they are ... Family violence refuge also sucks because they might be, like, a 17-year-old young woman, who's then here with all these like families ... Otherwise, they're in a private rental and paying 95 percent of their Centrelink on their rent ... Or they're in a transitional housing model where they're alone, not getting any support.” (Amplify practitioner)

Throughout the data collection, the evaluation found that young people were consistently presenting with diverse and unique housing needs that were not able to be met.

Recovery and healing needs of young people

The limited capacity of the service system to respond meaningfully to young people's healing and recovery needs emerged as a significant learning of the evaluation, both in terms of the availability of appropriate services and the ability to move beyond crisis responses and towards longer-term therapeutic support.

Despite this overall limitation, Amplify clients demonstrated capacity to begin to heal and recover from their experiences of family violence outside of clinical settings. Interviews, case studies and focus groups revealed that being listened to, believed and validated was the first – and perhaps most important – step in young people's healing and recovery journeys. In this way, the Amplify program was able to create opportunities for young people to build their readiness to step into a therapeutic relationship, either with their Amplify practitioner or through more formal mental health and counselling services.

While there is a need to establish more formal service pathways for youth-specific trauma recovery and healing, these findings suggest that it is also necessary to embed healing-oriented practices in all family violence responses for young people. This includes those like the Amplify program which are delivered at crisis point.

Wider system responses to unaccompanied young people

System responses are not working for young people

The evaluation found that current system responses are unable to respond appropriately to the needs of unaccompanied young people. Siloing between service systems, narrow conceptualisations of family violence risk and a lack of understanding or confidence to work with young people all contribute to this cohort falling through the gaps.

Eligibility criteria and issues around consent also emerged as a significant barrier to young people accessing support – as well as creating opportunities for adult perpetrators to ‘gate-keep’ or otherwise inflict further harm. The evaluation also identified a lack of clarity around the role of Child Protection. This often manifested in young people not receiving support from services because of an incorrect assumption that Child Protection respond to risk for young people under the age of 18 when, in practice, practitioners observed that Child Protection often declined to intervene in the cases of children as young as 15.

The evaluation further identified that – where young people were able to engage with the service system, often after repeated attempts and retelling of their story – they were often met with developmentally inappropriate responses. A frequent example raised throughout the evaluation was the phenomenon of mainstream family violence services and other supports ‘closing’ young people’s case management files prematurely because young people were not immediately responsive to calls and emails.

System responses that contribute to and compound harm

Interviews, case studies and practitioner focus groups revealed the many ways in which the system can contribute to or compound harm, including by minimising or dismissing the disclosures shared by young people or by actively colluding with adult perpetrators.

The evaluation found that the risk averse nature of many service organisations and systems was a key driver of system harm. Instead of holding risk alongside the young person, whether family violence, mental health or AOD risk, many services had exclusionary eligibility criteria that left the young person to hold risk alone.

The evaluation demonstrated the particular vulnerability of young victim-survivors in relation to adult perpetrators weaponising the legal and service systems to cause further harm to the young person. One stark example was the requirement to seek parental consent in order to access key entitlements or services, which often provided opportunities for adult perpetrators to prevent young people from accessing the supports that they needed. This included, for example, Centrelink’s ‘unreasonable to live at home’ designation – which often involved Centrelink staff seeking to verify through an adult perpetrator that a young person is unsafe at home, leading to systems abuse and increased family violence risk.

Overall, the evaluation found that current service system responses often fail to account for the unique forms of risk that are faced by unaccompanied young people. In many cases, the lack of developmentally appropriate service responses for this cohort meant that many young people were presenting to the Amplify program with a history of significant systemic trauma and a lack of trust in the service system as a result.

Strengthening the Amplify Program

Alongside maintaining and strengthening those elements that the evaluation found to be central to the program’s capacity to improve outcomes for unaccompanied young people, the evaluation identified a series of recommendations to scale up the Amplify Program moving forward.

1. Continue and expand funding of the Amplify program.
2. Review the Amplify program's resourcing model to reflect program scope more appropriately, including service delivery and capacity building elements of the model.
3. Extend program timeframes from four months to a minimum of six months, with capacity to provide step-down support up to one-year where required.
4. Consider expanding the program's age range, including to work with young people up to and including (at minimum) 21 years of age.
5. Ensure that any future funding for the program includes dedicated resourcing for clinical supervision and reflective practice, complemented by strong partnerships with specialist family violence services.
6. Incorporate dedicated, crisis brokerage to address material support needs of program clients, including where they have not yet been able to access flexible support packages and other key entitlements.
7. Work with Family Safety Victoria to identify and address barriers to timely information sharing by the program.
8. Actively monitor the capacity of the program to work in culturally safe and responsive ways with First Nations young people and young people from culturally and racially marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation has identified a clear, urgent need for the Amplify program, with few (if any) appropriate service pathways available in Victoria to unaccompanied young people presenting because of their interrelated experiences of family violence and homelessness. The evaluation found across multiple examples that, in the absence of the Amplify Program, young people simply would have remained at high risk of serious harm or lethality. This included whether that meant remaining in (or returning to) the situation of family violence for which they had first presented or being forced into other unsafe situations.

The evaluation found that the Amplify program is highly responsive to the needs of its client cohort, successfully delivering an integrated family violence and youth homelessness response that is tailored to young people while maintaining a lens on family violence risk. The program has demonstrated strong evidence of effectiveness, both in directly increasing safety for young people and building the capacity of wider services to respond to this cohort. Despite entrenched, systemic barriers to entering the housing system, the program has also worked, wherever possible, to remove barriers to accessing safe, stable accommodation. The program does so in recognition that, where young people are not able to access alternative accommodation and housing, they remain at ongoing risk of returning to situations of violence and harm.

Overwhelmingly, the evaluation points to a need to fund the Amplify Program on a continuing basis, including through additional investment to expand its capacity to respond to unaccompanied young people. In its absence, Victoria's stated commitment to recognising children and young people as victim survivors in their own right will not be fully realised, nor translate to increased safety for young people who present to the service system without a protective parent. Accordingly, the Amplify Program represents an opportunity to disrupt trajectories of harm and to ensure that a cohort that has previously had little voice in the service system is finally seen and heard.

Appendix A: Amplify Theory of Change

Figure 1: Amplify Program Theory of Change

Goal	The Victorian service system has increased knowledge of and capacity to respond to the specific needs of unaccompanied young people experiencing serious family violence risk										
End-of-program outcomes	Unaccompanied young people are visible to the service system	Young person is supported to plan and make decisions about what they want to have happen next		Young person has increased confidence and capacity to manage their safety and support needs moving forward		Young person is able to move forward with a sense of hope and confidence for a future free from violence		The service system maintains a lens on the young person's safety and wellbeing		Amplify pilot contributes to the evidence base on 'what works'	
Intermediate outcomes	Young people experiencing serious family violence risk are engaged with specialist support	Young person feels heard and validated	Young person feels less overwhelmed and able to reflect on next steps	Young person feels increasingly able to share and make sense of their experience(s)	Young person feels confident to seek help from services and other trusted adults	Young person is supported to enhance protective and stabilising factors in their life	Young person feels that it is possible to move forward, heal & recover	Young person feels supported to continue to implement their safety plan and goals	Wider practitioners have increased confidence to identify and/or respond to family violence risk	Model is adapted and consolidated based on emerging evidence	
Short-term outcomes	Young people experiencing serious family violence risk are identified	Young person's individual risk and safety goals are understood	Where possible, immediate risk to safety is managed	Young person has increased capacity to recognise their experience(s) as family violence	Young person understands what types of support and assistance are available to them	Young person's engagement with relevant services is actively scaffolded	Young person has a trusted role model & source of encouragement	When ready, young person's care is handed over to an appropriate, non-specialist support option	Wider practitioners have increased understanding of the nature and dynamics of family violence	Data on key activities and outcomes is collected and shared	
Influencing activities	Screen unaccompanied MCM clients for serious family violence risk (using MARAM)	Conduct risk assessments and safety planning, inc. through information sharing	Respond to immediate safety needs, inc. exploring options for rapid re-housing	Provide information and education about behaviours which constitute family violence	Provide information about supports and entitlements available to the young person	Provide case coordination, advocacy and warm referrals to relevant services	Connect young person with a Peer Support Worker	Based on readiness, plan for a safe, supported transition from the program	Provide secondary consultations and capacity-building to practitioners engaging with unaccompanied young people	Establish processes for monitoring, learning and continuous improvement	
Foundational activities	Develop detailed operating model		Recruit & on-board specialist and peer support staff		Understand client consent and reporting responsibilities		Establish and implement clear referral processes		Embed cultural safety and inclusion		Develop Monitoring & Evaluation Framework

Source: Centre for Innovative Justice in collaboration with Amplify program leadership and wider MCM stakeholder

