THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

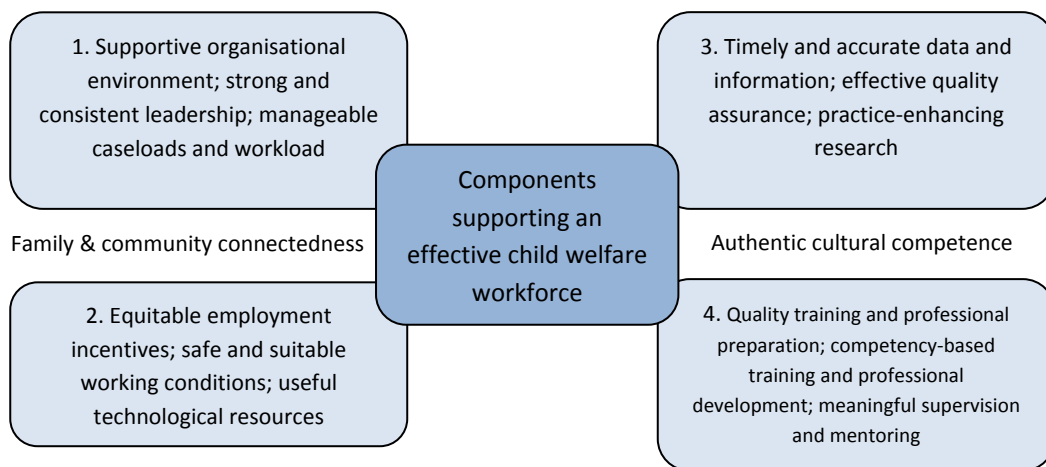**Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry Submission**

Submission from: Professor Marie Connolly
                                    Chair and Head of Social Work

I have been involved in child welfare systems for most of my career, and I have had the opportunity to work within the New Zealand system during a significant period of reform. I have attached an article outlining key elements of the New Zealand reforms that I thought might be of interest to the Inquiry Panel.

In this brief submission I will not undertake a critique of the Victorian system. I have been in Australia less than a year and I am sure that others are more experienced in these matters. Rather, I will focus on a few aspects that relate to the components of an effective child welfare workforce, and provide the review committee with some insights from my experience of working within a large and complex child welfare system.

The following components have been identified as important to the development of an effective child welfare workforce[1]:

1. Supportive organisational environment; strong and consistent leadership; manageable caseloads and workload	Components supporting an effective child welfare workforce	3. Timely and accurate data and information; effective quality assurance; practice-enhancing research
Family & community connectedness		Authentic cultural competence
2. Equitable employment incentives; safe and suitable working conditions; useful technological resources		4. Quality training and professional preparation; competency-based training and professional development; meaningful supervision and mentoring

1.   A supportive organizational environment

It goes without saying that strong and consistent leadership is important to any organization. Clear succinct messaging of organizational values and future direction is critical in engendering workforce commitment and investment. Workers need to see the whole picture, and so it is important that leaders are clear about that picture and are able to communicate it in ways that are easily understood both within and outside the organization. Workers also need to feel that the organization supports them, particularly given the work is challenging and it is not always possible to

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[1] Simplified from *Children's Defense Fund* document (2007)

predict what will happen within complicated child protection situations (Munro 2000). If workers lack trust in their employer and fear being cast as a scapegoat when things go wrong they will not only practice conservatively, but they will look elsewhere for less challenging work. Developing an effective media strategy to influence public perception of the organization and the work within it is important to this.

According to Howe (2009), relationship-based practice has been an integral part of social work since its inception, and writers have argued that it represents a critical component of effective social work (Teater 2010). Usually people join child welfare organizations because they want to make a difference to the lives of children. Having manageable caseloads that enable workers to undertake professionally rewarding work that makes a difference will impact positively on both the recruitment and retention of quality staff.

2.   Equitable employment incentives and good working conditions

There are many ways of providing incentives for workers – salaries, flexible working conditions, and creating a worker-friendly physical environment. The provision of useful technological resources is, nevertheless, the particular aspect that I shall focus upon here. Research suggests that when workers are clear about their role and the organization's expectations, they are more likely to stay in their job (Dickenson & Painter 2009). In a demanding and politically sensitive environment, however, it is not unusual for child welfare systems to develop or re-write operational policy urgently and defensively in an attempt to control practice and manage risk. This can result in policy frameworks that are chaotic and impenetrable and can result in workers practicing within a policy vacuum.

If this is a problem within an organization, re-writing operational policies succinctly in ways that leave space for professional judgement is important if an organization wants to retain quality staff.

3.   Accurate information, quality assurance and practice-enhancing research

Reactive child protection systems frequently find themselves on the back-foot having to explain and justify organizational performance. Constantly being exposed to external criticism can also result in systems being less prepared to expose aspects of organizational performance. This can result in a negative cycle – in the face of external criticism the organization retrenches becoming less transparent, scrutiny intensifies and the organization spends more and more time defending itself. Whilst it is clearly important that systems are accountable for what they do, an enormous amount of energy and effort goes into defending systems – effort that could arguably be better utilized in more positive ways. In these situations it is easy to see how attention is diverted to the system and we can lose sight of the needs of children.

Some months ago in an editorial published by The Age Dr Lynette Buoy from the Centre for Excellence in Child Welfare suggested that consideration be given to removing child welfare from the political process that inadvertently places children in the middle of the political cross-fire. Creating a space where a child welfare system can be accountable but have a degree of protection from sensationalist media coverage could create a more open system that is better able to expend effort interrogating its own processes and performance and supporting practice-enhancing research.

4.   Quality training and professional development

Professional development and training have been identified as critical to the motivation and retention of a strong professional workforce. The core business of a child protection system is to deliver quality services for children at risk. The demands in delivering frontline child protection services are extreme, and often dominate organizational focus and effort. Activities that are peripheral, but nevertheless critical, to the support of frontline services, such as training and development, can be marginalized within a child protection system and is often characterized by bursts of important, but inconsistent effort over time. Conversely, a core activity of educational and/or training providers is to strengthen knowledge, to communicate ideas through training and education, and to develop specialist areas of expertise in the evaluation and application of relevant research evidence into training and education.

A promising partnership approach to the training development of child protection staff can be found within the United States where state child welfare systems partner with educational providers to design, develop and deliver career-long training and development opportunities for child welfare staff. Training is provided across the spectrum of experience – from induction through to advanced training for staff, including supervision and team building. It could readily include interdisciplinary training and joint training across the service sector – something that is important to cross-sectoral collaborative efforts. Whilst responses across US states differ, the training partnership in Vermont USA also provides training and development opportunities for foster and kinship carers, an area that can be underdeveloped within child welfare systems.

Training partnerships that harness the strengths of educational institutions external to the child welfare system could provide an opportunity to develop an integrated workforce development, motivation, and retention framework that creates both recruitment and retention incentives for workers wishing to build their career within a child welfare setting.

Conclusion

Child welfare systems internationally are constantly undergoing processes of change and reform. That so much of this reform effort is unsuccessful is an important insight into the challenges of facilitating positive change within complex organizations. Strengthening the professional workforce within child protection is both important and challenging. It is possible, nevertheless, that considering workforce issues in the context of a broader change agenda within an integrated set of reforms may be more successful.

I would be happy to talk further with the Inquiry Panel on aspects of this submission or the reforms undertaken in New Zealand if that would be of assistance.

References:
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Howe, D. (2009), *A Brief Introduction To Social Work Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
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Teater, B. (2010), *An Introduction To Applying Social Work Theories And Methods*. Berkshire UK: Open University Press.