

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

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Introduction

The Victorian Government's child protection system has been the subject of much public scrutiny. This is understandable. The community wants to know that when a child is at risk, there is a comprehensive system in place to care for them. The community expects everyone, from the child protection worker at the coalface, to the Minister in her office, to be discharging their duties to care and protect vulnerable children.

Making assessments about risk to our most vulnerable children and planning for their longer-term best interests is extremely complex. Child Protection workers deserve our admiration and support for their vitally important work.

Victoria's child protection system has undergone much change in recent history. Both sides of politics have driven reforms to improve the system.

Under the Kennett Government this included the introduction of mandatory reporting.

Under the Bracks and Brumby Governments this included the establishment of an independent Children's Court; the delivery of new legislation; the establishment of the Child Safety Commissioner; the roll out of the Child FIRST platform across the State; new reform directions for out-of-home care, a new kinship care service, and a major expansion of the child protection workforce.

Nevertheless, significant challenges still confront the child protection system, as recent cases in 2011 highlight.

Victoria's child protection system is handling more cases than ever before and the needs of vulnerable Victorian families are becoming more complex – there are now higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, and family violence. Economic and social disadvantage is also common across families known to the system.

The Department of Human Services is experiencing significant demand pressures on the system and families staying in the system longer.

This inquiry presents an opportunity to build on the strengths of the system. It is also a chance to identify the issues that are impacting on the delivery of quality responses to children and families in need.

Central to this submission are two self-evident but easily overlooked central themes that need to underpin future recommendations and directions. These are putting children first, and ensuring that child protection workers, both government and non-government are properly supported and resourced.

Recent Reform and Investment

In August 2003 the then Premier, Steve Bracks established a Premier's Children's Advisory Committee to advise him on how the government could work better to improve the lives of Victoria's children. Stemming from this, in December 2004 "*Putting Children First ... the next steps*" was released, and key initiatives included:

- ☐ The appointment of a Child Safety Commissioner who would be responsible for implementing a range of strengthened measures to protect vulnerable children. The Child Safety Commissioner now holds a statutory office enacted under Part 6 of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* and is able to raise any matter, at any time, at his/her own discretion, or at the instigation of the Minister. The Child Safety Commissioner may publish any findings arising from his work in his annual report which must be tabled in Parliament;
- ☐ The appointment of a dedicated Minister for Children, and an Office for Children;
- ☐ The establishment of the Victorian Children's Council; and
- ☐ Legislation to establish a Working with Children Check in Victoria.

In 2005, the Victorian Parliament passed the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (CWSA)* and the *Children Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA)*. This legislation was enacted following extensive consultation. Key reforms included:

- ☐ The establishment of a Victorian Carers list to provide guidance on the approval of foster carers and employees of agencies;
- ☐ New and more rigorous processes for government-funded child, youth and family services including registration, external assessments and a statewide register of carers;
- ☐ Extending the role for child and family support services to respond earlier when families first show signs of difficulty;
- ☐ Responding earlier to repeated notifications to better address cases of child neglect.
- ☐ Where children cannot live safely at home, ensuring long-term stable alternative care;
- ☐ Promotion of more culturally-appropriate service responses to better maintain Aboriginal children's connection to their culture, family and community;
- ☐ A new Children's Court Therapeutic Treatment Order for children aged 10-14 who exhibit sexually-abusive behaviour.

In 2009 amendments to the CWSA led to further scrutiny and accountability measures for the Child Safety Commissioner and the Victorian Child Death Review Committee.

Further, in 2009 there was record investment by the Brumby Government into the system, with \$160 million announced in the May 2009 budget for out-of-home care followed in September 2009 with a \$77 million package to boost the child protection sector.

These two major tranches of funding delivered;

- ☐ 101 new frontline, professional child protection workers.
- ☐ A Specialist Intervention Team to tackle child protection trouble spots.

- ❑ Over 70 new staff across child protection and the non-government sector to provide assistance and supervision to children already safely placed with their extended family;
- ❑ A \$2.8 million recruitment and quality training campaign to recruit people with the right expertise to Victoria's child protection system;
- ❑ A \$4.7 million boost to Child FIRST to connect an additional 1,760 Victorian families to a range of early intervention family support services, tackling the risk factors of abuse and neglect before they occur;
- ❑ Appointment of two new Principal Practitioners to work with and support child protection workers;
- ❑ Additional training for child protection workers;
- ❑ A \$19.1 million pilot of new models of intensive family-based interventions to prevent children from needing to come into care. The first of these placement prevention pilots was established last year;
- ❑ Capacity for a new form of foster care, with expert practitioners to provide intensive care for children in their own homes;
- ❑ The ongoing trial of therapeutic residential care models, which provides for better trained staff to better meet the needs of children in care.
- ❑ A new volunteer mentoring program, run by the office of the Child Safety Commissioner to help children in residential care become connected to their local community;
- ❑ An expansion of the after hours child protection system; and
- ❑ A \$10 million investment for new residential care units that provide for more homelike and therapeutic environments.

Other measures to protect and support Victoria's most vulnerable children include the development of the reconfigured Department of Human Services to respond to more frequent and complex incidences of family breakdown and to oversee services for children, youth and families.

There is a long history of reform and investment by the previous Labor Government in the child protection system. This inquiry presents an opportunity to build on this strong platform.

Putting Children First

Underpinning the new legislation that the former government enacted in 2005 are the Best Interests Principles, which start with:

For the purposes of this Act the best interests of the child must always be paramount

Just as these principles should inform all decision making around children who come into contact with the child protection system, so they should inform the deliberations of the inquiry and any future actions of government.

Supporting our Child Protection staff

Consideration should be given to how best to resource the child protection system with professional child protection workers. In considering this issue, the Inquiry should look to address areas experiencing high demand, how best to reduce pressure on the workforce

and reduce the number of cases without a full-time worker. In particular, the Inquiry may wish to look at case load limits and related occupational health and safety issues for staff.

The role of child protection officers in supervised visits, and the role of child protection officers in the Children's Court are also issues worthy of attention.

Further, consideration should be given to whether the current child protection model encourages appropriate skill and career development for workers across all parts of the sector.

During the 2010 election campaign, the Labor Party announced that if it were to win another term of government, 80 additional Child Support Workers would be appointed to assist child protection staff keep children safe. This would have resulted in more support and capacity across the workforce, more home visits to assess the welfare of children at risk, and more assistance with facilitating access visits.

Further Issues

I welcome the opportunity to put forward other issues for consideration by the Inquiry including:

Out of Home care

- ☐ Foster carers: The number of foster carers has decreased in recent years and the cohort from which such carers are drawn from is narrowing. The broadening of the cohort could be addressed by improving payments for foster carers and by increasing recruitment efforts across the community. Further, standardisation of financial assistance packages provided to foster carers through each departmental region needs to be undertaken. The new model of more professional foster care which was being developed by the Department of Human Services under the former government needs to be further examined as well.
- ☐ Number of placements: Many children in out of home care are experiencing multiple placements, which can be very unsettling. Consideration should be given to strategies to reduce this.
- ☐ Kinship Care: As the fastest growing category of out of home care, consideration should be given to the establishment of a peak body to provide greater advocacy and training support for kinship carers.
- ☐ Siblings: Consideration should be given to how siblings in the child protection system, when separated from parents, are able to live together in out of home care.
- ☐ Children Leaving Care: Consideration should be given to building on recently established leaving care services to provide assistance with accommodation, life skills training, general and specialist health, job search and employment support.
- ☐ Placement prevention pilots: These pilots have been providing intensive assistance and support in the homes of at-risk families, respite options for parents and better family reunification programs. There is a significant cohort of children in out of home care who enter for a short time and then return to their family, suggesting earlier

interventions might prevent these children from requiring out of home care down the track.

Child FIRST

Consideration should be given to extending the Child FIRST program in partnership with the Commonwealth Government's income management scheme to assist families to break the cycle of welfare dependency. Employment assistance, skills training, respite and child care all could assist struggling families engage with the workforce. Poverty and unemployment is a common factor for families known to the child protection system.

After Hours Service

The former government provided increased resources for an after hours child protection service. This substantially relieved pressure on child protection workers who were not required to work after hours at night. Consideration should be given to a further expansion of the after hours service to additional regions across the State.

Conclusion

At any one time there are around 12,000 children in contact with the Victorian child protection system. We need to be upfront about the challenges of providing high quality responses for vulnerable children and families.

To address these challenges in the short term requires a further injection of staff to deal with the increasing number and complexity of cases.

Beyond this, future reform of child protection and family services should be about keeping Victorian children safe and putting their needs first. It should be about setting children up for life so that they have respect for themselves, and others; so that they feel that they are valuable members of our community; and they can have the best opportunities to fulfil their potential. What is needed is further investment in the system, particularly into the recruitment and retention of frontline staff.

As much as possible, a focus of supporting families before they enter the system, through such programs as Child FIRST, should be at the forefront of the Department of Human Services' efforts.

I would be pleased to meet with the review panel to discuss this submission further.

Luke Donnellan MP
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