


Professor Cathy Humphreys Social Work at Melbourne University of Melbourne Parkville. Victoria 3010 Ph. 03 83449427 Cathy.humphreys@unimelb.edu.au	The Alfred Felton Research Program Promoting Safety and Well-Being for Children, Young People and Families	 THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
--	--	---

PROTECTING VICTORIA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN INQUIRY SUBMISSION

ISSUE: A STRESSED CHILD PROTECTION SERVICE

RELEVANT TERMS OF REFERENCE:

3.B.The quality, structure, role and functioning of ...statutory child protection services.

KEY PRINCIPLES:

- Child protection investigation and prosecution should be an action of last resort for vulnerable children, but when the state does intervene, it should do so quickly and thoroughly, with a high level of professionalism..
- When a child is subject to an order, particularly a custody or guardianship order to the State, the State should act as a good parent.
- The State is an enduring entity, with responsibilities transcending particular governments, and this is particularly critical for the protection and care of children.

BACKGROUND TO SUBMISSION:

The Felton Research program has not had the functioning of the Child Protection Service *per se* as a recent research focus, but so many issues relating to the functioning of the Child Protection Service arise in the course of specific projects, that it cannot go without some comment. This brief submission therefore draws the attention of the Inquiry to some of those issues, on the assumption that there will be other voices raising similar concerns, and this statement might echo those or provide some additional impetus to their consideration.

FREQUENTLY RAISED CONCERNS:

- The high turnover of child protection staff, leading to fragmented service, discontinuous case planning and loss of knowledge at case and program levels.
- Chronic shortages of staff in the post-order case management phase, leaving children in care and the agencies to which their care is delegated with insufficient attention from their custodian or guardian.
- Large and unwieldy regional structures, where it can be difficult for Child Protection workers to match the accessibility and local knowledge of their community sector partners, thus eroding their credibility as relevant workers.
- Problems associated with the multiple functions of DHS as regulator, guardian, service provider, contract manager.
- Major problems with the interface with the Children's Court where the culture of the Court ripples through the workload and priorities which are established for child protection workers in ways which are not necessarily productive for the work with children and their families.
- A stressed and over-worked workforce, particularly among the dedicated core of staff who stay over a long period out of commitment to the children, the families and functions of the State. Many are concerned that the Child Protection service has had an exponential increase in the number and complexity of practice instructions and standards, without a streamlining of existing expectations or a corresponding rise in the resources to meet the rising standards.
- An IT system used by workers which is cumbersome and without the necessary functionality to provide easy access to case history.
- An overly directive supervision culture, creating problems for worker initiative and for relationships with clients and with the wider child, youth and family services sector.
- Difficulties responding appropriately to families where parents have complex needs, because of the lack of effective working relationships across sectors, notably with mental health, drug and alcohol, family violence, housing and correctional services.
- A particularly pernicious political climate, in which Child Protection workers feel under-valued, stigmatized and vulnerable to abuse, from clients, actors in the Court, the Press, external agencies and politicians. This is particularly damaging as it is laid upon a base of work that is intellectually and emotionally challenging, and which contains an endemic threat of harm to child clients and violence to workers.

STRENGTHS OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SERVICE:

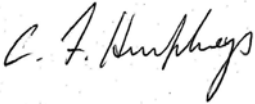
- Real efforts at Branch level to recognise and foster excellence, though the pressures on the ground make sustaining those efforts problematic.
- An outstanding Principal Practitioner (Ms Robyn Miller) who has made mammoth efforts to lift the knowledge base, practice skills, morale and accountability of the front-line staff and supervisors.
- A commitment to earlier and more collaborative intervention with families through the Child FIRST and Family Services reforms, and the use of the community-based child protection workers.

- A history of excellent program initiatives geared to particular populations, such as high risk infants or high risk adolescents.
- Strong developments of the multi-disciplinary teams investigating child sexual abuse in selected areas.
- A core body of experienced and motivated staff with a wealth of knowledge of the department, its procedures, and especially of its clients and their needs.
- A very positive commitment to training and staff retention through the Graduate Certificate in Child and Family Practice and the Graduate Diploma in Child and Family Practice Leadership.

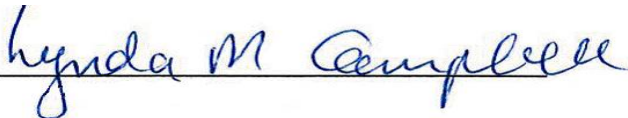
RECOMMENDATIONS:

- That the Inquiry consider the feasibility of a bi-partisan parliamentary commitment to support the development and further professionalisation of the Child Protection Service. To continue to play political football with this service is to erode its core, and to place children at continual risk through a demoralized and under-staffed service.
- That the Inquiry pursue the options for a whole of government commitment to integrated service for families with complex needs and their children.
- That the Inquiry consider changes which build on the VLRC report but go beyond the current set of recommendations to ensure that there is a less adversarial approach and that the needs of abused children are placed at the centre of any change process
- That the Inquiry pay particular attention to the functions of the State as custodian or guardian of vulnerable children, with a view to recommendations and resources that ensure that children who have been through the protective investigation process and who are now the responsibility of the State do not suffer because resources are continually re-directed to the politically sensitive notification/investigation phase of the child protection process.

Signed



Cathy Humphreys, Professor of Child and Family Welfare, Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne



Dr. Lynda Campbell, Research Fellow, Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne

Endorsed by:

Child, Youth and Family Research Cluster, Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Date 19 April, 2011