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PROTECTING VICTORIA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN INQUIRY - SUBMISSION

ISSUE: Aboriginal children in kinship care

RELEVANT TERMS OF REFERENCE:

C) Out of home care, including permanency planning and transitions.

3.5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of the range of our current out-of-home care services, as well as the supports offered to children and young people leaving care?

3.5.2 Is the overall structure of out-of-home care services appropriate for the role they are designed to perform? If not, what changes should be considered?

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognise the additional burdens carried by Aboriginal kinship carers, and the importance of recruiting and maintaining a greater number.
2. Affirm and promote self-determination for Aboriginal services
3. Build capacity in Aboriginal services and caregivers of Aboriginal children
4. Improve training to all workers with Aboriginal children in care
 5. Expand training to Aboriginal workers in responding to children experiencing trauma.
6. Make mandatory that carers and workers with Aboriginal children undertake training on the cultural needs of Aboriginal children and that DHS fund child protection workers and community services to access this training.
7. Implement a quality assurance framework in relation to Cultural Support Plans.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE:

This Submission draws upon literature and recent research in kinship care that included a specific focus on Aboriginal children.

Family is the cornerstone of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) culture and spirituality. The connection to family and community form the basis of identity, cultural connectedness and the emergence of the child's spirituality, and provides the fundamentals for security and well-being throughout adulthood. Aboriginal organisations stress that children need to develop relationships with extended family members while they are still children. Relationships must be encouraged and nurtured, and difficulties in maintaining relationships, such as child protection issues must be overcome (SNAICC, 2005).

Children's place in their wider family becomes even more critical when there are protective issues causing them to be removed from the daily care of their biological mother and father. Cultural Support Plans are mandated for Aboriginal children in care (State of Victoria, 2005), to address the imperative for Aboriginal children to be securely connected

to family and culture. However, the quality of these are not scrutinised to ensure they address the cultural needs of children throughout their involvement in the Victorian child protection system.

The rate of ATSI children in out of home care is nine times the rate of non-ATSI children nationally; in Victoria, the rate is 13% (AIHW, 2011). Despite the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACCP), many Aboriginal children are still placed in foster care, usually non-Aboriginal. Current figures (June 2010) show that in Victoria, 42% of Aboriginal children are still placed in care that is non-kinship and non-Aboriginal; and 26% of those in kinship care are with non-Aboriginal family (AIHW, 2011). Thus inherent challenges for keeping in touch with family members and culture exist for 68% of Aboriginal children in care.

RELEVANT RESEARCH:

There is as yet no published research on Aboriginal kinship care in Australia (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007). These authors identified an urgent need for such research; in addition, the need for research in this area has been highlighted in an Aboriginal publication on research priorities for children (SNAICC, 2004). The current research at the University of Melbourne is a beginning to address this gap.

The 2010 Kinship Care and Family Contact Research Project consisted of two strands: a **survey** of kinship carers to identify trends in family contact arrangements; and **focus groups and interviews** to explore the issues in more depth. There was a special focus on Aboriginal children in the research design. Specific questions were asked of carers of ATSI children in the survey, and focus groups and interviews were organised with Aboriginal services. Consultation via interviews and focus groups took place in three Aboriginal services, two rural and one metropolitan. Results of this work will be published in the near future.

430 completed survey responses were received. Of these, 57 were carers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children; 15 of these were Aboriginal carers. Between them, they were caring for 109 ATSI children; two-thirds of these were in non-Aboriginal kinship care. Three of the children were Torres Strait Islanders (TSI), and three were both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Only one carer identified as TSI, caring for one TSI child.

Key results:

- There is a strong cultural imperative to provide care for children in need within Aboriginal communities. While this is a key strength of communities, it can lead to families accepting the care of children even when overwhelmed with their own difficulties, eg homelessness. Aboriginal services gave examples of inappropriate requests for care by child protection workers that did not take straitened family circumstances into account, but were acceded to by carers.
- Caregivers of ATSI children were mostly (65%) over 50, female and frequently single, and living in poverty with often crowded housing. Aboriginal carers were caring for larger numbers of children (average 2.4) than non-Aboriginal carers (average 1.8).

- Survey responses included many comments conveying great love of the children and commitment to them.
- Experiences of parental contact were often difficult, and there was great need expressed for support with this. In particular, the view was expressed that for cultural reasons, contact will occur with parents despite safety concerns, and that careful casework is thus necessary to address children's safety.
- Approximately half (53%) of the carers stated that they were unaware of the Cultural Support Plans for the children; 44% said that they had no part in implementing these. This raises concerns about the current effectiveness of Cultural Support Plans and their implementation in supporting children's connection to family and culture.
- Consultations also revealed a lack of understanding among mainstream workers of diversity in Aboriginal communities; this can lead to incorrect preparation and implementation of Cultural Support Plans. In general, this was seen as sensitive, difficult work that needs to be done by Aboriginal services.
- One-third of the carers of ATSI children (33%) felt that the children were not growing up with an active understanding of their culture.
- Only half (53%) of carers reported that they had adequate support to ensure that the children keep in contact with family and culture. Some frustrations were expressed about this. Family connections are also limited by a lack of help with finding information leading to reconnection, and with mediating intra-familial conflict.
- Services stressed that safety standards should be the same for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. Inappropriate placements are sometimes made due to families being unable to say 'no' to the cultural imperative to provide care when needed, despite their own circumstances, eg too many children, poverty, homelessness. Assessments in crisis situations may be as minimal as a police records check, with no follow-up.
- The Stolen Generations continue to have a major impact on current family and community functioning, and on Aboriginal community attitudes to child protection. There is a particular need for sensitivity and trustworthiness in interactions of workers with Aboriginal families.
- The number of Aboriginal kinship care placements is limited by a lack of cultural sensitivity in family assessments.
- Many families are unwilling to come forward to offer care through fear that criminal convictions that are old or not relevant to their capacity to give safe care may be held against them.
- The cultural practice of using threats for verbal discipline is often misinterpreted as placing children at risk of physical abuse.
- Racism is an issue with children who are living in their non-Aboriginal family. Caregiving families are sometimes unwilling to facilitate the child's relationships with their Aboriginal family.

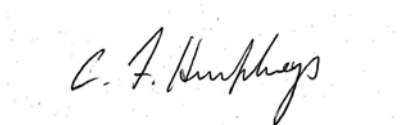
- Aboriginal services see this as a challenge that they can meet, working supportively with the non-Aboriginal carers, rather than initially acceding to carers' preference to avoid Aboriginal services.
- There is a strong skill base in (extended) family support within Aboriginal services. They demonstrated patience, a non-judgmental approach, and persistence in providing support to community members including children, parents and caregivers.
- Aboriginal services value and seek out training programs from mainstream services such as family therapy training and trauma counselling, and are willing to share their own understanding of culture and family connections.
- There is a huge unmet need for support from families caring for Aboriginal children. Many feel that the children were placed with almost no support at all. Caregivers feel that the Department of Human Services is often unresponsive to their needs.
 - Respite care, housing and finances were mentioned as major problems, as well as counselling and educational help for children, and assistance with mediating family relationships.
- Like mainstream services, Aboriginal services are limited by funding models as to what they can achieve by way of supporting families to care for their own children

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Recognise that Aboriginal communities are best placed to support their kinship networks.
 - ❖ Funding models need improvement if Aboriginal children are to remain within their families and communities, and/or be firmly connected to them, and thus the cycle of family breakdown diminished.
 - ❖ Funding models should assume that all Cultural Support Plans are created and implemented by Aboriginal services, and allow sufficient resources for this.
 - ❖ The Victorian Aboriginal Decision-Making Program (McHugh & valentine, 2010) is an example of effective practice in working with Aboriginal families that should be promoted.
2. Particular support to carers of Aboriginal children, and to the children themselves, is essential if placements are to be sustained and good outcomes are to be achieved.
 - ❖ Support includes ongoing casework, financial assistance, counselling and mediation to assist with family dynamics and children's trauma, and educational remediation.
 - ❖ Where security issues preclude uncontrolled parental contact, alternative contact environments to DHS offices need to be found. These may include specifically designed contact centres or arrangements with community facilities for special use.

3. Continuing professional education is needed for Aboriginal workers and other workers in Aboriginal services.
 - ❖ Training in responding to trauma, and in working with family dynamics needs to be universally available to Aboriginal services.
4. Cross-cultural training should be mandatory for all child welfare workers and their managers, and for non-Aboriginal caregivers of Aboriginal children.
 - ❖ This will assist with improved understanding of Aboriginal culture such that safety assessments are appropriate.
 - ❖ This will also help build the pool of suitable Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kinship caregivers.
 - ❖ Training needs to be provided on an ongoing basis such that workers are reminded of key issues and are able to build their cultural awareness over time.
 - ❖ Non-Aboriginal carers need ongoing information and support to develop awareness of cultural issues.

Signed:



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Endorsed by: The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Association

Date: 20 April 2011

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