



“Caring Women Make a Difference”

SUBMISSION
**‘Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable
Children’**

August 2011

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children

The National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV) wishes to thank the Inquiry Panel for the opportunity to make this affirmation and submission on "Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children".

Established in 1902, the NCWV is one of the oldest women's associations. It is a non-sectarian, non-party political umbrella group that encourages the participation of women in all aspects of community life.

It informs, empowers and advocates for a fair and just dialogue and engagement by women for women, and seeks to improve communities by empowering women to make a difference.

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We have read dozens of submissions and sat in on a full day of public presentations and would endorse the main themes that have emerged during this inquiry.

We wish to particularly affirm and highlight the following measures mentioned in other submissions:-

- 1. That keeping children home with their family is the preferred option**
- 2. Prevention – being the prime determinant of all future legislations, policy & practise**
- 3. Early Intervention – sitting under and being key to all prevention policy & prevention**
- 4. Children's/Family Court – move to a less adversarial model of functioning and develop a system that puts the child at ease and allows for their voice to be heard**
- 5. Legal system – radical changes to the rules of admissible evidence and how the court hears the child's voice including the Independent Children's Lawyer – should not cost – no means test – (it is about the child, not the parent)**
- 6. More regional services including courts – more consistency across the sector, travel/accommodation/parking needs make it more difficult to access services and is physically and financially stressful. If services were available in the regions then there could be more early intervention and better outcomes – it should not matter where a child live - they have a right to be safe and resourced**
- 7. Kinship Carers formal & informal – a vital resource for maintaining family relationships that needs to be recognized as a viable option which is resourced with remuneration, training and respite and family members made an integral part of all discussions re: future options and needs**
- 8. Respite & Foster Care – Increase the support, training and remuneration given to carers. Intentional and careful selection and seen as part of the team so involved in discussions about the child/ren and their future**

The NCWV wishes to highlight five major areas for consideration by the Panel of Inquiry. These issues are:-

- 1. Vulnerable children who are not mentioned in the majority of reports to this panel**
- 2. The age of care leavers**
- 3. The National Commissioner for Children**
- 4. Australian wide Police check/working with children check**
- 5. An intentional working together of services across all sectors in the area**

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children

1. Vulnerable children not covered in the majority of submissions

There are many children who by virtue of not being in trouble with the law or not being “actually” abused, sit outside of the system that we have been looking at in the majority of submissions, but are never-the-less vulnerable and “at risk”.

They are children whose parents/families may be dysfunctional, unwell, living in poverty or experiencing or have experienced major trauma in their own lives.

Children in these families generally have poorer educational, employment and health outcomes. These are children who typically then end up with lower levels of permanent employment opportunities, poorer parenting skills and a reduced capacity to cope with their lives, and to pass on the skills and resilience needed to live productive lives to their children and so perpetuate the cycle of vulnerability.

A concerted effort needs to be made to intervene and to change the future for these children.

One stop shops at Centrelink offices, etc... designated youth connection workers, a greater collaboration between all levels of service provision (see point 5 of this submission), and stronger and a more robust preventative health and education system which is not content with the lowest common denominator benchmark, and the notion that some kids will not thrive or learn.

Equity of service provision for all children, your safety, care and opportunity should not be dependent on where you were born or live.

Local magistrates need to hear cases in regional & rural courts so that a proper understanding of local services and situations and distances needing to be travelled for access can be taken into account when determining access and where a child lives and goes to school.

2. The Age of Care Leavers

We would like to see the age of care leavers increased to 23, the age at which Centrelink will declare a young person independent without exceptional Circumstances and that a portfolio of information about them be gathered and given to them when they leave care.

In the broader community young people from stable and well resourced families are staying home longer often into their mid-twenties, (about a quarter of all 20 – 34 year olds – 2006 census) so it would make sense that young people who have “missed out” on some of the care, nurture and resourcing in life and who are still finding their feet, should not be expected to be independent and able to fend for themselves at 18.

We need to think in terms of readiness not just chronologically.

At the very least we need to assist with accommodation, life skill training and the costs of continuing their education so that they do not turn to prostitution and theft to survive or become homeless or end up in prison as an accommodation alternative.

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3. The National Commissioner for Children

We wish to affirm and ask that a National Commissioner for Children be appointed as soon as possible and given a broad scope of responsibility to oversight all services, but particularly policy and practise that is put in place for children across Australia. This is important to this inquiry as some of the areas that are spoken about in the various submissions cross into federal jurisdiction.

We also wish to compliment the Victorian Commissioner for Children Bernie Geary for the work that he is doing for our children in Victoria, and can see the benefit of this position both at a state and federal level.

4. Australian wide Police & Working with Children Checks

We ask that an Australian wide police and working with children check be investigated to remove loop holes across the country and to increase compliance.

At the moment every state has its own check and checks for different things at different costs, with Victoria and Western Australia also requiring a separate Police & Working with Children check. All information for these checks is gleaned from the same federal police databank. Police checks are current until the day they are granted as they are none active, whilst the Working With Children check is active – so if someone offends the organization it was initiated for, is informed immediately.

The complexity, differing standards across the states and cost means that some don't bother and question its worth. An Australia wide check that is active with a photo ID card issued, would help protect Victoria's most Vulnerable children from those who seek to abuse their vulnerability.

5. Intentional Working Together of Services across ALL sectors

In the interest of best practise and to achieve the optimum outcomes for our children we ask that there is an intentional Asset Based Community Development model of cooperative service provision across all sectors.

Co-location of services in shopping centres, schools, doctors, migrant centres or Centrelink, in places where people go, will greatly assist families to get the help and information that they need in a familiar, supportive and safe environment.

This then will provide a multi-faceted, client centred, culturally sensitive and diverse range of services in a cost effective way.

Many not-for profit groups have wonderful life skill, breakfast, homework, parenting and self-esteem building programmes. We need to harness these and value add them to the professional services that are available.

Indexing a list of the full range of services and programmes and emergency contacts, in each geographical community and have these lists available, is just one simple way that we can make a difference.

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children

The National Council of Women of Victoria, endorses this Inquiry and pledges to work with the Victorian Government in whatever way it can to improve the outcomes for Victoria's Vulnerable Children.

We want services that put the safety of the child and the protection of the family unit as the first priority in service delivery. Where possible everything should be done to uphold the family unit, to support the authority of the family (where this is functioning and has reasonable expectation of healthy future outcomes), is holistic, caring, inclusive and hopeful.

A system that sees the child as a client in its own right therefore ensuring that the processes of care and help and judicial system are flexible and robust enough to be able to hear, and to broaden the parameters on admissible evidence so that courts and decision makers can hear the voice and the heart of the child.

We want to see a system that is positive and empowering in nature, that intervenes earlier enough to limit damage but strong enough to take decisive action when needed to protect vulnerable children and families.

Support for foster carers is crucial as is the education of communities, and encouragement for involvement, for we understand that it takes a community to raise a child so we all play a part in prevention, intervention and remediation.

For those in care we want to quote from ¹No One Listened by Isobel & Alex Kerr.
The voice of two children who have been through the "system".

"Sometimes a young person just wants a hug, which the workers are nervous of giving in case they open themselves up to accusations of having a sexual motive. Many of the workers end up disillusioned because of the system.

In most nuclear families, the parents would never allow their children to change schools so frequently and then to be thrown out into the world at age eighteen without any further help and support. Why does society find it acceptable that this should happen to vulnerable young people in the care system? There should be uproar about this, and changes should be introduced so that kids in care get the same opportunities and support as those growing up with their own families.

There needs to be more emphasis on education and on continuing to support the young people beyond the ages of sixteen or eighteen, to combat problems like loneliness, drug abuse and homelessness. Everyone is too quick to write off young people in care as 'bad' rather than 'damaged', and to criminalise them too young. We need to establish a system that sets goals for them, gives them positive rewards, and is much more supportive of those who choose to continue into further education.

It is much easier for the world to forget about the inconvenient children. But if children in care receive better treatment, all sort of other problems once they are in the outside world might be avoided. "

1. No One Listened *Isobel & Alex Kerr* (Harper element 2008) pgs 299 & 300