

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

### **Submission from Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault**

**April 12 2011**

Staff at Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) provide counseling, advocacy, information and support to victims/ survivors of sexual assault aged 12 years and over. NCASA's is funded to provide services to people in the 4 LGAs of Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Darebin and Banyule. NCASA counsellor /advocates have many years of experience in working with children and families with complex psychosocial problems, histories of trauma and issues such as socio-economic stress, mental illness, family violence, substance misuse, grief and loss and sexual abuse as well as involvement with the courts and statutory child protection system. Through their work at NCASA, all staff have extensive experience in counselling young people and families who have been impacted by the trauma of sexual assault.

#### NCASA responses

In response to various points raised under the Terms of Reference, the following issues have been identified as significant:

#### **Introduction**

We understand this is an Inquiry which has provided Terms Of Reference. We believe it will be important to include in the introduction to the final report, a statement identifying the extent of child sexual abuse in the community and some data relating numbers and/ or estimates of child sexual abuse rates. An extremely important part of the broader context of protecting vulnerable children is the extent of child sexual assault in the community. Particularly as it is a hidden crime which often occurs within the confines of the family or within a supposedly safe place like a school or sports club or church. The high rates of sexual assault of children has been shown to be a direct contributing factor to a range of concerns for high risk young people - such as youth homelessness and substance misuse & dependency.

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## **1. The factors that increase the risk of abuse and neglect occurring and effective preventive strategies.**

Due to the very particular nature of sexual assault and its devastating impact on an individual, we believe it is important to specifically name sexual assault along with child abuse and neglect. Sexual assault is not one aspect or symptom of “neglect”. It is a deliberate and planned crime against a person, in this case of an adult against a vulnerable child. In most cases, it is a repeated crime, endured by the victim over a long period of time and has devastating, lifelong consequences. It is not an action which occurs as a result of a risk factor. It is of concern that there is no specific mention of sexual assault.

### **1.1.1 Preventative strategies**

Prevention programs in schools. The CASA House SAPPSS model has been evaluated and demonstrates effectiveness in bringing about a positive change in attitudes. Introducing an integrated prevention program across all schools would be a positive strategy.

### **1.1.1**

Sexual assault support services need strengthening. CASAs have the resources, knowledge, skills and experience to implement effective prevention programs, but need increased resources to do this work. There are many specific communities - such as particular ethnic communities – with which the local CASA could work and which could be targeted with the aim of establishing a working partnership and implementing culturally relevant education and prevention programs.

### **1.1.4**

Yes there do need to be specific strategies to address the needs of particular groups in the community. For example, considerable additional resources need to be dedicated to training Aboriginal health and welfare professionals who can work more effectively within their own community. We need more representatives of all ethnic and cultural communities across the sector - in all areas of the child support and child protection systems.

### **1.1.5 “Public Health Model”**

The current Child Protection system is purely reactive. We believe that more focus is needed on preventive strategies. Because of the nature of sexual abuse, it is much more difficult to prevent it. i.e. it is a deliberate, planned act by an powerful adult preying on a vulnerable child. It is often a repeated act - so ongoing sexual abuse over many months or years.

To address this, it would be necessary to develop a more holistic approach such as the VicHealth led campaign focusing on Prevention of Family Violence. This campaign incorporates developments across a range of levels and sectors including:

- policy – government policy which influences agency policy
- the law / changes to the law
  - which in turn leads to changes to processes protocols and systems
- community level - strategies and campaigns at community level such as in schools and sports clubs

### **2.4 What are the most cost effective strategies to enhance early identification of and intervention targeted at children and families at risk?**

At NCASA, we regularly have clients who identify intergenerational sexual abuse. For these families, there are very few services to refer to for ongoing support i.e. services which specifically work with this situation and address the complexity of issues which arise for these families. Especially if the perpetrator is still around in the family.

The Bouverie Centre does address this situation directly but, to our knowledge, there are no other services in Melbourne/ Victoria, that are accessible to people who need them.

### **3. The quality, structure, role and functioning of family services etc**

In the court system, the adversarial system doesn't work best for the child. Often appears the focus is on parental rights etc.

In relation to accessing support, the benchmark is too high for eligibility for support. In our experience, it is often difficult to find appropriate support for some young clients who fail to meet the eligibility requirements for the services of the local DHS Child Protection team or Child First agency. This often results in vulnerable young people, who have left an abusive family situation, attempting to live independently, without adequate skills or supports. This can lead to the young person becoming increasingly under pressure, experiencing high levels of anxiety and increasingly at risk of further family breakdown, homelessness, failure to attend school and isolation.

### **3.2 Skilled workforce**

Workforce development - increasing resources and salaries into this child and family support sector, including improved salaries.

#### **3.3.3**

#### **Do the current services accommodate the needs of vulnerable children and families from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds?**

The current services are not resourced adequately to be in the position to ensure their services are accessible to all the numerous diverse ethnic groups in their own local community. This does need to happen to accommodate the need.

It is Important/ essential for government to support collaboration and partnerships between mainstream agencies and the various diverse ethnic and communities in Victoria.

### **3. Family Services**

#### **3.3 Strengths and weaknesses**

Partnership and collaboration are strengths where it is in place.

It is very important, in terms of the system having the capacity to be effective and respond quickly when there is a situation where a child is at risk of being regularly abused by a non-custodial parent. Whilst an investigation is underway, children are particularly at risk. Throughout this period, there is a need for consistency and coordination between services

dealing with the various aspects of the case - DHS, Police, courts, and also community support agencies such as CPS, CASA, Child First, schools.

Family Court says children can't go to counselling

These processes increases risk for some children

Where a child has been abused by father, or where there is FV happening regularly, the mother is held accountable for protecting the children. If she can't protect the children, the children are often removed. This is unfair and further undermines the family and causes further trauma for the child. For the family and particularly the mother, the injustice is extremely undermining to confidence and capacity.

In a situation where there are vulnerable children and abusive adults, there needs to be support for implementing the law, which identifies that children are vulnerable and that family violence is a crime. The issue that adults should not be abusive to children is the issue that needs to be addressed. The perpetrator of the violent crime needs to be removed and held accountable. The mother should not be held accountable.

In these situations, often it is more of a focus on the rights of the adults than on the needs of the child.

### **3.5 Strengths and weaknesses out of home care and supports**

#### Circle Program

We identified a particularly strong program the Australian Childhood Foundation Circle Program trauma training for foster parents

Much better more effective support and training which has lasted

#### Gender sensitivity

We identified an issue relating to gender in residential care homes. In placing a young person, there needs to be an increased awareness about the impact of gender and the gender balance in a resi care home. There may be risks associated around gender balance in a resi care home. For example, 4 boys and one girl - a vulnerable young girl placed with 4 older boys who were known to have displayed sexually abusive behaviours.

#### Storybook for children who go through care.

Suggestion that an individual storybook be developed throughout the life of the child/ young person who utilises this child protection system. Often people reach 18 years and have been in numerous different foster homes and residential care units. But they have no record of their life. A documented record would be very helpful and give a sense of continuity and connection to significant people and experiences throughout their life. This would be very positive for them in terms of their own identity.

#### DHS workers to read files.

Recommend DHS workers to be familiar with history of a child. Presumably this problem is an issue relating to resources, workload and workforce capacity.

### **3.5.6 and 3.5.7**

#### Allowing same sex couples to adopt.

An obvious resource in the community is the numerous same sex couples who would love to have a family and who would be willing to adopt a child in need of a family.

### **Conclusion**

We suggest it would be extremely instructive to hold a roundtable with people who have been through the system, when they were children.

### **Parenting is undervalued**

As a general statement, the lack of support for parents makes it extremely challenging and difficult to do the work of child raising/ childcare. In our society, there is a broad undervaluing of parenting.

### **Poverty**

Poverty of many families is a huge issue which impacts on the way people are able to cope with otherwise challenging situations such as family violence or a housing crisis or homelessness. These socio-economic stresses are rarely taken into account specifically, when people are dealing with courts or the statutory child protection system. There are huge expectations of single mothers in particular, such as:

- responsibility for protecting their children from violent family members or ex family members
- expectation to return to work even when children are still at primary school

- financially punished when they do manage to find part time work (less pension, less child support)
- expectation to provide a middle class lifestyle with inadequate income