

Submission by
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In relation to the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children inquiry, I hope the following will assist in your decision making process.

Client interviewing techniques: When examining assessment, investigation procedures and responses the issue of interviewing children is critical. Time spent with children and young people during the process of assessing risk and gathering information is vital to the outcome of the investigation. The focus should be to conduct interviews in a calm and child friendly environment and not be hindered due to time restrictions. By that I suggest that the person conducting the interview must have no pressing appointments and must be able to totally dedicate their attention to the child or young person. It should be expected that a number of such interviews are necessary to obtain all relevant information. Child Protection officers need to have appropriate work allocations to enable these interviews and follow up written documentation to be proficiently conducted. As children may not disclose abuse during initial/early contacts, premature closure of a case may leave these children at ongoing significant risk. Pressure of existing clients needing attention and bank up of new cases not yet visited are just two of many issues which may result in inadequate investigations into child abuse. Interviewing of clients cannot and must not be rushed – the well being of the child should not be compromised due to inadequate resources.

In order to protect vulnerable children, and ensure that they are heard, there needs to be adequate child protection staff that will have appropriate time to conduct a professional comprehensive assessment in each and every case.

Enhanced interaction between Child Protection and the Children's Court: Whilst Magistrates are knowledgeable about the theoretical approach to risk assessment, the issue of environmental neglect has at times been problematic. In particular, families have historically been presented to the court after children have been removed, due to Child Protection assessment that the family environment is unfit for habitation, and these same children then returned to the home time and time again. Attendance at these premises by the presiding Magistrate may be in the best interest of the child by enabling him or her to view the concerns first hand and include these observations in the decision making process.

Regular conferences between Magistrates and Child Protection would build a close relationship and aim to achieve the most appropriate outcomes for clients. Whilst these conferences have occurred in the past, I am suggesting a regular contact, perhaps quarterly or monthly, at each court would assist in improving relationships and mutual understanding.

Working environment: In order to strengthen the proficiency and retention of child protection staff a stable working environment is necessary. Policies and processes which are mirrored within an office and between offices, within regions and the State will assist greatly in minimising unnecessary stress. The need for staff to move from team to team within their office or between offices may in itself be stressful and this is exacerbated at times by the need to learn new processes or policies in order to conduct the same task because particular managers prefer to do things a different way. When the job of protecting

children is the focus and needs primary attention, the often unnecessary and time wasting office politics can shift the focus to staff frustrations.

Implementation of structured state-wide processes and policies would enable child protection officers to concentrate on their job of working with children to investigate child abuse rather than be side tracked by unnecessary administrative issues.

In recent times the government has seen fit to provide funding to employ further Child Protection officers for Victoria. In effect the quantity of staff increases across the state as a result of this funding is unlikely to have any impact on the overall vulnerability of children. It is my opinion that government officials who assessed this funding need are unlikely to have a realistic idea about the staff requirements necessary to enable adequate time to be devoted to each and every child at risk to ensure that a comprehensive in-depth job is completed. The fact that new staff members are likely to be inexperienced and will take some time to gain the knowledge required to achieve the required outcomes relates to the separate issue of staff retention which has historically been problematic in relation to child protection staff.

The primary focus in relation to child abuse always has to be in the best interest of the child. Unfortunately many issues such as budget constraints, inadequate qualified experienced staff, court decisions and staff retention, to name a few, impact on the success of achieving this focus. Barbara Holborow OAM recently recommended that the Family Court work more closely with Child Protection. Whilst this must be supported, the Child Protection workload is unlikely to cope with increased Family Court work without a significant injection of staff, initially to successfully address child abuse notifications.

Further to that, it is crucial that Team Leaders totally fulfil that role and not be expected to be Team Leaders/ Case Managers. When Team Leaders personally become involved in the management of complex cases, their capacity to proficiently and adequately supervise staff is compromised, and good supervision is vital to client safety.

Children have died in the past as a result of inadequate investigation and assessment into notified child abuse concerns. This enquiry is the opportunity to put things right and prevent more unnecessary deaths.