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The Hon Philip Cummins  
Chair  
Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry  
GPO Box 4708  
Melbourne VIC 3001

Thursday 14 April 2011

Dear Mr Cummins

The Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance (VYMA) thanks the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry for the opportunity to make this submission.

The VYMA is the peak body for youth mentoring in Victoria. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation providing leadership and expertise to ensure the growth of quality youth mentoring across the State. Our vision is for strong, connected Victorian communities where young people have the opportunity to reach their potential through quality mentoring experiences.

Youth mentoring provides structured and trusting relationships that bring young people together with volunteer mentors who offer guidance, support and encouragement. A major study found young people with mentors are:

- 27% less likely to begin using alcohol
- 46% less likely to begin using drugs
- 33% less likely to hit someone
- 52% less likely to skip school
- 3 times less likely to drop out of school
- 4 times less likely to fall pregnant as teenagers
- 4 times less likely to be arrested<sup>1</sup>

Since its establishment in 2005 the Alliance has become accepted as the voice of more than 200 youth mentoring programs in Victoria. Today, the VYMA provides an effective mix of consultation, professional development, resource development and advocacy.

We estimate that at least 7000 young people (aged 12-25 years) and 6000 volunteer adult mentors are involved with these youth mentoring programs. These numbers are growing every day.

The majority of programs are community based, where young people are matched one-on-one with an adult volunteer mentor. Programs may also be conducted in schools, TAFEs, workplaces and even online through 'e-mentoring'.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia L Sipe, *Mentoring: A Synthesis of Public/ Private Venture Research 1988-1995*, PPV 1996.

## Youth Mentoring and Vulnerable Young People

The focus of our submission relates to questions within Parts 3 and 5 of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry Terms of Reference.

### 3.5 What are the strengths and weaknesses of the range of our current out-of-home care services?

Youth mentoring has been recognised by the Victorian government as an important strategy in supporting young people as they leave care. The VYMA applauds the significant investment that has resulted in the roll out of a number of programs across the State.

Whilst there is no doubt that providing access to a supportive adult through mentoring results in more positive outcomes for young people, research has shown that these relationships will only succeed if the program is aligned with best practice standards.

Recent research from the US tells us that:

“mentoring, if done well, may hold the potential to meet some of the critical needs of youths transitioning from foster care to independent living and early adulthood. However, given the heightened vulnerabilities and complex needs of these youths, social workers should proceed with caution. Protecting foster youths from further rejection or disappointment must take precedence; this priority dictates, at minimum, diligent adherence to the best practices gleaned from the research on youth mentoring”.<sup>2</sup>

The VYMA is committed to providing ongoing support to leaving care mentoring programs to ensure they align with the standards that we know will result in more positive outcomes for young people.

Recommendation: That funding support is provided by the Department of Human Services to ensure the VYMA can continue to support quality leaving care youth mentoring in the future.

A major recurring issue identified by our membership is that young people are often not referred to youth mentoring until they are just about to leave the care system. As this is often a chaotic time for these young people the vital matching process is often disrupted. As a result young people leaving care struggled to engage with a mentor and are not able to benefit from an ongoing supportive relationship as they transition out of the care system.

Recommendation: That child protection workers consistently refer young people to youth mentoring programs when they are 16 years old to ensure they have the opportunity to effectively engage with a mentor prior to leaving care.

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer, R., Collins, M.E., Ward, R. and Smashnaya, S. (2010) Mentoring for Young People Leaving Foster Care: Promise and Potential Pitfalls. *Social Work*, 55 (3), 225-234

**5.1.4 Is it necessary to strengthen the capability of organisations in the nongovernment sector to better equip them to work with vulnerable children and families and if so, how?**

Whilst leaving care youth mentoring programs are run by organisations with expertise in supporting vulnerable young people, it must be acknowledged that many youth mentoring programs in Victoria also support young people who are involved in the child protection system.

Whilst these programs are funded by philanthropy, business or other government departments to provide general support around school engagement, transition to work/ further education or simply increasing young people's confidence and self esteem, many receive enquiries and referrals from child protection workers. As a result, program coordinators and volunteer mentors without the skills and knowledge to support young people with complex needs are doing just that.

The VYMA sees that it is imperative that both staff and volunteers engaging with young people in the child protection system have the support required to provide quality youth mentoring experiences for these young people.

Recommendation: That the VYMA, in partnership with member organisations with child protection expertise, be funded to develop and deliver targeted training and resources to develop the capacity and expertise of generalist program coordinators and their mentors to support young people in child protection.

We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the potential of quality youth mentoring and look forward to answering any further questions that the committee might have.

Yours Sincerely



Sarah Johnson  
Executive Officer

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