

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

**I submit the following reflections addressing specific aspects of the terms of reference as noted. With a long professional background in education and both the adult and juvenile justice system, I recognize the similarity to the Child Protection sphere – children make great headlines but not great re-election platforms! There needs to be a long term bipartisan commitment to breaking the generational cycle that accommodates an environment that is not conducive to the well being and development of children within their homes.**

### **3 Family Services**

The principal issue facing Family Services at our agency is the growing number of referrals coming from Child First. The impact of this is growing case loads, waiting time for engagement; pressure to close cases, increasing workplace stress and a need for more EFT case workers.

The effectiveness of Family Services would be enhanced by the well documented need for more meaningful communication and consultation between the agencies and Child Protection.

The barriers that I identify between the establishment and maintenance of a cohesive child protection network are founded in the constraints upon Child Protection to work co-operatively and supportively with the agencies. The statutory requirements of Child Protection are an essential component of the network however such focus on detail and rigor, would be more valuable, if the content quality was built upon the input of all professionalism and expertise available - geared towards the optimum outcome for the client families.

A system that requires an estimated 80% of a field workers time to be spent on data entry needs revision. This works to hamper those workers within Child Protection from the quality time of working with the families and consulting with other professionals in working towards a positive outcome.

#### **3.2 Providing a quality service to vulnerable children and their families is dependent on having a skilled workforce. What are the strengths and weaknesses of current workforce arrangements e.g. working conditions, training and career paths? How might any weaknesses be addressed?**

The working conditions of the field workers within Child Protection are appalling. Improvements in this regard are essential to better protect the best interests of children and better support outcomes for children and families.

I manage an agency that includes Family Services program delivery. Child Protection are so under resourced that the workers have insufficient time to engage in meaningful collaborative talk with the Family Services case workers.

Child Protection field workers are under so much pressure and yet still have insufficient support from an under resourced 'transport service' and are required to waste valuable field work time delivering clients.

Child Protection workers build up so much accrued time without any real opportunity to take the time as the demands are too high, due to the lack of resources.

Child Protection field workers have very little support from the Department. The pay rates are poor considering the level of responsibility and unpaid time committed to the work. It is amazing that the issue of staff retention, although verbalized, has no real purposeful response.

The working conditions of the Child Protection field workers needs to be re-visited. To attract and retain quality workers, quality remuneration needs to be provided along with conditions that support the health and well being of the workers in this environment of high stress and high workloads. Such improvements in the working conditions and remuneration for the workers will enhance the quality of the service to vulnerable children and their families.

This improvement in the current conditions of employees must include more human resources on the ground to ensure the depth and quality of the work with the families and the consultation with CSOs is sufficient to enhance the outcome of the engagement.

**3.4.2 Is the overall structure of statutory child protection services appropriate for the role they are designed to perform? If not what changes should be considered?**

Structure of CP, Child First and CSOs is sound. It is the demarcation between the levels that undermines the mutual objectives.

To maximize the effectiveness of child protection the opportunity must exist for quality consultation and interaction with the field staff of the agencies. A position paper circulated by DHS last year – I am sorry I cannot locate the paper for referencing – labored on the importance of open and transparent communication between Child Protection and CSO's.

Any shortfall in the optimum level of communication within the structure of statutory child protection is because of the lack of resources dedicated to the cause. Time to consult and communicate would help appease any perceived conflict between the levels of the service - as it would help maximise the benefits of the professionalism and expertise engaged in the sphere of child protection.

**7.1.3 What workforce development and retention strategies are required to meet the needs of the children and family welfare sector in the future?**

The best retention strategy is to improve workplace satisfaction. This can be done several ways.

Allow the workers the satisfaction of achieving optimal outcomes with their clients by utilizing the input and expertise available from other professionals and having the time to dedicate to achieving the best outcome for the children and their families. This requires extra human resources on the ground to meet the demands upon Child Protection. A cost benefit analysis may be beneficial in determining the long range benefit of quality interference as opposed to repeat interference by re-referral.

The workers in Child Protection are so tied to the exhaustive statutory requirements they have little scope to work to their potential to achieve the best outcome for the children and families. Child Protection need the time and department support to work with the agencies and to work with those clients rejected by Child First in a case management role.

Another aspect of workplace satisfaction is opportunity for advancement within the child protection field. It appears from the outside that there is a heavy emphasis on promotional positions that are not working in the field. I hazard at a guess that DHS is similar to teaching – the higher you are paid, the less coal face work you actually do. Consequently, those wanting a higher remuneration are taken from work at the coal face.

If this inquiry is legitimate they cannot ignore the poor work conditions evident by the unpaid overtime / accrued leave, high work related stress levels undermining effectiveness and restriction on working consultatively with families and other professionals to obtain the best outcome.

Noel Sibly  
Manager  
Family Resource Centre  
Bass Coast regional Health.