

Community Connections (Vic) Ltd's Submission to 'Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry'

(1) Introduction

- Community Connections (Vic) Ltd is an established independent provider of services to rural Victoria's vulnerable children within the Barwon / Southwest Region. The Agency is contracted by DHS to deliver a range of Out-of-Home Care and Family Services that include Foster Care, Residential Care and ChildFIRST.
- The Agency is responsible for the delivery of an Out-of-Home Foster Care Program that is anchored throughout the region (Geelong to the South Australian border) and Residential Services within the Southwest Warrnambool and District. Community Connections (Vic) Ltd is the lead Agency for the ChildFIRST Family Service Alliance within the Southwest Victoria sub region.
- The Agency's submission to the inquiry draws on its experiences of working in partnership with DHS Child Protection Program within the Barwon / Southwest Region: Community Connections' relationship with child protection commenced with the establishment of Foster Care and Family Group Homes development in the early 1980's.
- Community Connections (Vic) Ltd is an Agency that is contracted to deliver a range of Family Law Services funded by the Commonwealth Government. These services include pre and post separation counselling and support services, a Family Relationship Centre and a Children's Contact Centre. Community Connections (Vic) Ltd is actively engaged in the task of integrating these services with its state contracted Child Protection responsibilities.
- The Agency is pursuing a practice model that maximises all available resources in order to respond effectively to a determined focus on the best interests of children and young people. This involves finding ways and means to join up state and commonwealth program interests.

(2) Rural Communities and why they are different from their city counterparts when planning

- Community Connections is closely connected to rural communities. Rural areas are different from their city counterparts, people are more isolated, have to travel further and have learnt throughout their lives, so that it is culturally embedded, that they need to do things on their own. Rural communities are often very proud, independent and don't like to ask for help, even though these communities have a large sense of belonging and community spirit. People try to look after each others practical needs and help out whenever they can, however, emotional support is much more difficult for communities and individuals to provide.
- Community Connections (Vic) Ltd received funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) for a Family Support Drought Response Team program from April 2008 to December 2010. This was promoted as the Rural Outreach Counselling program and had a number of components including the Farm Gate and Funnel Projects which assisted families and individuals on farms and in small rural communities. During the life of the program the practitioners encountered many different families and individuals, each with their own unique experience. The main groups were farmers and farm families, low income families and single parents in rural communities. They all had very different circumstances and needs and highlighted Community Connections' need to carefully consider when planning to deliver support services in a rural setting.

- Farming people and connected rural communities are usually very proud and self sufficient and are not used to asking for help, but when they do they really need it. To respond appropriately when need arises rural areas require flexible support services, which also provide outreach services to communities, as it is often difficult, or even impossible (especially in some seasons), for those on the land to travel to a regional centre to access services.
- Low income families in small rural communities face many difficulties. The reason they live in, or might have moved to rural areas includes affordable housing. However, the cost of living in rural areas is usually higher. Often small communities are under-served. Support services such as doctors, health centres, counselling services, financial assistance but also appropriate secondary schools, sporting facilities and friends are mostly located in the bigger towns, which means travelling into town on a very regular basis. The cost of petrol and owning a car are very high.
- Single parent families often have the same issues as low income families and might also face lack of child care facilities, pre-schools, kindergarten etcetera.

(3) Some Social Issues in Rural Communities

Social isolation is an issue in rural communities:

- It can be harder to connect with family members, friends, neighbours or the community because of distance, rural working responsibilities and lack of time due to a busy agriculture schedule or because of financial concerns.
- Some people are not able and/ or not willing to access services when needed, because they have always been used to coping by themselves. They are also unaware of what services are available and / or might not be able to leave the farm, house or workplace and travel into town. In many areas and across many programs outreach services aren't available.
- It can be harder to take part in sporting or community groups outside of their own small community (eg in town) because of geographical issues, finances, time restraints. Small rural communities can often only offer limited sporting activities. Other sporting options, community groups and group activities are usually held in larger towns or regional centres.
- In the case of battling many farmers rarely leave the farm much as it takes up all of their time and there is little room for anything else.

(4) Our experiences with the Child Protection System as it stands now

- The less than desirable retention rate of DHS Child Protection Practitioners has a detrimental impact on practice performance and standards. This process leads to inconsistencies within the life of case plan agreement.
- The lack of access to family support services in the smaller towns such as Colac, Hamilton and Portland.
- There is a state of continuous confusion as to the distribution of responsibilities within the actions that define a case plan and its ongoing management. (example: approvals and procedures necessary to fulfil a child's daily activities)
- There continues to be a lack of understanding of the nature of shared responsibility for Child Protection Practice. This is described by Agency practitioners as ongoing role confusion and a lack of acknowledgement to the significant contribution of Community Service Organisations.
- In the Southwest sub region the ChildFirst Alliance is regarded as a significant success with the location of a child protection practitioner within the lead Agency (Community Connections (Vic) Ltd) as highly beneficial to the practice.
- A view by the Agency Out-of-Home care and Family Service teams that full and complete case management of children and families would put aside much of the day

to day practice confusion within the system. This view is qualified on the basis that the independent Community Service Organisations within the region have a long and enduring relationship with the subject communities which is characterised by staffing continuity – (building long term relationships) and stable leadership and management structures.

- Our Agency foster carers have over the years demonstrated significant loyalty to the program and the Agency: This is largely due to an endurable relationship between long standing staff and carers built on a shared responsibility model without authoritarian or professional distinctions. The Agency is buoyed in its work by the many positive and flourishing outcomes for children that have been achieved. (see attachment no. 1)

(5) Critical Issues for the Inquiry to Consider

- The need to expand the Agency's and Sector's capacity to deliver early intervention services that include significant commitment to a separately funded Therapeutic Service model. (The Agency is currently implementing a rural / farm based residential facility).
- The need to move towards a client centred children's model of practice that draws both Commonwealth and State funded services into an open and flexible system devoid of bureaucratic boundaries and able to move freely towards collective solutions.
- The need for the sector to pay less attention to public perception and provide a strong focus on deep and long term planning. The development of flexible and responsive program models immediately adaptable to the movement of children and families within the gambit of all place based sources of Government and independent funding.
- The institutionalised and emerging service gaps within the rural and remote regional social structures.
- The need for greater integration across the rural service system (including links with primary health etc)in order to build wrap around responses to the needs of children and young people and their families within local rural communities. (The separation and individuality of government services need not be so wide in rural communities).
- The need to move the existing capacity for rural communities to identify the most highly vulnerable children from birth to school age immediately into a real and well linked early intervention practice. (see attachment no. 2 re SIEDS early intervention service).

Bruce du Vergier
Chief Executive Officer
Community Connections (Vic) Ltd.

Tuesday 1st June 2010

Minister Lisa Neville
Minister for Mental Health,
Community Services and Senior Victorians
Ministerial Office
Level 22, 50 Lonsdale Street
MELBOURNE 3001

Dear Minister Neville,

**Re: Social Inclusion and Emotional Development Strategies (SIEDS) –
a pathway to placement prevention and reunification**

Historically Community Service Organisations have been funded to provide services to vulnerable clients as determined by statistical analysis of data collected by the Department of Human Services. These programs have been traditionally designed to react to a perceived need of a catchment area and are often reactive with little or no scope for early intervention for families who have not yet reached the at risk level. Community Service Organisations have for many years felt frustrated at not being able to provide preventative or holistic services that could minimise the likelihood of children entering the child protection system or once there, provide the wrap around services that would move with the child from prevention services, placement services to reunification with family.

The DHS funding streams and the indicators themselves, stifle innovation and creativity from the community services sector. Community Connections (Vic) Ltd has developed a program over the last 5 years called Social Inclusion and Emotional Development Strategies (SIEDS) which has difficulty being accepted as a legitimate practice, despite the fact that it is research based.

Children are the most vulnerable people in our society. Those that are 'at risk' of parental abuse or have been removed from their families face an increased vulnerability as a result of entering the system that is in place to protect them. This is due to the fractured nature of the system caused by the changing services that have the responsibility for case management of the child or family (please refer to Attachment 1). Focus is naturally on protection of the child and assessment of risk, however, in this process the attachment between child and parent is affected and the skill development for parents is often neglected. This, although a brief and superficial summary of the current situation, raises the following questions:

- How do we build, rebuild or sustain a positive relationship between the parent and child more effectively while this is occurring, particularly when the child may not return home for sometime, if ever
- How do we create and foster positive interaction and memories between parents and the children who have been removed?
- How do we provide consistency for the child while they are in the service system?
- How do we attempt to counteract the trauma that may occur for children when they are removed from their families and parented by the system?
- How do we facilitate optimum brain development of children who are subject to the trauma of child abuse while they are in the service system?



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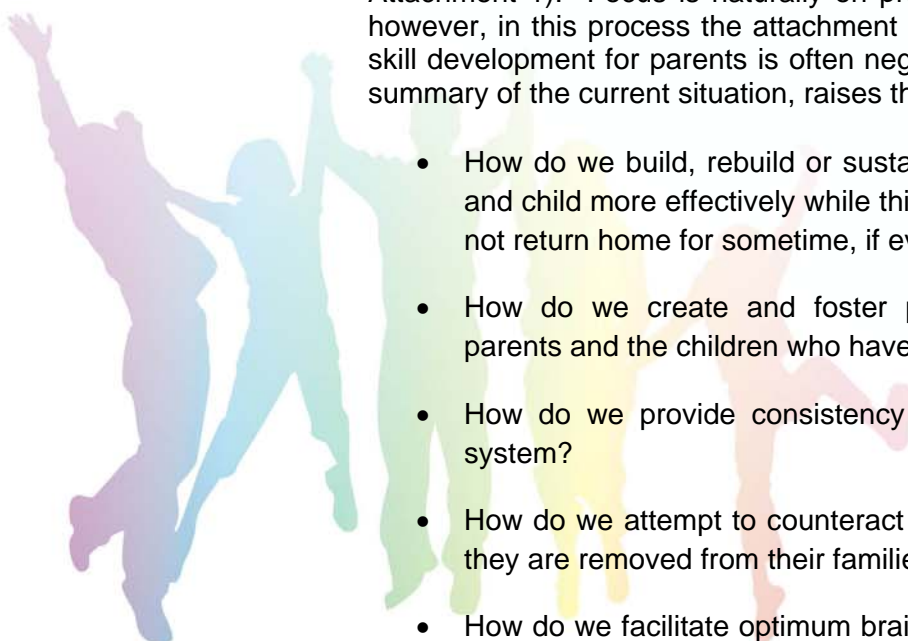
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The nature of the child protection service system, including Child Protection, Child First and Family Services means that the child can get 'lost' in the service system. The system is risk driven (as it should be), but the child's development, attachment with parents, emotional wellbeing, building of resilience, and parental skill development, and their attachment and relationship with their child/ren is not the primary focus.

The solution to breaking down the silos of service delivery is to place the child at the centre and use a practice intervention that follows the child in the service system. The use of such a practice can naturally integrate service delivery whilst ensuring continuity for the child and for the parent (whether the child is in care or at home) – please refer to Attachment 2. It can provide a pathway through the service system for children and parents.

Community Connections has developed a positive intervention strategy called SIEDS which can:

- Follow the child in the service system
- Assess the parental ability to parent
- Assess and monitor parental ability and motivation to change.
- Maintain, enhance or develop bonding and attachment
- Assist the development of parental capacity in order to provide optimum outcomes for the child.
- Provide practical parenting skills for vulnerable families in a positive manner, which is not currently available through other services. This practice builds on parents' existing skills as opposed to focusing on their deficits.
- Increase the resilience of children, parents and families
- Assist directly with children's emotional, cognitive and social development
- Provide parents and children with a positive interaction with the child protection system.
- Provide practical strategies for dealing with problem behaviours.

SIEDS practice can counteract intergenerational despair and also the despair that can be caused by becoming powerless and sometimes lost in the service system. This is a connected problem but the current system provides a disconnected solution. SIEDS can assist in providing a connected solution. It can act as a catalyst for the coordination of efforts for the wellbeing of children and families in touch with the Child Protection system. This will result in a better and more efficient way of working with families and children. It complements therapeutic models of intervention and is a direct practice which can actively link services in the best interests of the child.

SIEDS is research based and has a proven impact on children aged 0-6 years and their parents. A study was conducted by Deakin University which found that over the 6 months of being involved in the program, the children had gained 20 months in development in their play skills and 9 months in their language and social ability. (Please refer to Attachment 3)

An evaluation of the Reading Discovery component of the SIEDS program was conducted in 2009. This involved services involved in the Child Protection System (please refer to Attachment 4 for the full evaluation report). The report states that 'Reading Discovery is considered to play a major role in the development of children's literacy skills and it contributes to children's social development through the use of imaginative play, the development of language skills and comprehension, increasing children's overall readiness for kindergarten and school, and establishing positive relationships between parents, adults and children. Importantly, the program's practice model facilitates attachment, bonding and positive relationships within families.'

SIEDS is new and innovative and crosses traditional program boundaries. The basis of the intervention is reading and play which is a proven positive engagement strategy with vulnerable families (and naturally is with children). However, because of the use

of reading and play, its validity has been questioned by many in DHS and the service system. There has been little commitment to developing an understanding of the extent, validity and success of SIEDS with families despite the Deakin University research results. Many view this cross program practice as the responsibility of the Education Department or Early Childhood Services.

We are sending this information in hope that we can meet with representatives of the Department of Human Services to discuss the prospect of Pilot Project Funding to implement SIEDS practice in order to develop a model that can be cost effectively replicated throughout the Child Protection service system. We enclose a booklet about the program for your information – Please see Attachment 5.

Regards,

Bruce du Vergier
Chief Executive Officer
Community Connections (Vic) Ltd.

Encl:

- Attachment 1: SIEDS - Fractured Service System
- Attachment 2: SIEDS - Integrated Service System
- Attachment 3: Executive Summary Deakin University Research
- Attachment 4: Evaluation Report
- Attachment 5: Booklet



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Sharmaine's story fostering hope

TO ALL the people out there who share a life story and experiences similar to mine, my name is Sharmaine.

I was put into foster care at the young age of five.

Unfortunately, I was one of the unlucky children out there whose parents are unable to take care of them.

My family and I had to go through ups and downs as I went from home to home with out any stability in my life.

But when I was seven my family and I were blessed to have the good luck of meeting a lovely couple with two daughters. I now call the couple my step-parents.

I was quite excited when I was also able to live with my brothers and sisters until I was 14. I then moved from house to



Sharmaine is now in a better place.

house in the following three years.

I lived in seven different foster homes.

At the age of 17 I met a lovely lady who I now call my aunty. I was only supposed to stay with her for two weeks but that turned out to be a whole year.

Everything I know, the way in which I present myself, the way I speak and act, all of this I have learnt from many people with whom I have shared homes.

A lot of foster kids feel left out and alone. At times we steer down the wrong path but at the end of every tunnel there is always a bright light, which I was extremely lucky to find.

No one is perfect but you control the decisions you make in your life.

I am now 21, have a full-time job, rent a beautiful house, own a gorgeous dog and have my driver's licence.

I am telling my story to inspire kids who have gone through or who are going through a similar misfortunate experience.

Keep your head up high, set yourself goals, aim to try hard and to be the best you can. Don't lower your expectations whatever they are and, most importantly, have dreams and goals.

FOSTER CARERS REQUIRED FOR CHILDREN & YOUTHS

Have you got a spare weekend each month?

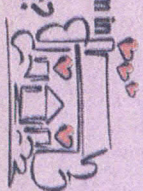
Community Connections is a non profit community based organisation providing a range of human and social justice services across the Barwon South West Region of Victoria.

We are looking for local families, couples or single persons who can provide a nurturing home, support and care to children and young people aged between 0-18 years. A tax free reimbursement for expenses is provided, as is training, and 24 hour support.

If you would like to know more about Foster Care please contact Kylie Drummy or Cheryl Flanagan on 1300 361 680.



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