

## **CHILD PROTECTION SUBMISSION**

### **Introducing myself:**

I am a qualified Social Worker, with over 40 years experience in and exposure to the Child Protection field.

### **My experience:**

- **In 1969**, I joined Social Welfare Department (Children's Homes Section) and until 1974 worked with Wards of the State. I worked as a base grade worker, and was promoted to a supervisory position. I left the department to travel overseas.
- **Between 1988 and 1990**, I was employed at Community Services Victoria (CSV), Western Region as an Advanced Protective Worker, which involved:
  - investigation and assessment of complex cases of child maltreatment and implementation of interventions
  - provision of guidance and consultancy and supervision of staff
  - supervision of students on placement
  - participation in the planning and development of regional protective programs
  - liaison with statutory and voluntary community agencies
  - provision of advice to personnel within and external to CSV regarding cases of maltreatment of children and young people
  - monitoring and evaluation of program standards and implementation of strategies to ensure quality program delivery
  - identification of training needs for program staff and provision of in-service training

**Between 1990 and 1992**, I was employed as a Team Leader in Protective Services, Health and Community Services (H&CS), Western Region, Footscray, which involved:

- supervision of staff engaged in the provision of Protective Services for children and young people
- management of Protective casework service
- provision of advice to personnel within and external to H&CS regarding cases of maltreatment of children and young people
- monitoring and evaluation of program standards and implementation of strategies to ensure quality program delivery
- liaison with institutions, agencies and community groups with regard to provision, development and use of services for Protective Services clients
- identification of training needs of program staff and, where appropriate, provision of in-service training.

**Between 1992 and 1996**, I was employed as Recruitment and Staff Development Co-ordinator/Community Professional Education with Health and Community Services, Protective Services, Western Metro Region, Footscray, which involved:

- co-ordination of recruitment to Protective Services program
- identification of staff training needs and development of strategies to address these; including in-service training and collation of staff exit interviews and identification of issues pertaining to staff retention, morale and future recruitment
- co-ordination of student placements in the region
- development and implementation of an orientation program for new staff and students on placement
- liaison and networking with community statutory voluntary agencies, including resourcing of Western Region Child Protection Reference Group
- consultancy to all Protective Service staff with regard to training needs and issues
- response to and fulfilment of requests from community agencies for professional education relating to Mandatory Reporting
- provision of contact point between Protective Services and other H&CS programs with regard to service provision, inter-relationships and joint training possibilities
- co-ordination and development of regional information seminars

For over 25 years, I have been continuously involved in **Social Work education**, providing Liaison Social Work for Social Work students on fieldwork placements from Victoria, Melbourne and Deakin Universities, many of which are in Child Protection. I am currently working in this field.

#### **General Personal/Professional Observations:**

My reflections, perspectives, hypotheses and recommendations come from my previous experience and my current involvement in the field, and primarily relate to recruitment, staffing, retention and morale issues.

- A feature of the departmental functioning which is of major concern is the “churn and burn” phenomenon; in which the turnover rate is horrendous, with damaging implications (emotional and career) for staff leaving and for those staying in the service.
- Team leaders, who are employed to provide supervision for new social workers are very aware of and focussed on fulfilling administrative procedures and avoiding negative attention, which leads to defensive practice, often at the expense of providing support to inexperienced workers. In other words, the developmental, educational and supportive aspects of supervision are often not met; which results in new workers feeling unsupported and vulnerable, rather than developing professional skills and gaining greater confidence. Defensive practice evolves from: the pressures of high caseloads, the constant fear of negative media attention, anxiety of middle managers arising from perceived (and real) pressure to meet timelines and fulfil administrative procedures, and fear of the possibility of being scape-goated if there is a crisis or a negative outcome which becomes public. These factors combine to mitigate against creative or developmental ideas and processes.

- I have found it frustrating over the years (as a participant in and observer of the Child Protection system) to see the continuous “tweaking” and re-labelling of processes, rather than accessing the collective memory and wisdom of past practitioners and efforts. Through the time of my involvement, I have seen previous processes “re-badged”, and presented as a new initiative. It seems to me that as new managers enter the field, there is a rush to re-create and re-vamp processes; and a lot of energy is invested in this, rather than re-visiting past practices and examining strengths and limitations of these.

#### **Feedback from the field:**

General comments reactions from students undertaking the Social Work course:

\*\* It is worth doing a placement in Child Protection, if you can survive there, you can manage anywhere.

\*\* If you cannot get a job anywhere else, it is always possible to get a job with Child Protection. (I counsel students against this, for the arguments as presented above about inexperienced workers in this field).

#### **Recommendations:**

- That a cost benefit be undertaken to examine the feasibility of recruitment, staffing issues and processes outlined below.
- That NO base grade workers be employed in Child Protection.  
The personal and emotional impact of the issues involved in Child Protection is massive, as is dealing with a complicated and at times adversarial legal system, and the complex process of liaising with agencies which are ambivalent about and at times hostile to undertaking Child Protection work.
- That Social Workers employed in the Child Protection System have at least three years experience.

I anticipate that the argument against these propositions will be: costs.

However, I consider that it would be an extremely valuable exercise to cost the current staffing practices, considering the processes of recruiting, employing and providing Induction for new workers, compared to higher wages for experienced workers who have made a commitment to undertake protective work.

Please consider this process:

- 1 Senior staff are involved in developing job descriptions and Key Selection Criteria.
  - 2 Senior staff (generally three) are involved in reviewing job applications, planning and conducting interviews, checking references and writing up reports.
  - 3 All of these processes take several senior workers off line for several days, which impinges on and adversely affects delivery of core business.
  - 4 Training staff are involved in planning and delivering Induction programmes, often over several days.
  - 5 Many staff leave after a very short time, and the process starts all over again.
- It is my contention that it would be a worthwhile exercise to cost these processes.

- That a career structure be developed within the department, in which skilled and specialist practitioners are remunerated appropriately and their roles are recognised and rewarded. Child Protection work is complex, difficult, generally viewed negatively in the community, not well remunerated and it burns social workers out when they are not appropriately qualified; meaning trained, experienced and skilled.....and do not have appropriately qualified managers and support systems (both within the system and externally) to do the work. It is my contention that a greater investment in the child protection programme (including better salary remuneration and holidays) to attract more mature, experienced and well-supported social workers would result in a better functioning child protection system, because staff would be better equipped to deal with the trauma of child protection issues, stay longer and be able to mentor and support newer and junior staff, who would in turn stay longer. In other words, it would be a positive development if Child Protection is attributed a more valued status in the profession and in the field generally.
- That past practices, such as employing overseas recruits, be examined and taken into account when “new” initiatives are being considered. During my period of employment 1990-1992 I was part of the team responsible for the induction, orientation and training of Social Workers recruited from United Kingdom. This recruitment was not particularly successful. The induction and training to bring them up to speed with local legislation and procedures, was very time-consuming, labour-intensive and costly (as senior personnel were involved), added to which some of the recruits had significant personal issues in regard to re-location, which provided significant challenges for staff to support them. I was concerned to hear that such a recruitment has again been undertaken in 2009-2010, and I wonder whether managers ever study or learn from departmental history and past experiences and outcomes, rather than merely “re-inventing the wheel”.
- That universities (possibly in conjunction with Child Protection) develop a specialist training course designed to equip workers with skills pertinent to the child protection field.

In concluding, I contend that the department should recruit more experienced social workers, provide personal and professional support for them, and provide continuous specialised training and appropriate remuneration.

Rhonda Ferguson  
Social Worker