

Good evening,

I have noted the closing date for written submissions to the Vulnerable Children Enquiry is 15 April 2011 but wanted to make the following points for the Enquiry's consideration.

I am a social work practitioner in New South Wales and have worked in the child protection field since 1971 following which I headed the first Child at Risk team in the State from its inception in 1975.

That team, initially on a very small scale, introduced a generic approach to the needs of children and families at risk, guided by a multi-disciplinary child at risk committee comprising experienced paediatric, psychiatric, nursing and social work staff across agency and departmental boundaries, without the need for a plethora of policy and instruction manuals that today force child protection staff to be in front of their computers for far longer periods than they are actually talking to and together with their clients.

The initial moves to introduce compulsory notification of abuse in NSW stemmed from that interdisciplinary forum. To this day, more than thirty years on, it is not at all clear to me that the risks children face at the hands of the child protective system are less than they would have otherwise faced.

However, the NSW experience in the passage of the 1977 amending legislation in the NSW Parliament, introduced mandatory reporting provisions and became the forerunner to similar changes in many other States. Looking back, the basis for that legislative change has been thwarted in my view, through professional groups now reporting, or notifying, to satisfy legislative imperatives rather than to introduce change into the parenting practices of their clients. The notion that a report will produce a service still holds sway in some circles.

In NSW, the number of children coming into care has risen alarmingly for several years, at a rate far greater than any commensurate increase in carers to provide even barely adequate alternative family care. The flow on effects include overloading existing carers beyond the capacity which could reasonably be expected of them and ultimately impacting unfavourably on the standard of care they might provide.

The subsequent breakdown of what might have been otherwise viable placements has disastrous impacts on the children leaving the broken placement as much as it has on the children and family members remaining in that environment.

The planned training and assessment of carers cannot keep pace with the rise in abuse matters where children, removed because of imminent risk of abuse or actual abuse, are brought into the care responsibility of the Director-General without any firm guarantee that the alternative environment, short or long term, into which they might be placed is any better than the one from which they might have been removed.

The crucial role of family members as suitable alternative carers, particularly in Indigenous communities, despite the principles enshrined in the relevant legislation, is often not adequately explored at the time of emergency action to remove a child from a too-severe risk. Children are therefore placed outside family care while the suitability of prospective family members is determined, a process which might often take more time than the very policy-dictated timeframes established to recognise the importance of attachment and bonding for infants and very young children - sometimes more than two years before final orders are instituted!

The move to structured decision making tools as a means to address the complex assessments required in situations where face to face contact may not always be readily possible, has had a significant bearing on the categorisation of risk. In most offices in NSW

still, at least 10 % of reported matters require a field response of some sort but the response is not forthcoming, generally because the capacity issues in terms of suitably trained and experienced practitioners, and the volume issues in terms of straight out raw numbers, will not allow the response to be made. The point is the risks have not been reduced - they have been acknowledged... and sidelined.

In terms of raw numbers, calculations completed many years ago in NSW confirmed that it would take an experienced practitioner alone, about 30 hours to complete a fully comprehensive family assessment on a matter involving significant risk. So on best estimates, allowing for 1820 hours of caseworker time per year, ( 140 hour by 13 monthly flextime periods), less recreation leave (4 weeks at 35 hours per week - 140 hours), public holidays ( 10 days by 7 hours per day) - 70 hours, sick leave (10 days by 7 hours per day - 70 hours) and closure on Thursday mornings in NSW for staff training ( 48 half days at 3.5 hours per half day - 168 hours) that leaves 1372 for actual work to be done. This would allow one caseworker to complete about 46 matters per year - and even that is on the presumption they did nothing else.

The mathematics don't look good. They look worse when the workers are doubled up to do the assessments.

The support functions for carers are not factored into this equation.

The approach which the Wood Commission envisaged would be taken by the non-Government sector in the provision of services for children in the out of home care sector and in early intervention programmes like Brighter Futures, has yet to materialise in any real sense in remote communities in NSW. As an example, in just one office in a remote location there are in excess of 360 children in care and less than 14 of them are in non-Government care sector services - less than 5%.

The recent report on the evaluation of the Brighter Futures programme estimates unit costs for Government sector supply of early intervention programmes at \$33,000.00 per client compared to \$22,000.00 for non-Government sector supply but in remote locations, infrastructure provisions prevent small scale operators taking on contracts that are let to the larger agencies, who do not have a large presence in the more remote communities. The effect of this is that the Brighter Futures programme falls back upon the statutory agency to supply by default, at 50% more cost than the same service can be delivered by non-Government sector supply.

If the child protection system which Victoria contemplates is predicated on these sorts of organisational approaches, it is arguable the same sorts of capacity issues will ensue. An alternative paradigm is fundamental - one in which local communities are strengthened and empowered in the sorts of ways that Vinson and Homel argued as far back as the late Seventies and early Eighties when the indicators of community well being were used as a basis for constructing a different paradigm

I understand the Enquiry's final report is scheduled for November this year. I hope this input will be useful in the deliberations of the enquiry and if you would like further comment from me, I'd be very pleased to assist. I would expect however that these comments shall be kept confidential. They are made in good faith that the Enquiry will be informed by critical appraisal of practices used over many years and in the hope that whatever model is eventually determined, will be in the interests of children families and communities.

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