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Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry  
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## **The Victorian Inquiry into Vulnerable Children and Young People**

### **Life Without Barriers**

Life Without Barriers (LWB) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Vulnerable Children and Young People and supports the Victorian government commitment to improving services for vulnerable children and families.

LWB is one of the largest not-for-profit providers of community services in Australia including support in the following:

- Family support and out of home care
- Mental health
- Reducing homelessness
- Unaccompanied refugee children
- Disability services
- Youth justice.

We support almost 5000 vulnerable people each year through our 87 offices across every state and territory and New Zealand. We have three offices in Victoria, Cranbourne, Eltham and Mildura. LWB invests in research, innovation and development which informs our practice across the country.

### **Abuse and neglect in Australia**

Six out of every 1000 children were abused or neglected in Australia last year. Usually by members of their family, the people who love them but struggle to care for them.

According to the Report on Government Services 2011, in the year to June 2010, more than 187,000 children around Australia were reported to child protection authorities. 31,000 of these children were found to be harmed.

The murder of children by their families brings to our lounge rooms the most extreme examples of child abuse. Yet, most child abuse is hidden in our neighbourhoods as thousands and thousands of parents struggle to care for their children.

When a crisis happens it's rarely a surprise. Many families call out for help and do not receive it. Family and friends can often see problems building and not know what to do. It can be difficult to know how to get help, where to get it from, and what help will actually help.

Many families struggle without assistance until they reach a crisis, and by the time families become known to the child protection system their problems are usually very complex and difficult to resolve. Faced with an incoming tide of reporting, child protection systems have understandably tended to prioritise the crisis end of the spectrum.

There is increasing recognition that we need a better balance. We need to give families practical help well before they reach a crisis. We know that stable housing, quality education and access to health care are the building blocks for strong families and communities.

We also know that when families start to struggle, there need to be easy ways to ask for help and receive it to prevent a crisis from developing. Affordable and accessible child care and access to transport; home visits from professionals skilled in counselling, child health, sleeping and settling techniques, stress management and nutrition; and financial assistance can make a real difference.

Families need to be encouraged to seek support when things start to go wrong without fear that their children will be taken away. Sometimes all it takes is a little bit of help to get families back on their feet. The sooner this help is delivered the better the outcomes for children.

### **Early intervention and prevention**

There is a strong base of research to support the efficacy of prevention and early intervention services.

Effective prevention services include:

- Maternal home visits from a midwife or early childhood nurses to provide practical assistance and support to families with a new baby.
- Mothers groups which allow for shared experiences and provide access to support networks and advice.
- 24/7 parenting assistance available on the phone and on-line ensures parents are able to seek assistance for concerns in a timely manner
- Health direct; telephone contact for health and medical matters to access information and support relating to health and wellbeing
- Early engagement in playgroups and childcare to form social networks for both parents and children
- Maternal mental health programs that can respond to incidences of postpartum depression and provide appropriate help and care
- Breastfeeding support to help nurture care tools for new mothers.

These and other prevention services need to be available to assist all parents to care for their children. These services also provide opportunities to identify vulnerable or at risk families and provide early intervention services such as:

- A strengths-based model of case management which focuses on the skills that parents have and utilises as many natural supports as possible, supplemented with formal services.

- The provision of respite, both planned and unplanned. Families report that when they can play a role in the arrangement of their support such as when they think they need a break or have a high risk event planned, they are able to access respite at a time that has the greatest impact for them and their children.
- The use of child protection supervision and court orders to monitor a child's wellbeing and ensure provisions of care are being undertaken including;
  - Allocation of a case manager to supervise and support the family.
  - Requirement for the family to see the same GP and/or other specialists regularly and for that specialist to provide reports to the case manager and the court where appropriate/necessary.
  - The use of orders to ensure compliance with medication or other treatment programs (e.g. methadone or rehabilitation).
- Community awareness of support services for families in need or people around them who are concerned about the welfare of a child. Access to early, non-judgemental support can prevent crises and enable families to retain care of their child/ren. The work and coordination of Child and Family Information Referral Support Teams (Child FIRST) is a practical example of an effective response to the increasing demand for child protection support.

Wherever possible, supports must be available for families to safely retain care of their children.

### **Out of home care**

Where children come into care, every effort should be made to work with the family to enable the child to return home as soon as possible. The likelihood of successful restoration of children with their families, where this is safe, needs to be a clear objective in the case plan and supported through interventions such as:

- Frequent caseworker contact to monitor parental progress and facilitate in the restoration process.
- Engagement of family and social networks to provide additional support for families in crisis.
- Individualised support plans to ensure the case plan best caters to the circumstances, environment and unique needs of the child and their family.
- The provision of parenting skills workshops, substance abuse treatment or rehabilitation programs.

In cases, where it is not safe to restore a child home, case work efforts should focus on placing children in stable family based care. Children in OOHC have the worst life outcomes of any group of children in Australia, for example:

- 64% no leaving care plan
- 35% are homeless in the first year of leaving care
- 46% of boys are involved in the juvenile justice system
- 29% are unemployed
- 28% were already parents themselves.<sup>1</sup>

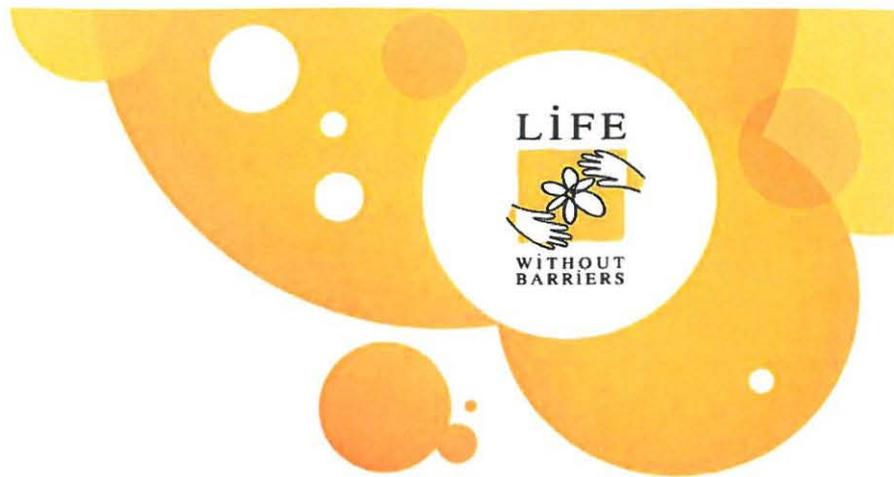
Placement stability is fundamental to good outcomes in OOHC. Nationally, in the period 2009-10, 51.2% of children and young people exiting OOHC after 12 months or more had three or more placements within that year.

For Victoria, the placement stability rate for the same period was 50.6% respectively.<sup>2</sup> To ensure greater stability:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.create.org.au/news-and-events/kids-in-care-without-a-road-map>

<sup>2</sup> Report on Government Services 2011 [http://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/105356/072-chapter15.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/105356/072-chapter15.pdf) Table 15A.24



- Matching carers with the needs of children need to be comprehensively assessed for likely compatibility.
- Placement with siblings should occur where possible to help maintain stability in the child's life and maintain family relationships.
- Ongoing agency support to monitor the child's progress and ensure their best interests are being met including health, education, nurturing and care.

These priorities will help give these children the chance to remain in school, have continuity in their health care and develop meaningful and trusting relationships and goes some way to improving the outcomes for this group of children.

#### **Development of the community services sector**

LWB believes that part of the solution to the complex array of issues in the support of vulnerable children and families is a robust, transparent and accountable not for profit sector. LWB has observed little expansion in the number or type of service providers in Victoria and believe greater openness to new providers can only enhance the capacity and capability of the sector.

We look forward to following the work of the Inquiry and the solutions it will provide to delivering better outcomes for Victoria's children.

For further information, please contact me on 02 4033 4500 or [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

Ray Dunn  
CEO