



**OPEN PLACE**

*Support Service for Forgotten Australians*

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

## **Submission from Forgotten Australians**

Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry  
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## OVERVIEW OF **OPEN PLACE**

**Open Place** is a service for Forgotten Australians established in January 2010 with funding provided by the Victorian State Government. Berry Street is the lead agency working in partnership with Relationships Australia (Victoria), VANISH and a number of community service organisations.

**Open Place** is a support and advocacy service that co-ordinates and provides direct assistance to address the needs of people who grew up in Victorian orphanages and homes during the last century. The service aims to help people who identify as Forgotten Australians to deal with the legacy of their childhood experiences and provide support to improve their health and well-being.

It is a service that aims to be accessible, welcoming and open to new ideas. **Open Place** is for all Victorian Forgotten Australians, irrespective of where they now reside. The majority of support services are for Forgotten Australians themselves, with some support provided to members of their immediate family. We provide personal support, life skills, support in accessing specialist services, financial assistance and individual advocacy.

The staff work together with service users to identify the needs of Forgotten Australians and to deliver high quality, caring services for them and their families. We believe in reaching out and in being accountable to Forgotten Australians for the way that we deliver our services.

Our multi-disciplinary team are committed to the principles of **Open Place**.

## **OPEN PLACE PRINCIPLES**

### **Showing humility and courage**

- Open Place wants Forgotten Australians to express their views
- We will not shy away from criticisms or concerns of others, nor ignore the lessons of history (including the recent past)
- We will represent the interests of Forgotten Australians and their immediate families, in the wider service sector and the community
- We will advocate for changes to the delivery of services to which Forgotten Australians are entitled where those services are seen as inaccessible, discriminatory or otherwise not meeting their needs

### **Being respectful and strength oriented**

- We will celebrate achievements, resilience and survival
- Services, including individualised planning, recognise and work with the strengths and capacities of each individual

### **Committing to flexibility and integration**

- Every effort will be made to ensure Open Place is accessible to Victorian Forgotten Australians regardless of their place of residence, their abilities or their financial circumstances
- We will provide information and assistance to help Forgotten Australians to access support from other services they need

### **Demonstrating accountability**

- Our staff and volunteer will be skilled and have the knowledge and values required to perform their duties to the highest possible standard
- Action learning and review will focus on outcomes and we will build knowledge to inform service development, policy and practice change

### **Working together and being inclusive**

- We will promote a sense of 'place' by providing the space and resources to enable Forgotten Australians and their families to feel safe, welcome and acknowledged

### **Honouring diversity and being culturally sensitive**

- We will value the beliefs, traditions and heritage of everyone and will make every effort to provide a service which honours culture

## **SUBMISSION**

**Open Place** welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry.

As noted above, **Open Place** applies principles of self determination and peer support in delivering our services. We encourage Forgotten Australians to voice their views and opinions on matters that concern them. Of great concern to Forgotten Australians is the plight of children and young people entering and leaving the statutory protective care system as it operates today.

On Tuesday March 22 **Open Place** held a forum to discuss the Judicial Inquiry. What follows is a record of the views expressed at that forum with specific reference to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Ten Forgotten Australians attended the forum.

### **The factors that increase the risk of abuse or neglect occurring ...**

1. Children who have been raised in abusive situations/in the care system struggle with parenting and have no good role models for positive parenting as they grow up to become parents themselves. To be a good parent you need to be shown how to do it.
2. Some children have behavioural issues or disabilities and parents need extra support and advice to manage those behaviours.
3. There are a lot of pre-birth classes, planning and support but very little after birth support.
4. Parenting is more often than not focused on the mother with little attention paid to the role of fathers as carers. Mothers tend to be blamed when things go wrong but they do not receive the assistance they need if their partner is not supportive.
5. There are many different cultures in Australia with different expectations of the mother/father role in raising children. Sometimes there is conflict between the dominant culture and the different cultural groups.
6. Drug and alcohol issues in parents are handed down to their children. The needs of the children are hidden in these families.
7. Housing policies contribute to ghettos and the cycle of disadvantage and poverty.
8. Young people do not have enough interesting activities within their local communities and they form gangs out of like-minded boredom.

### **... and effective prevention strategies:**

1. There should be a greater emphasis on building up universal services such as Maternal and Child Health services, Community Health Services, Council services and schools.
2. Schools have a vital role to play in building strong and supportive communities for children particularly if they are struggling at home.
3. Schools should teach children how to develop social skills and how to look after themselves and be responsible in the community.
4. Parents and children should have good role models available to them in their local communities. Schools could play a role in providing access to good role models within each school community.
5. Parenting Programs should be more widespread and should be automatic for new parents.
6. There should be greater emphasis on the role of fathers in pre birth and post birth parenting groups and classes.
7. Psychologists should be more available and what they know about good parenting and managing difficult behaviours such as tantrums should be readily accessible to all parents and particularly to parents with disabled children.

### **Strategies to enhance early identification of and intervention targeted at children and families at risk including the role of adult, universal and primary services. This should include consideration of ways to strengthen the capability of those organisations involved.**

1. Greater emphasis should be paid to universal and primary services over and above secondary and tertiary services.
2. Schools are central to how communities operate particularly for children. For children their school is the most important community as they are growing up. If they lose contact with school then they lose access to positive role models and to a sense of belonging and fitting in with society. Schools could employ psychologists who would be accessible to all parents and students so that parents could have information about how to manage difficult behaviours.
3. Parenting Programs could be run in Primary Schools so that parents could support each other.
4. Parents with children with disabilities need more assistance and should not have to search around for help. Families with children with a disability should have a consistent worker supporting them who knows their story and can advocate for them.
5. Children who are hidden in families at risk need to feel safe somewhere to tell their story. They need to be believed and helped.
6. Families should feel safe to ask for support when they are struggling. They shouldn't have to get to the point of wanting to give up before they ask for help. Families should not fear that DHS will take their children when they ask for help. If more universal services like schools and kindergartens and Maternal and Child Health Services were linked to social work support and psychologists then families may not get into such deep trouble before they ask for help.

### **The quality structure role and functioning of:**

- **family services;**
- **statutory child protection services, including reporting assessment, investigation procedures and responses and**
- **out of home care, including permanency planning and transitions and**
- **what improvements may be made to better protect the best interests of children and support better outcomes for children and families.**

1. The authority for Child Protection should remain with the State.
2. The State should be responsible for investigating reports of child abuse. The State should employ more investigators to deal with the reports.
3. The social workers in the Department need to be more consistent so that you have the same person working with you and children can develop a relationship of trust.
4. The DHS workers should go out into the community more.
5. Once children are in care or have a Court Order on them they should have independent people assessing how they are going in care and whether they are receiving all the things that they need like a good education, health care, dental care, recreation and good food. That person should not be a DHS worker or an agency worker but someone completely independent. Children need to have an objective assessment made of their needs.
6. Checks of children in out of home care need to be regular and frequent.
7. More effort should be made to keep siblings together. The sibling relationship is the one that will endure when everything else falls away. The quality of the relationship between siblings needs to be supported in such a way that there is no rivalry or competition for parental attention or carer/worker attention. If children are separated they need to have a clear access plan that they know about. They need to be told and kept up to date with information about their siblings. More work and research needs to go into this area of therapeutic intervention.
8. All social workers both in DHS and in the agencies should make sure that they write accurate information about the children. They should always double check information.
9. Children need to be informed about what is happening to them and they need time to listen and process what is said to them. They need to be protected from harmful and hurtful information but they also need to be told the truth. After a child protection removal from home for example, they need to be assured that their mother/father/brother/sister/auntie etc is safe.
10. Children in the care system now and leaving the care system should be able to read their files with no black lines running through them.

### **The interaction of departments and agencies, the courts and service providers and how they can better work together to support at risk families and children.**

1. Independent people should attend the Children's Court with children to make sure that their rights are maintained and that they are asked about what they want in a safe environment.
2. DHS social workers should work more in the local communities like they used to do.

## **The appropriate roles and responsibilities of government and non-government organisations in relation to Victoria's Child Protection policy and systems.**

1. The authority for Child Protection should remain with the State.
2. The State should be responsible for investigating reports of child abuse. The State should employ more investigators to deal with the reports.

### **Measures to enhance the government's ability to:**

- **plan for future demand for family services, statutory child protection services and out of home care and**
  - **ensure a workforce that delivers services of a high quality to children and families.**
1. Agencies need to recruit carers or provide out of home care options so that families stay together and so that siblings are not separated. Splitting up sibling groups should not be allowed to happen.
  2. Schools need to be better educated about children who have to live in out of home care so that they are not stigmatised in the school and treated differently.
  3. Children in care need to feel that they can explain what has happened to them without feeling ashamed. Children need to be assisted in knowing how to explain their situation to other people.
  4. Foster carers require more support such as respite, psychological assessments and support for children who have behavioural issues or who have particular disabilities.
  5. Residential Workers must be highly qualified and should be paid at better rates to make it an attractive professional job.
  6. Residential workers and foster carers need to receive ongoing training and support.
  7. Forgotten Australians and young people who have experienced the care system may be used to support ongoing training by telling a little about their experience and some of the impacts of both positive and negative experiences.
  8. Respite carers or "holiday hosts" should be carefully screened and assessed.
  9. Foster carers and respite carers [holiday hosts] need to be well matched to the children so that expectations are consistent. Carers should be consistent and familiar with the children. Agency workers, DHS workers and carers need to be careful not to introduce or promise things that they cannot follow through with. There is too much disappointment in children's lives already if they have had to come to the attention of Child Protection Services.

## **The oversight and transparency of the child protection, care and support system and whether changes are necessary in oversight, transparency and /or regulation to achieve an increase in public confidence and improved outcomes for children.**

1. Record keeping needs to be factual, accurate and always written with the intention that the child and his or her parent will one day read the record.
2. Independent assessments and reviews of children in the out of home care system need to be conducted to ensure real transparency and an objective evaluation of the quality of care being provided to the child with respect to their health, their education, their culture, their emotional wellbeing, their self care etc.