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PROTECTING VICTORIA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN INQUIRY

THE HON P.D. CUMMINS, Chair

MILDURA

9.06 AM, THURSDAY, 16 JUNE 2011

MR CUMMINS: I very warmly welcome you here this morning in this beautiful city and region on behalf of the Inquiry. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet, the Latji Latji people, and we pay our true respects to their elders past and present, and I trust future, and we also pay our respects to our closest neighbours, the Barkindji people across the river, and elders from other communities who may attend during the day.

We are very grateful for your written submissions that a number of entities have made and also to some written personal submissions which we'll hear more about during the morning. The Inquiry, as you know, was set up by the government at the end of January, 31 January, and we're due to report by November this year. It's an Inquiry, as you all know, focused upon the system as a whole and its purpose is to seek solutions, long-term and immediate, for the future. It is thus not an Inquiry looking at individual cases, it's not an Inquiry looking to the past to allocate liability and blame as a Royal Commission might, or as the Ombudsman might, or as the Child Safety Commissioner might. They are very important functions that such entities might have. Ours is quite different; we are looking at the system as a whole.

It was asked when we commenced our Inquiry, or more directly when the premier announced it, "Why another Inquiry? We've had numerous inquiries over the last 30 years. They have resulted in an accretion of obligations upon persons in the field and what's the point of having yet another Inquiry which might gather dust on a shelf." Pre-electronic image, you might have noticed, because I'm older than all of you.

I think the answer is this: we hope it's not just another Inquiry, we hope it's not just another report - and I'm not for a moment demeaning the other very significant reports which have occurred over the years - but what I mean by that is that we hope it's a different Inquiry in that it is looking at the system as a whole, it is future-based, it is solutions-oriented and if we achieve that we'll have done our task and I hope it will be a valuable task. Underpinning all of that is your contribution and that's why we have come to hear and to read and when we go away we're going to re-read and study what you have submitted, both verbally and in writing, and that really underpins our Inquiry, so we are grateful for your contribution and we truly believe it will assist the future in Victoria in protecting Victoria's vulnerable children.

You all are aware, I'm quite sure, of the ground rules of this event. It's a public meeting, as you know, which means that it can be reported by the media. It's not a court of law, which means that one is not protected against liability for defamation or self-incrimination - I'm quite sure that doesn't apply here - but that's the difference between this being a public meeting and a court of law which has certain protections built into it which we don't have here because we're in public in meeting and also, as you know, the Child, Youth and Families Act prohibits the identification of persons, either children, young persons, adults or witnesses who have gone through the Children's Court process, so again I'm sure none of you will identify such persons.

We've found that where there are individuals who really want to talk about something that might perhaps come close to one of those prohibitions, they've done very well because they have sought to, and we think achieved, extracting the principle from their individual experience and talking about the principle, talking about the point that is made by their individual experience and we've found thus that people can comply, even private individuals talking really about their own experiences have risen to the level of extracting the principle from their experience and that's I think a very commendable effort - not easy - and most commendable. So that's our ground rules, we're really looking at the system, not looking at individual cases and we're very pleased that you have come here to support the children you're wanting to support.

I'll just go back here for a moment and I'm very pleased to invite Adjunct Prof Vernon Knight first to come forward. Vernon, if you'd take a seat and settle yourself in. I've had the benefit, Vernon, first of all, of reading the very substantial Mallee Family Care submission which has been made to the Inquiry - I know others are going to speak directly to that - but I mention that because of your position as Executive Director and that was a most helpful submission, if I may say so, and 22 pages of closely typed thought contained, plus the references at the end. I've also had the benefit, Vernon, of your own personal additional submission which I'd be very pleased if you'd speak to and you do it whatever way you like, either read it or speak to it. I'm happy to follow the process that most suits you.

PROF KNIGHT: Thank you, Mr Chairman, and thank you for coming to Mildura. We're particularly pleased that the issues that might be peculiar, I suppose, to regional communities have been identified in this Inquiry and your ability to travel and hear from us directly is much appreciated. You're correct, my organisation will present in a second presentation and I suppose that will focus on the things that were identified in our original submission, which is the hard-nosed work of our agency, the on-the-ground dealing with kids in distressful situations.

I've been asked to present in the absence of my deputy, Fiona Harley, who heads up our community development unit, to talk about some other work within our organisation which we believe is important in terms of generational change, and we particularly wanted to bring those issues before the Inquiry so that in fact the Inquiry not only thinks about how the system can be improved, but in fact what the scope of activities might be to change prospects for children who probably haven't even been born yet.

I will, with your permission, read from the notes because if I don't I'll wander and then I'll be in trouble with you and my colleagues. I begin by observing that much of Victoria's history - and I suspect I might be as old as you, sir - but much of Victoria's history and child protection has been devoted to picking up the pieces. While numerous inquiries have contributed significantly to the earlier detection, the better intervention and better outcomes, we continue to face the challenge of too many children who remain unsafe. This situation

prevails despite the enormous increases in spending in child welfare in the 40-odd years that I've been involved. You, sir, have the onerous task of attempting to further improve our state's response to the most needy and damaged children and we know that you'll benefit from the insights of some
5 very experienced and committed practitioners, together with the equally important perceptions of parents and carers and children themselves.

Some of the most profound learnings for me actually came from the production of a play that my organisation was involved in where a group of kids who had
10 grown up in state care, ranging in age from 80 to 8, got to tell their stories. It was captured in a video called Victoria's Children. I have already supplied a copy of the video to your secretariat in the hope that you might get time to view it. We at Mallee Family Care now use the video as a training tool for new
15 staff and carers because it's a reminder that there are no simple answers and no quick fixes. The system, it seems, is always destined to be imperfect.

This morning I'm wanting to add to the other contributions of my organisation and flag the need to resource those services and supports which may have the potential to break persistent cycles of disadvantage, those cycles which burden
20 so many families. In doing so, I reflect on my early years as the superintendent of a children's home when I was left to wonder why it had taken more than a century and John Norgard's Inquiry to alert us to the fact that children who grow up outside a family will bring limited skills to their own parenting. One
25 would have to say it should have been obvious. I guess now I'm wondering why it has taken another 40 years and the work of people like my friend Tony Vinson to make us aware that kids who are not engaged with a completed education and meaningful employment will surely lower the bar for their own children and their children's prospects in life. Surely that's obvious too.

30 It goes without saying that one of our best prospects in life is to grow up in a family where our parents have enjoyed a fruitful education and they are equipped for real jobs. That simply won't be true for many of our children. Guided by Prof Vinson, Mildura has now completed a body of work which will
35 hopefully be the road map for addressing glaring concerns contained in our social indicators. Sir, I have left copies with your secretariat.

MR CUMMINS: Yes, I've got that.

PROF KNIGHT: The report focuses on the needs of preschoolers with
40 nothing in the toolkit; no orientation to numeracy or literature or creative play; primary schoolchildren who are two or three years behind in their education; young people who will disengage in secondary school as they find their school days to be hurtful and isolating; and the very littlest of our children who
45 probably won't even have a chance given that the very person that they need to have guiding their entry into education may have been so damaged by her own experience that the school ground is the last place that she wants to be, she is simply not going to be the one to take little Johnny or little Mary along for their first day at preps.

The Mildura education plan lists the many initiatives which we believe will meet the needs of children and families who are either disengaged or prone to be disengaged and I'd like now, if I might, to briefly describe some of the initiatives which are being delivered by Mallee Family Care through the Tony
5 Vinson Centre. I guess in the naming of the centre we hope it ascribes the sort of heights and quality that we're seeking to find in the outcomes of its work. Very briefly, sir, the programs include one we call TLC, a Total Learning Centre; a program called Reading Discovery; a program called E-Mentoring; and another called Chances For Children. Again, I've left with the secretariat
10 some information about some of this work.

Total Learning was an initiative commenced about two or three years ago which responded to those young families, those young mums, in particular, whose horror experience of school was destined to alienate her children from
15 the school ground. Under the very creative leadership of my colleague, Fiona Harley, and in cooperation with the Education Department we set up a family centre in one of the local primary schools and that family centre now provides activities and programs and all sorts of engaging work for the very families that we know that will be alienated. So in fact what we're doing through that work
20 is building bridges between the school and the young mum long before Mary or Johnny ever reach school age. It's a stunningly successful program, even in the albeit short space of two or three years. The schools and others are starting to say, "This is breaking down significant barriers."

25 Reading Discovery is a program which is an adjunct to our work with families, but it recognises that too many children grow up in families where there is no exposure to books and learning and creative play, and workers and volunteers regularly visit families, not to see what's missing from the fridge or not in the pantry, but to sit on the floor and creatively play. I guess one of the most
30 thrilling comments that I ever heard in relation to this program was that all too often the person who's glued to the story-time is not the little youngster, it's mum.

E-Mentoring is a program that came out of the thoughts of how to engage with
35 particularly the early secondary schoolchildren, and these are those who have migrated from primary school, but probably two or three years behind their milestones. The E-Mentoring recognised that one of the skill sets they inevitably had was the ability in the digital world, their ability to use technology and the program has been developed based on the fact that the
40 mentor is digitally-based, the mentor is by computer, by Facebook and all those other strategies. So we're trying to be much more creative about how in fact we can engage, link and befriend kids who otherwise will struggle and potentially fall out of the school system.

45 Finally, sir, the program that's been with us now for about 10 years is one called Chances For Children and it's a very simple bottom line program that says, "We've got to make sure that of all the things that might inhibit a child's education, money must not be one of them." Thanks to a very generous community in that past 10 years, Chances For Children has now supported 800

young people in this region to fulfil their education and cultural destiny and that's been made possible by donations of in excess of \$2 million, so it really is a remarkable example of a community wanting to change the destiny of many of its kids.

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What I hope will be of interest to you is the fact that each of these programs have attracted enormous interest from funders and policy makers, both state and federal. Our agency is regularly being invited to present this work and associated research to workshops and conferences. Sadly, I must indicate that none of them enjoy any government support or access to funding streams that would assist in their maintenance. It might be said that we are investing least in the programs which possess the potential for long-term change. This is not an argument for less money into hard-nosed services because god knows that's required, but it is a call to see if in fact we can be much more visionary and forward thinking in terms of how we're going to break the cycles of disadvantage. Beyond your own terms of reference I respectfully suggest that there's an urgent need to consider investment in anything that's going to work to break the cycle of generational poverty and disadvantage. Thank you.

20 MR CUMMINS: Vernon, that really locks in very relevantly to what I said at the start, namely, that we are really looking at the system and future and outcomes. When you speak as you do of cycles of disadvantage and of generational change, that's one of the matters we're looking to, is to the future, not just the immediate, so it is in fact most relevant to us, the matters you've addressed, but clearly you also address the immediate, not just the long-term, because your Mildura education plan obviously is a very proactive on-the-ground entity. I haven't seen the video yet, so I'll look at that, but I have read only briefly the program, and I'd like to study it further and look further at it. But looking at education, that's clearly central to the future and I think you've nailed it very clearly, if I may say so. Good wishes.

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PROF KNIGHT: Thank you for the opportunity.

MR CUMMINS: Pleasure. Thanks very much, professor. Now if it's convenient for Patrick, Matakia and Lois to come forward in whatever way you'd like to. I think Fiona is not here.

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MS TSOUKATOS: No.

40 MR CUMMINS: She's not. Right. Well, the three of you please come forward.

PROF KNIGHT: I was Fiona, Mr Chairman.

45 MR CUMMINS: Very good. Ladies and gentlemen, as I'm sure you know, Patrick Timmons, Matakia and Lois are respectively General Manager Client Services, Director Client Services and Manager of Family Services of Mallee Family Care and, as I said to Prof Knight, who had the benefit of a substantial submission from Mallee Family Care, which I think has been co-authored by

you all, you looked at terms 1, 2, 3 and 5, I think, and divided them up, which I think was a very sensible approach, and we've also had a written additional submission which I think is what you might like to speak to today. So take it that we have read and will re-read your 22-page submission and any additional material and we'd be very pleased for you to take whichever way you'd like to take it. You take it amongst yourselves.

MS TSOUKATOS: Thank you. I'm Mataxia Tsoukatos and thank you for the opportunity to present today. Before we begin, we'd also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting today and to pay our respects to elders past and present. Thank you to the panel for coming to Mildura. As Vernon said, I think it's a great opportunity for us to not only talk to the Inquiry, but also to hear from our other members of the community in terms of the ideas that they may have about how we can all work better together in order to meet the needs of vulnerable children.

Mallee Family Care has over 30 years' experience of working in the Mallee with our most vulnerable children and families, and although 30 years may seem a relatively short period of time, we've learnt a lot during that time. One of the key learnings for us has been about the need for our services to be constantly evolving, to be thinking creatively, flexibly and responsively in how we deliver services to families so that they can raise happy and healthy children. How we were doing business 30 years ago certainly looks very different to how we're doing business today, and Vernon spoke a little bit about E-Mentoring and things like that and I'm sure it will look very different 30 years down the track.

Today we're just going to spend a few minutes summarising some of the information that was in our written submission, but adding some additional information, and I'd ask Lois to start and talk a little bit about Integrated Family Services.

MR CUMMINS: Yes. Thanks, Lois.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you. I guess I'm going to focus just for the time being on Integrated Family Services and looking at how we're meeting the needs of vulnerable children in the community. And I guess what that's meant for us as an organisation as that systemic change has been rolled out over the last five years.

I guess probably the key thing for us is the establishment of the Integrated Family Services system and Child First and the benefits that that's had and I guess primarily for us we've seen that as a move in the right direction in terms of how we engage vulnerable families and how they get captured in the system before they come to the notice of child protection, and I guess for us that's been a real demonstration of the partnership and collaboration across the sector in a very genuine and very real way, and that's had a lot of I guess flow on effects for the way that we do our practice in terms of working with vulnerable families and what that's meant. So I guess what we're seeing as an organisation

is that we are catching families a lot more earlier and it's meant that we're able to do some really effective work to prevent their entering into the child protection system.

5 I guess one of the other things that we're seeing is that there is an increased complexity with the number of issues that we're working with with families and that families require different packages of care or different responses, depending on what their needs are and the level of complexity of the issues that they're working with within their family, and I guess we're looking I guess into
10 the future for the development of more flexible service models about how we can do that, and Vernon's talked more broadly about the systemic stuff, but I guess in terms of the flexible service, we think about things like say the current Family Preservation program and how that operates. I'm sure you've probably
15 heard reference to Family Preservation and how that can I guess sort of be collapsed into the family services sector to allow us to be a bit more flexible in the way that we use those models of practice and that would enable us to tailor our response more I guess pointedly to families.

20 I guess thinking about the therapeutic work, and Pat's going to talk a bit about the therapeutic work in out-of-home care, but in terms of the therapeutic work that can happen with families and looking at those therapeutic models that can be expanded across the Integrated Family Services and not just applied in a home-based care or an out-of-home care type setting, we've seen some really good responses to that in a very early way in out-of-home care and I think
25 there's exciting times ahead if we could look at some of those therapeutic models and how they can work in a family services and child protection and more broader service system response to vulnerable families.

30 I guess probably the need for us looking into the future, thinking about the balance between early intervention and tertiary support, as I've already referred to, the families are a lot more complex who come into Integrated Family Services, so the way that our models are built, it requires us to manage the demand for service. So what that means is that families who are quite complex are a priority for our service and those families who are less complex, we have
35 less ability to service their needs. So I guess thinking about into the future, models of how we balance and address, I guess still pick up those families that would still get some benefit from some earlier intervention, rather than allowing them to progress through the system and become more complex, at which stage we would pick them up. Thank you.

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MR TIMMONS: I'd like to focus on the out-of-home care aspects of our work. Currently, yes, we're very familiar with the challenge to the system with very complex needs for kids coming into the system, complex responses required and one of the challenges of the future from my perspective would be
45 the therapeutic care approach. We have therapeutic care through the Circle program, which is a limited approach. We have therapeutic resi care practices being understood and developed in pilots across the state. I look at "therapeutic care", the dictionary meaning of "therapeutic" is curative, so it's looking at the hurt of the children and designing a solution and introducing that

to the out-of-home care vehicle that they'll be using. I see it as an imperative of breaking that vicious cycle of in and out of care and in and out of placements, which is a very costly exercise, we know that - costly monetary-wise, but also in the social ability of the kids - so my belief is that therapeutic approaches, while sometimes there is a monetary requirement, there is also a practice requirement and it's been around for about 10 years that I'm familiar with and it's always been marginal. I see it as central in terms of the future of the kids. Fix the hurt and then the placements will be more successful and generate better outcomes for the kids.

With that in mind, in our submission I've pointed out therapeutic care is a very important aspect of the future. We've seen the value of this newer focus model on care. We would like to see the principles of therapeutic care embedded across the system. The model enables best practice and we want this for all the children and young people in out-of-home care, as opposed to just in particular activities, like Circle program and therapeutic resi. I think it can belong right across the system. Fixing the hurt first and then making those placement models work better. It's not always about money, more often about the acceptance of new approaches.

Other options in out-of-home care that we value would be the ability to wrap funding around a particular child who has specific needs and increasing remuneration for carers. I'm sure there's been submissions focusing on that and I would just support those. The ability for innovative models of care, and some of those innovations can be within a care team or within the thoughts of a couple of people working in the interests of a child and I think we need a capacity to explore innovation and not be stuck in our square boxes and that way we can create alternative solutions, respite solutions. I think there is another submission today with regard to respite for kids in care. I would support lots of creative options: camps; peer group, generating good peer group for kids in care with other kids rather than keeping them separate as an issue; camps, holiday-focused, building self-esteem of the kids and other therapeutically designed activities supporting the placements and the future of the kids.

Also looking for holistic service responses. We have a lot of that now, an ability to look more broadly at the needs of the kids. We've had it specifically linked to education, but we look at the whole child and the need for a whole care plan, including families - very important - whether they're able to be actively a part of the kids' lives, that's another issue, but being able to include parents in the planning for the future of the child is very important and I believe that works very well in 95 per cent of the cases, so I value that.

Giving greater emphasis to the importance of culture. Very important. Recognising and working with appropriate cultural aspects of all children. We certainly have a commitment to Aboriginal cultural issues, we have a commitment to cold community. Mainstream kids also bring some aspect of culture with them and I think we need to look further into what benefits we can provide to them, recognising that culture.

Supporting families to achieve and identify changes. Managing change is a very hard thing for everyone and we were talking yesterday about giving up smoking or going on a diet, things like that. Managing those changes is very difficult and our expectations of families to manage changes may be too high in some regards, so incremental gains is a good thing, as opposed to total outcome that must be identified. So ensuring that there is someone supporting families through that process is necessary and programs such as the regionally-supported reunification program that we're working on up here in the north, very important in terms of recognising what we can do better with the kids and the families that we're here to work for. Thanks.

MR CUMMINS: Thanks, Patrick. Excellent.

MS TSOUKATOS: I just wanted to spend a few minutes just talking a little bit about creating an overarching philosophy and culture of making vulnerable children everybody's business. I know that they've been catchphrases over the past years, but I think we've sort of moved a little bit away and I think we need to come back to creating a culture where responding to the needs of vulnerable children and families is not seen as the sole responsibility of government and welfare agencies. We all have a role to play.

We would support the development of a shared social responsibility model for vulnerable children and young people. There are lots of people in this room, more are coming, who have been working with vulnerable families for many years and I'm sure could add a lot more to this, but it needs to be acknowledged that it takes a different way of thinking and a different way of working and effectively engaging to work with vulnerable families. We need to create environments where people feel welcome, where their skills as individuals and parents are recognised, rather than looking at vulnerable families as having a multitude of deficits.

The first interaction, as we know it, is quite often the most important. Asking for help is not an easy thing to do. As a service provider, we can't sit back and wait for families to come to us. We need to be more proactive. When working with families - and we've learnt this over the years - we have to be honest and open about what needs to change in order for children to be safe. These are the hard subjects to talk about and sometimes the fear of jeopardising the relationship gets in the way of working through these issues with families, but with support and training we can all take a more proactive approach to meeting the needs of vulnerable children.

There are lots of very good services in our community and lots of really good government initiatives that are available for vulnerable families, but still we're not seeing the people most in need accessing these supports. Just the other day there was a report released on the early start free kindergarten program for Aboriginal children and children known to child protection services. Some 2000 pre-kindergarten places were created for this target group across Victoria, but only 463 children enrolled under this scheme. We have to learn from

programs such as this. There is many lessons that have been identified as part of the recent review, but it is certainly telling us that it's not just about making services available, it's also about making sure that the services are easily accessible and responsive to the needs of vulnerable children.

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The recent review found that when a family is living in difficult circumstances, it's problematic for them to be organised enough to be engaged in sessional kindergarten. For many families we work with, some of those basic things, like access to transport, just makes it all too difficult. Taking the service to where children and families are works much better, as has been demonstrated by some of the intensive supported playgroups that have been delivered in some of our most vulnerable communities.

Over the years we've learnt that assertive outreach, taking the service to those people most in need, is an effective way of engaging with vulnerable families. For some reason we know it works, but it doesn't always happen. We're not quite sure why. Sometimes it's about the resources and times and on other occasions it's about the skills of the staffing group. These are all things that can be overcome if vulnerable children become part of our shared responsibility.

4. Universal services who are achieving their targets, how can we make vulnerable children their priority? As a provider of services under contract to the federal government, we're currently involved in the development of vulnerable and disadvantage access strategies. This focuses on understanding our community and then ensuring that those most in need receive support is most welcome and I think worthy of consideration by all levels of government.

As Patrick said, there does need to be a greater recognition of the significance of the changes that we're asking families to make. The types of issues that we're asking families to address vary from drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, mental health, parenting, homelessness. These are not easy changes to make, particularly if it has been the only way of living that you know. Acceptance of incremental change, as Pat said, is really fundamental.

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Finally, in closing today, we would like to acknowledge and recognise the many families who have over the years tackled the big issues which have been impacting on their capacity to provide the best care that they can for the children. We know it's not easy and it takes great courage. Secondly, we want to thank the patient and dedicated staff who have hung in there with families sometimes over many, many years to ensure that children are safe and well-cared for. Thank you.

MR CUMMINS: Thanks very much, Mataxia. In that presentation twice you used the word "proactive", which was a word I used in reflecting upon what Vernon had said, so we're on the same page about that. Patrick, when you said that therapeutic care needs to be central and embedded and not marginal, I take that point very much on board. Lois, there was a question I wanted to ask you in relation to term of reference No. 3 and I give can give you the page. On

page 14 of your major submission - and I think this might have been you, but if it wasn't you, one of you can - - -

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yeah, sure.

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MR CUMMINS: You've put in here, "Conflict of philosophies of practice, this is a weakness in relation to the workforce in the current way we're doing things."

10 MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yep.

MR CUMMINS: "Conflict of philosophies of practice. Family services operate from a strength-based philosophy. Child protection operates from a risk assessment framework. This results in using a problem saturated view rather than exploring hope and change." I'll show it to you, if you want to see it.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yeah, yeah, sure. That would be lovely. Thank you.

20 MR CUMMINS: You mightn't have written it, but I think you did.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Well, yes, I'm sure I did, actually.

MR CUMMINS: It's that dot point, so have a look at that, but if you could just elaborate on that a little bit, or one of you.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: I guess probably what we were trying to sort of capture at that point is I guess the work of child protection is obviously statutory, that's what they're required to do, so when they're presenting what families can't do in front of a judge - and if we think about the changes that need to happen for families, which is what Mataxia and Pat were talking about, if they're coming from a very problem saturated point of view, if they have to present what families can't do, then we have to come along and say, "Well, this is what we believe that they can do." So I guess in terms of the practice philosophies, we're coming at it I guess from two different viewpoints.

MR CUMMINS: Are they complementary or are they inconsistent? Can they be made to work together or does one need revision?

40 MS O'CALLAGHAN: I think - that's a really tricky question - I guess more and more what we're seeing - - -

MR CUMMINS: That's what judges ask.

45 MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yeah, I guess more and more what we're seeing is the level of risk for families is really high, so the level of risk that we're working with, particularly in family services, the bar is increasingly higher. I mean clearly there is a place for the work that child protection does. I think that we have the ability to work together. I guess it's about saying that we actually I

guess view things - it's just about recognising I guess the difference in the practice philosophy and where we're coming from, but that does then create some conflict for the way that we do our practice with families.

5 MR CUMMINS: Well, if it's done well, it should be complementary, shouldn't it?

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yes.

10 MR CUMMINS: And probably the start of it being complementary is to acknowledge the difference and then work forward from there.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yes, and then work from that, yes.

15 MR CUMMINS: It was a good formulation, I thought.

MS O'CALLAGHAN: Yes. Well, I guess that's what we're seeing in our practice, yep.

20 MR CUMMINS: Well, Mataxia and Patrick and Lois, thank you very much for that. That has been most helpful and as I said at the start, we'll study the material written which we've already read and also your verbal submissions which are recorded and published on the web site, so thank you to the three of you and for coming forward. I wish you well.

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Next, I'm pleased to invited John Fitzgibbon to come forward. If you just take a seat, John, and settle yourself down conveniently. John, you've helpfully put in a summary written submission, which I have read, and I'll take it in the way you'd like. If you'd like to read it or perhaps summarise it or just go to some points in it. You do whatever is most convenient to you, John, because it's very useful to have it.

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MR FITZGIBBON: Thank you, Mr Chair, and can I first of all say that I thank the Inquiry for the opportunity of being here this morning and I also have to thank a volcano in South America for allowing me to postpone another activity that I was going to be at which gave me the opportunity of being here as well. Having said that, I do apologise in advance that I was encouraged very late to attend and the indulgence of the Inquiry to see me at the last minute.

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40 MR CUMMINS: The football teams had difficulty getting back to their home bases. You've done well.

MR FITZGIBBON: Mr Chair, I've been a school principal and teacher for many, many years and currently employed at the Local Learning and Employment Network, whose task is partnerships in relation to children and young people ages 10 to 19. During that time one area that has concerned me greatly and certainly caused me some inadequacies as a school principal was where children were in the care of relatives, and that's what I really wanted to just confine my remarks to this morning. I bow to the much greater depth of

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wisdom and knowledge in this room this morning than I have, but these are just a few comments of mine that I hope will be of assistance.

5 Many of these children in this situation are, of course, in formal arrangements and while there are some concerns in many cases with some of those formal arrangements, I'm more concerned as a school principal, or a former school principal, with those informal arrangements that you don't know about and you don't discover until often some problems arise, and it is for those groups that I address most of my remarks concerning, particularly the characteristics of
10 these would be where children are left with grandparents in the main, that would be the most common one, in other cases it's with aunts and uncles, or even in some cases with older siblings, adult siblings.

15 As I said, in a number of cases it's a formal arrangement, but it's a significant number I believe, but I don't have any research to back it up, where there are informal arrangements and you don't hear about it and that's probably where the vulnerability of these children is at the most extreme. The other side of it, of course, is that when these arrangements occur, it's almost invariably as a result of a significant trauma. On one hand it could be a significant dislocation or disruption to the family, a break up of family structure, or on the other hand
20 it could be the death of mother and/or father and leaving the child with the older member of the family.

25 Often at school these children are identified first of all as being children at risk and often then there is research done at the school level to find out why they're at risk and that's when often these family structures are identified. When we talked to the grandparents in this case, there is usually a very, very low level of understanding of what support is available to them. They're out of the mainstream of things often by that stage, but they do express some very high
30 concerns.

35 Since resigning from the Education Department I have had the opportunity to be back in school and talk to a lot of these people and the main common concerns they express I think are, first of all, lack of finance. More often than not they're living on a pension. For those with the formal guardianship, they have some benefits and entitlements to supplements to their pension. However, those living not in formal guardianships don't have that support and the pensions are clearly inadequate to support a child, particularly in an education system when the child is at secondary school where costs can be
40 quite significant.

45 As I said before, they express a real lack of understanding of the child. When you talk to them, the carers, they express grave concerns about the generation gap between them and the child or the young person that they're looking after - God forbid most parents I guess feel that gap between them and their own children when it comes to the social media and the technology that's available to kids today - so when it's a grandparent and that generation gap is doubled or tripled, it must be horrific trying to come to terms with where these kids really are at and what's happening in their world compared with the adult world.

5 The other thing is that often it's found that these grandparents are significantly removed from their schooling years, either both in terms of time and in terms of understanding of what the schooling is at the present time, and I think we heard before, I think Vern was talking about the inadequacy or the feeling of inadequacy by these carers to go to schools and talk to teachers and talk to principals when their schooling may not have been as satisfactory as we would have liked as well.

10 The other thing that they mention repeatedly is the need for respite. They need time away from the children to gather their thoughts, for the children to gather their thoughts too, I guess, and often they rely on things like local council programs, local school programs, local sporting organisation programs, particularly during school holidays, school vacation time where these kids can have some time-out, if you like, and the parents or the grandparents can have some time-out as well for their own mental health and physical wellbeing.

20 There was expressed to me in recent times a real concern that a lot of these programs were starting to drop off the radar screen. Now, when you talk to people about this, it would appear that there was probably a couple of reasons why this may have been occurring. One was that the mainstream family situation with kids in what we generally would consider a normal family situation weren't using these programs as often as what they may have done in the past, so therefore it was seen maybe that they weren't as necessary as they had been in the past, but unfortunately while that may have been the case for a lot of families, for these grandparents it wasn't a luxury, it was an absolute necessity that these programs be available to them.

30 The other thing was that there was tremendous pressure on local councils, particularly here in our area in recent times where most of these programs originated or were financed from. We suffered from the concerns of drought for a number of years and now we've got floods and so there was a tremendous call on resources and it was often these types of programs that were placed in jeopardy, although I did hear from council yesterday that they're reinstating a number of these programs in the next lot of school holidays, so that's a welcome return.

40 MR CUMMINS: That may have been a temporary issue perhaps, but it underlines the point that you can be pushed sideways by other priorities and that has to be kept under observation.

45 MR FITZGIBBON: Yes, and I think the thing is that with these grandparents often they are the persons who are least skilled at lobbying for these things to take place.

MR CUMMINS: Yes.

MR FITZGIBBON: While talking to these carers, of course, while they're expressing their concerns, it's easy to observe or it's relatively easy to observe

other concerns that they're not articulating, but are clearly evident. The one that I think would be highlighted most of all would be the mental health requirements of these people. As I said before, their situation comes about as a result of trauma. It impacts on both the young persons involved in the scenario and also the carer. Informal arrangements, sometimes this is picked up and sometimes they get good service, but in informal arrangements that just doesn't happen and often it's not even recognised until there is another significant trauma or event with the child or with the grandparent in health situations before these services are applied, so clearly there needs to be some attention to identification, particularly in schools, of when these situations are occurring and attempting to provide or to attach them to the correct service.

The other thing with a lot of these grandparents was a profound sense of guilt because it was happening to their family and they were often proud people and so they felt guilty that the situation had arisen in the first place and that was often the reason why they didn't go and seek a formalisation of the guardianship, simply out of that sense of pride. There is also, I observed in schools, a partial deception on their part not to want the school to know that this has occurred.

The other thing amongst these grandparents too was I think the level of education and social competency. Often it was observed that the scenario that had occurred was a perpetuation of problems that had occurred in family structures with their children and then had been manifested on the grandchildren and it was often the case of where traits like alcoholism and family violence and that sort of thing was perpetuated down the generations, so these grandparents were often less capable of handling that family situation because they had been involved in the same problems themselves.

I guess the other thing is the lack of access and support to finance. These carers are recommencing child caring over again at a very advanced age many of them and usually in very trying circumstances so that we really do need some process of early identification of this at the school level and I think that, as I said before, they clearly and usually identify a great lack of knowledge and understanding and a reluctance to formalise these things and to engage in support processes for themselves.

I think what I'm most concerned about, Mr Chair, would be some local solutions to this sort of problem. I think, first of all, it's critical that we have schools and local service organisations together developing some sort of awareness program so that we can identify when these situations exist and making sure that they are in some ways formalised and that services are attached to them and I think that that really does mean that we've got to spend a lot more time with schools in terms of understanding and providing that service and I think the things like we heard already here this morning, things like mentoring programs and support programs, innovative programs need to be attached to schools so that they can service these carers.

I think that we need advocacy so that we can lobby on behalf of grandparents,

we can lobby council and talk to council about what really is important in these cases and attempt, if possible, to get the resources available so that these programs can be seen as a crucial part of community living, not just as an adjunct that might be good if we could afford it, but something has got to be there.

The other thing is the provision of support and services, as I said, must be available to schools to tag on to very, very quickly and easily. We've got wonderful services here in the town, but not always do we have the ability to identify where to go and where to get them and how easily we can bring them to the people who need. I've already talked about training programs and I think the training programs need to be for these carers, as well as for schools, because they're the ones who are responsible for the welfare of these children. Often they don't know what they should be doing. Often they don't have the skills to handle the children and we've got to provide them with those skills.

Just by way of indulgence, Mr Chair, if I can just raise one example that's arisen recently and that is in respect of the Mallee Research Station at Walpeup. This was a facility that was left vacant by circumstance from two government departments, but the current lessee of the centre is very keen for something to happen and it was certainly suggested that this could be an ideal-type place where some of these services could be attached to these families where carers have relatives for children, and whether it be for camps for these children as a respite to the carer, or whether they be special training centres where carers and children could come where children could be involved in programs, carers could be involved in training programs, and also where maybe we could attach other people to it, like schools, where they could be involved in training and understanding what the problem is. We're looking at developing a model for that research centre and we hope that we have some news very shortly on whether that is a viable proposition or not and certainly we'd welcome any support for that type of activity. Mr Chair, I thank you for your indulgence this morning. As I said, I don't have any formal research or documentation to provide you on this. This is very much just by way of experience over a number of years and I hope that it's been of some benefit to the Inquiry.

MR CUMMINS: Thank you very much, John. When you say that you haven't got the formal research, and you mentioned at the start of your presentation that perhaps there are other very specifically and well-qualified people in various areas, what you've really brought is your insights as 30 years as a teacher, 17 years as a principal, plus what you're doing now and that's very important. In my 20-plus years as a judge the question was sometimes asked, "Who judges the judges?" Well, you've asked the question, "Who cares for the carers?"

MR FITZGIBBON: Yes.

MR CUMMINS: And emphasising - there was a range of things you covered - I noticed in particular your emphasis upon the importance of respite and the area you have spoken of is a very important area, so we'll take on board what

you have said, plus your own written document which reflects it and we'll take that into account. So thank you very much, John, and good luck with Walpeup.

MR FITZGIBBON: Thank you, Mr Chairman.

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MR CUMMINS: Next, I'm pleased to invite Bronwyn Williams to come forward. Bronwyn, come on up here. Take a moment. Take a seat, just settle yourself in. Pour yourself a glass of water if you'd like to and just catch your breath and when you've sat down I'll have a word to you. Bronwyn, I'd be very pleased if you proceed in the way that suited you, either reading your document if you found that most convenient, or just selecting parts of it to read. Whatever is best for you, I'd be pleased to hear you.

MS WILLIAMS: Okay, thank you very much. My name is Bronwyn and I've been a foster carer for the past 11 years. I've cared for over 45 children and young people. While initially I cared for adolescents, more recently there have been toddlers in my care as well. I care for sibling groups. Once I cared for a [REDACTED] and I also care for numerous individual children, young people. Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on the strengths in the current system and suggest some areas for further improvement to ensure best outcomes for children, young people in care.

There are four points that I would like to highlight: these include inadequate reimbursement for the role foster carers undertake; lack of follow through on support services for children in care; lack of respect for the role foster carers play in the system as well as inadequate information sharing at the start of placements; and finally the lack of respite offered.

Reimbursements. Carers' reimbursements need to match the work the carer does, as well as cover the expenses involved in a placement. Being a foster carer these days has moved away from a voluntary commitment to that of an unpaid worker. The number of things we as carers are expected to do has increased. We are told we are volunteers, but are asked to do more and more in our role as foster carers. We are now expected to do tasks, including doctors' appointments, dentist appointments and access with family. If the department want carers to continue to do more tasks, a proper rate of reimbursement has to be offered. Even children and young people coming into general foster placements are displaying more complex issues and behaviours. Carers are expected to care of these children and manage the complexities while only being offered base rate carer reimbursement. The process of deciding which rate of carer reimbursement applies to a placement is unclear and lacks transparency. I don't think that carers' views are taken into consideration in the decision-making.

Follow through support services for children and young people in care. While carers do all they can for children in their care, the system is not following through on other aspects of complete care for children. I've had experience of children coming into care with no school engagement and limited actions to address this. One [REDACTED] had no school for over six weeks on arrival in

my care. I am concerned that health and wellbeing needs of children are not being met. It appears as if the trauma children have experienced isn't being addressed. Often children and young people in care do not have access to counselling, even when carers see real needs and try to advocate for this support to occur.

Respect for the role of the carer. Carers know the children and young people in their care. It often feels as if DHS child protection workers don't respect this or the role foster carers do. Child protection doesn't always include carers in best interest planning, or I believe they've gone back to case planning meetings now, and don't seek their input. I have indicated to workers that if I'm not asked about undertaking a task, it should not be allocated to me. I find that workers assume I will do things even without being asked.

Workers don't take into consideration that I have other commitments and other children in care. Systems need to be implemented that actively recognise and involve carers as valued and contributing members of the team. On occasions when children are placed in care with a carer, not enough information is given to the carer to assist in the transition of the new placement. At times this can result in a very stressful time for both the children and carer. There is information that carers need to ensure optimal care is to be provided. If carers are to be a key part of a team providing the best possible outcome for children in care, not just feeding them and offering a bed, but nurturing and supporting them to heal, then information sharing is necessary and extremely important.

My last item is respite. An important part of foster caring is ensuring that the foster carer is able to meet the emotional needs of the children in their care. I believe there is a lack of respite for carers. Having an occasional weekend or evening out assists me to ensure my care of the children is of the highest quality. When caring for children with high and special needs, everyone needs a break. The only real opportunity I have for respite is when my daughters or sister offer to care for the children. This allows me to have a break, whether it's a night out or a weekend away. If this respite was not available to me, I would be feeling very stressed and exhausted. Regular respite offered to carers by the agency would assist carers in keeping their stress levels low and would stop carers feeling burnt out, anxious or tired. Regular respite would ensure that not only the carers are getting a well-deserved break, but also gives the children in care an opportunity to have a break as well.

In conclusion, I still believe that children who are placed in my care have the right to feel safe and secure, feel that they are part of a family and have their emotional wellbeing and medical needs met. I will always advocate for what I feel is the best interest of children in my care, including the four points I have highlighted today. Thank you very much.

MR CUMMINS: Thank you, Bronwyn, that's been very carefully put together and I like the fact that you've methodically gone through with your four points. It's a theme which has really come through quite clearly from a number of sources is the importance of respite that you've just identified as your point

number 4 and, indeed, the previous presenter also touched upon that. Also, the increased complexity in your ten-plus years that you've been there and you've highlighted that as well, that there is an increased complexity in it all, which is a bigger demand upon you, so we note all of that.

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You weren't here at the very start because you were on the way and I said then, so I say it to you also, we take this material on board and we study it and we publish it on our web site as well, so we look at it further beyond your own presentation here, but it's been helpful of you to come forward and present what you have done, so I thank you and I wish you well for your important work, Bronwyn.

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MS WILLIAMS: Okay. Thank you very much and I must apologise for being late.

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MR CUMMINS: That's quite all right.

MS WILLIAMS: I was waiting for someone to come and take over for me at work.

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MR CUMMINS: Good on you and I'll get my page 3 back because I need it.

MS WILLIAMS: Thank you very much.

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MR CUMMINS: Ladies and gentlemen, that covers our formal speakers so could I say to you thank you very much for coming this morning. It was an early start I know which might have been inconvenient for people, so I'm sorry about that but it is very important to have the benefit of your input. We're very pleased to be here and we thank you for your work and we formally close the sitting. Thanks, ladies and gentlemen.

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INQUIRY ADJOURNED AT 10.16 AM ACCORDINGLY