

RESPONSE TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM, NT 2010

I make the following submission to the Board of Inquiry into Child Protection, NT. In view of time limitations, I submit dot points mainly in the area of 'practice issues and some possible solutions' that I ask the Board to consider.

Writer's background

- Extensive history as a practitioner in the human service field including:
 - Policy and program development work in the youth justice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fields in the Queensland government
 - Manager Programs in Queensland in the (then) Sir Leslie Wilson Youth Detention Centre and the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre as well as several years as a community corrections worker
 - Community work through the non-government sector with young street people in South Australia and with families and unemployed in Queensland.
- Each year since 2007 I have undertaken contract work up to 7 months at a time for the NT government as firstly a Community Welfare Worker and now as an Advanced Practitioner in the child protection area. In 2009 and 2010 I have been employed at Darwin Remote Office servicing some smaller communities/town. Prior to this I worked in the urban based office at Casuarina.

General comments:

- My comments are possibly not new but I submit them because they are vital to addressing the child protection issues in the N T. .
- People in remote isolated communities/towns do not have the same access to normal basic services as those people living in urban settings – hence they suffer from extreme social injustice in their daily lives.
- Non-government services such as Somerville, Catholic Care, Anglicare, Salvation Army for the most part stop at Palmerston. Even people at Batchelor are expected to travel to Palmerston to access any funding or support services that these organisations offer (yet there is no regular bus service from Batchelor to Palmerston).
- These organisations offer support, guidance and most of all the opportunity to families for early intervention and follow-up as required.
- Services that are available in most communities relate mainly to basic health care with some communities having a fly in/fly out alcohol and other drug counsellor.
- Children and families in remote or isolated communities are entitled to equality of access to services, especially in the larger areas such as Wad-eye, Daly River, Maningrida to mention just a few and towns such as Batchelor.

- The resulting reality is that the most disadvantaged people living in the most disadvantaged areas of NT have less service delivery/support than elsewhere which results in increased pressure/stress on families and individuals.
- The most disadvantaged become the most responsible for own care recovery and that of their family/community members.
- Current child protection work in remote and isolated areas has to rely basically on utilising extended family or other community members – frequently such people are already 'worn out' and barely coping.
- Different child protection approach/model required for child protection in remote or isolated communities as opposed to that in urban settings.
- Fly-in/fly-out approach does not provide the necessary regular and consistent intervention for children and families and impacts negatively on building the necessary working relationships with families and the wider community
- Increased formal co-ordination of services required rather than relying ONLY on informal networking and informal worker based relationships.

Developing solutions

- Recognise that a key factor leading to child protection issues is the extreme disadvantage lived by families in remote and isolated areas.
- Issues do vary community to community however there seem to be some common themes that impact on children/families and result in child protection issues (be that directly or indirectly lead to a notification). These include low attendance rate at schools, children wandering the local streets at night, young children 'growing themselves up', babies/toddlers not getting sufficient food, high costs of food, and lack of recreational activities – these are in addition to matters frequently in the public domain such as over-crowding, alcohol and other drug abuse, and domestic violence.
- To address common issues in the many remote and isolated areas, a team of workers (reporting to either govt or non-govt organisation) from various disciplines including child protection, community development, psychologist, cultural adviser, education, and early childhood needs to attend the larger communities/live-in for a time and work with the community to identify the issues impacting negatively on children in that community and develop options specific to that community to address the identified concerns.
- Increase staffing especially in those offices that service remote and isolated areas so that 2-4 staff attend a community and stay longer rather than the current 1 / 2 workers who stay 1 / 2 days – this to occur until some of the basic government and non-government service providers are operational in remote/isolated areas.
- Consider placing a child protection worker attached to a health centre and/or school (places which are pivotal in a community) who would work with the local Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Worker (this latter scheme to be expanded) to address some issues such as neglect, assess whether a formal notification is needed and either proceed to notification or work with community to address. This could be particularly effective with many of the child concern notifications. This worker would operate in conjunction with an assigned Child Protection Worker based in Darwin Remote office.

- Consider providing practical support to those community members who already informally “grow up other people’s children” or establish a safe venue for children.
- Recruit and train Aboriginal foster carers in local communities.
- Upskill and expand role of Remote Family and Community Worker (Commonwealth govt funded positions in 8 communities) to enable them to work with a Child Protection Worker with community development skills based in the larger communities/areas to address some of the concerns that end up as child protection but which could be resolved through early intervention.
- Provide either Family Support Workers or similar to Darwin Remote to enable them to do the family support activities (such as transporting children to access and back to carer) rather than Community Welfare Workers doing child protection investigation and follow-up, out of home care/sub-care matters and family support activities.
- Supervision (different to case management/supervision) to be available by skilled, trained experienced personnel – not to assume that all Team Leaders have necessary skills. Staff to access appropriately qualified personnel external to office at departmental expense.
- Panel of consultants to be available as resource personnel, particularly in areas of failure to thrive, parenting skills, working with adolescents.
- Need to streamline the paperwork so that (say) 70% of worker’s time is directly on casework activities and 30% to record-keeping rather than the opposite.
- Any new model/approach needs to have a planned implementation program with the various steps spelt out recognising that in many instances staff are already working on ‘overload’.
- Support programs/services that need to be considered to ensure that remote/isolated communities/towns are adequately serviced: culturally appropriate - maternal and child health programs, parenting programs, adolescent developmental programs, financial, general, gambling, grief and loss, and family counselling, family support services, truancy officers, a variety of sport and recreational programs that are age specific, and specialised adolescent health services to mention just a few.
- General recreation programs / recreation programs/ sports activities/
- Support services and educational programs, especially for young people in violent relationships.

I wish the Inquiry every success and look forward to the report and implementation of an effective, culturally appropriate child protection program.

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