CHAPTER 12
WORKFORCE
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Workforce

The workforces in child protection, child welfare, child care, youth services, employment counselling and juvenile justice are not large enough, stable enough, experienced enough, trained enough, paid enough, supervised enough, equipped enough, valued enough to do the jobs as well as they should or as many of them wish they could.\(^{959}\)

Introduction

Workforce issues in general and in child protection, and child and family welfare in particular, are well described in the local, national and the international literature.\(^ {960}\) The words of Douglas Nelson above highlight the magnitude of workforce challenges in this field. It is obvious that without an able and strong workforce, policies and plans made with the best of intentions and with premier skills are of no value at all. In recognition of this, we note that ‘a comprehensive workforce development plan incorporating recruitment, training and retention strategies’ is recorded as a priority of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020. It is early days in the implementation of this imperative.

Planning for the effective establishment of a strong workforce and its ongoing management is well acknowledged as a major task confronting the Northern Territory Government.\(^ {961}\) What were unmistakable from the commencement of this Inquiry are the mammoth workforce problems in the Northern Territory (Northern Territory) that are evident across most areas of work - ‘staff are under enormous pressure as they have been for many years’.\(^ {962}\) Alongside our immediate awareness of these workforce challenges, the Inquiry recognises and appreciates the strength of commitment of the Northern Territory Families and Children (NTFC), and broader workforce, reeling under the heavy strain of caring for and protecting children, supporting families and growing community capacity in Northern Territory.

Recently, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has focused on the important workforce concerns in relation to the health workforce.\(^ {963}\) In part, this is in response to well articulated concerns about the crisis in this particular workforce in rural and remote, as well as urban, Australia.\(^ {964}\) It reflects growing evidence of the need to resource new and


\(^{961}\) Submission: Department of Health and Families.

\(^{962}\) Submission: NTFC Workforce Development Unit.

\(^{963}\) National Health Workforce Taskforce, 2009, Health professional entry requirements 2009-2025 - Macro supply and demand report, National Health Workforce Taskforce, Melbourne.

creative initiatives to meet the health needs of rural and remote area Australians.\textsuperscript{965}

There has been no equivalent national government attention to the needs of the community service workforce despite a number of current reviews and appeals for government to pay urgent attention to these broader workforce needs in Australia – including strong recommendations that refer to the escalating ‘national social and community service workforce crisis’.\textsuperscript{966} Reference to a national crisis is made in a very recent workforce report by Healy and Lonne which recommends that the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) undertake a ‘national workforce analysis and planning processes in conjunction with CDSMAC (Community and Disability Service Ministers Advisory Council)’\textsuperscript{967}

The newly launched statutory authority, Skills Australia has, as one of its primary functions, the analysis of current and emerging skill needs across Australia and has recommended the development of a workforce reform agenda.\textsuperscript{968} It is very clear that the needs of the community services workforce are urgent and hopefully some of these recent reports and initiatives offer optimism in terms of national agendas that can support the Northern Territory and other states and territories.

Universally, child and family welfare workforce recruitment and retention present analogous as well as unique problems. Most consistent are the child and family workforce anxieties that are voiced in countries that have adopted the neo-liberal (investigatory and forensic) rather than social-democratic (universalist family service based) approach to the protection of children.\textsuperscript{969}

As described in Chapter 2, the following profile is one which typifies areas that influence particular child and family welfare workforce challenges:

- significant and chronic socioeconomic disadvantage and dislocation
- large wealth disparities between the rich and the poor
- high levels of disadvantaged Aboriginal populations
- diverse and remote small communities
- dispersed and large geographic areas
- significant ethnic diversity.

\textsuperscript{965} J Humphreys et al., 2008, ‘Beyond Workforce: A systemic solution for health service provision in small rural and remote communities’, MJA, vol. 188, no. 8, pp.77-80.


\textsuperscript{967} Healy & Lonne, The social work & human services workforce: Report from a national study of education, training and workforce needs, p.68.

\textsuperscript{968} http://www.skillsaustralia.gov.au.

Workforce matters occupy space in most child protection inquiries and reports. Many such inquiries have focused on the needs/deficiencies of a dedicated child protection workforce, that is, the number of child protection, family support or out-of-home care workers required. What is less evident in many of these reports is a discussion related to an integrated cross-sectoral workforce development plan across the continuum of universal, secondary and targeted services between government and non-government. In most inquiries the focus of concerns and the subsequent recommendation are on training, recruitment and retention of frontline child protection workers/practitioners in statutory authorities.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children takes a broader view on workforce needs:

The attraction and retention of an appropriately skilled and qualified workforce – including statutory and non-government service workers, as well as voluntary carers – is a high priority. 971

Additionally, the Framework acknowledges the importance of the National Early Years Workforce Strategy and recommends building on and extending initiatives to support such initiatives as the Western Australian (WA) Foster Care Team Development. The Framework highlights ‘the need for recruiting/retaining people with specialised skills demanded in government, non-government and carer workforces’. 972 Most importantly, it promotes the need to ‘develop and expand the Indigenous child protection and welfare workforce, including: - fostering Aboriginal controlled services to deliver support to Aboriginal families’. 973

Whatever the policy framework that shapes the workforce, there are many other factors that impact on its capacity to do its work well. Of particular importance is how the work – including its components - is conceptualised and described so that it can be done (work design). As well as this there are important matters such as the cultural context of the work, the way that jobs and tasks are allocated, funding levels, the way positions and work are distributed, demand for various categories of work, caseload allocation, and organisational factors such as policy and administrative systems, accountability procedures and protocols for intra and inter agency work.

This chapter provides a brief description of the Northern Territory Families and Children (NTFC) workforce and work conditions and focuses on how the submissions, hearings, consultations and public forums describe workforce issues – staff turnover, recruitment and retention, work practice demands, induction and training, supervision, support and mentoring and culture and management. To the extent that the Inquiry could do so we also comment on workforce matters relevant to the welfare of children within the much broader context of integrated services now required by national, many state and professional policy frameworks (and as proposed in Chapter 11). Because Aboriginal child, family and community welfare issues are of such importance in the Inquiry and unarguably can only be resolved by paying serious attention to the need for a strong Aboriginal workforce, this matter is also addressed.

970 e.g. Wood, Special Commission of Inquiry into child protection services in NSW; Jacob & Fanning, Report on child protection services in Tasmania.
971 Council of Australian Governments, Protecting children is everyone’s business, p.25.
972 ibid., p.43.
973 ibid., p.30.
In the submissions, hearings and consultations, there is much evidence of personal, organisational and professional commitment present amongst the dedicated and broad workforce concerned with protecting, caring for, and educating children, and supporting families and communities in the Northern Territory. This workforce dedication is noted at the outset and provides a signal of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape in which worker stress and distress appears to run parallel with the grief and misery of children, young people, families and communities living with immense disadvantage and trauma. Despite the very evident litany of problems, there is a strong strand of optimism in many submissions, such as that of the NTFC Advisory Council:

The Northern Territory offers rich and rewarding work experiences, but not in the short term. \(^{974}\)

And:

In future planning let us not forget that we are never too small to make a change. The Northern Territory can lead the way.... ‘ If you think you are too small or insignificant to make change- you have never been in a dark room with a mosquito.’ \(^{975}\)

According to a Charles Darwin University academic:

While inquiries often tend to focus on negative aspects of systemic failures and crises, they also present the opportunity to recognise good practice, to make meaningful and sustainable recommendations and to act as catalysts to change. \(^{976}\)

In making recommendations about workforce changes that are required in the light of the findings of this Inquiry, we pay tribute to the commitment, professionalism and enthusiasm of the many people who are contributing to the wellbeing and protection of the children, families and communities of the Northern Territory. We hope that in the acceptance and implementation of the recommendations of this Report they, and those that follow them, will achieve access to the work conditions that enable them to undertake their work effectively, receive the recognition and reward they deserve for the work they do and, that we all bear witness to better outcomes this will produce for the children, families and communities of the Northern Territory.

**Current Workforce Data**

Whilst the workforce that is required to service the needs of children and families in the Northern Territory consists of a broad spectrum of workers across many government and non-government agencies, predictably much of the data that was presented to the Inquiry related specifically to NTFC Child Protection, Family Support and Out of Home Care workers, and associated workforce procedures and policies. Most of the workforce data

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974 Submission: NTFC Advisory Council.
975 Submission: Hannah Moran.
976 Submission: Jerry Sweeting.
supplied to the Inquiry relates to the current staffing of and workforce arrangements in the NTFC and was included in the submission by the Department of Health and Families (DHF) and associated NTFC work units\(^ {977}\) as well as in responses to specific requests to that both the Department and the Division. In the Executive Summary of the primary DHF submission it is noted:

> The Department does not currently have the capacity to sustain an adequate response to the growing demand in intake, child protection investigations and out of home care...The current policy and service system response is clearly not sustainable into the future.\(^ {978}\)

Whilst, in the full report it adds:

> DHF has no resource allocation model to undertake workforce modelling and analysis across occupational groups or a workload measurement system to link workforce planning to service planning. Historically, annual budgets are distributed based on previous year allocations while new funding is generally allocated based on known or identified need. This historical approach to funding allocations has not and cannot account for the complexity or intensity of work undertaken by child protection staff in different locations, or provide a mechanism to determine an appropriate allocation that will standardise case loads, and account for the range of caseload complexity or the actual cost of service delivery, including office space, child and staff accommodation, vehicles and administration costs.\(^ {979}\)

It is apparent from the submission of the NTFC Workforce Development Unit (WDU) that, with the support of other DHF staff, their small complement of staff (a ‘hit and miss staff number of eight’) is responsible for ‘attraction, recruitment and retention, workforce reporting, training and professional development’ and, including the oversight of supervision requirements, for the entire NTFC workforce.\(^ {980}\) The submission lists the following workforce problems, among others:

- Chronic under resourcing of the unit itself and its inability to retain staff impact severely on development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of robust learning strategies
- Major deficits in leadership and management training
- Low participation levels in core and other training due to low staff numbers and inability to release staff to access training
- Ad hoc and inadequate staff induction and orientation
- Delayed training of up to 12 months for some new staff due to lack of fit between recruitment time and delivery cycle
- Poor participation by senior practitioners, team leaders and managers because of case demands at the front line

\(^ {977}\) Submission: NTFC Workforce Development Unit.

\(^ {978}\) Submission: DHF.

\(^ {979}\) Ibid.

\(^ {980}\) Submission: NTFC Workforce Development Unit.
• The need for creativity, flexibility and energy to create robust strategies that can be tailored to the unique circumstances of the Northern Territory and various offices and work units

• Absence of a clear process to meeting workforce needs for career progression expectations or to aligning the core roles and responsibilities of staff to their relevant learning and development needs

• Absent or ‘on the run’ supervision and the inconsistency of supervisory skills amongst managers and team leaders

• Lack of understanding and lack of mechanisms for compliance with statutory policies, procedures and standards.

This submission is deeply disturbing insofar as it is self consciously reflective and critical of its own capacity and performance and candidly (perhaps courageously) identifies very serious inadequacies at all levels of workforce recruitment, retention, support and training in NTFC. It offers an enlightened and comprehensive framework for improvement and acknowledges the centrality of workforce capacity building, support and supervision as prerequisites for adequate let alone quality care services for children in Northern Territory:

Staff resourcing issues can impinge on the ability to provide quality services to ensure that we keep children safe ... staff supervision arrangements and a formal line management structure are critical to initiating, implementing, tracking and supporting learning development strategies for staff.981

The WDU has documented its well researched plans for current and future needs in three distinct areas of:

• Learning Development Framework – includes core and specialist training

• Supervision Agreement – includes process and implementation

• Capability Framework – includes recruitment, retention, support and career pathways.

In an attached submission from the NTFC Care and Protection Training and Development Working Group (a sub group of the WDU) a most comprehensive list of suggestions augmenting these plans are canvassed, problems identified and proposals suggested for the remediation of the stipulated workforce problems.982 It is clearly evident to the Inquiry that none of these strategies for workforce improvement and change can be achieved without significant additional resources which include the capacity for creativity, mobility and flexibility to meet the ‘unique’ needs of Northern Territory service providers. It is also evident that without this resourcing the crisis facing the protective services for children will continue.

981 Ibid.
982 Ibid.
Organisational, staff structure/ function and workforce numbers

The following staff groupings are noted as constituting the NTFC child protection cohort:

- Child protection workers (CP)
- Out of home care workers (OOHC)
- Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers (RAFCW)
- Youth Workers
- Team Support Workers
- Family Support Workers
- Administrative Support Staff.

The Inquiry understands that, what is called, the ‘professional stream’ constitutes child protection workers, family support and out of home care workers as well as some members of therapeutic teams. Regional offices include child protection teams and out of home care teams as well as administrative support staff. Most offices may include some Aboriginal family and community workers, family support teams and youth workers. In the 2009 annual Report, total costs for NTFC are given as $94.4 million, whilst the Treasury Report within the DHF submission indicates that the budget is $83 million.

In the 2009 Annual Report, staff numbers for the NTFC Division are given as 369 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) and budget estimates are for 478 in 2010-11. The Annual Report notes that 251 of these staff are ‘professional stream employees’. In the departmental communication provided to the Inquiry in August 2010, the FTE is reported to be 503 with 182 people being in the professional stream. We acknowledge that some of the differences in these and other numbers are due to the fact that some calculations are ‘means for the year’ and some are ‘particular date numbers’. Whatever the methods of calculation, this represents a small number of staff at the frontline of child protection services spread over such an enormous territory that includes so much remote work with an added complexity of language and cultural considerations.

In the same communication it is noted that ‘NTFC is running at just under 10 percent of the DHF FTE total’ which means that, in general, the NTFC workforce constitutes a very small component of a much larger department – a matter referred to frequently in hearings and consultations. Table 12.1 provided by NTFC offers some measure of the increases in professional staff numbers from 2007 to 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>OOHC</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>FISS</th>
<th>YS</th>
<th>CC</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>80.25</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>95.89</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>124.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>119.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>144.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>21.56</td>
<td>124.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>172.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

983 DHF Response to Inquiry request for information, 25 August 2010.
There are six Branches within NTFC:

- Child Protection Services (CPS)
- Out of Home Care Services (OHCS)
- Youth Services (YS)
- Family and Individual Support Services (FISS)
- Policy and System Support (PASS)
- Budget and Corporate Support and Disaster Recovery.

Since 2002, the Northern Territory Government has increased the number of child protection workers by 71 (a 50 percent increase) and planned an additional 10 workers over the next 5 years. It is noted that further growth in staff numbers is planned. In the DHF budget estimates for 2010-11, just over $4 million is budgeted for increases in professional staffing for the child protection and associated therapeutic services.

In his media release of 19 April 2010 (released after the DHF submission to the Inquiry), the Minister for Child Protection confirmed that there had been ‘a tripling of the child protection services budget since 2001’ which included ‘an additional 112 child protection and support workers funded by Labour since 2002/2003’. He announced that, in 2010–11, ‘an additional 76 child protection staff will be employed as part of a $14.6 million funding boost to Northern Territory Families and Children’ affirming ‘there can be no greater priority as a Government than to protect our children’.

The structure of NTFC as a division within the DHF appears skeletal although it is appreciated that being a Division within a Department provides some leverage in relation to corporate support services such as Information Technology (IT) and Human Resources (HR). It is clearly important to note that the NTFC was only recently established as a Division as a result of recommendations from previous inquiries. Most of the submissions and comments about the location of NTFC within DHF express more concern for outcomes rather than structure, that is, they ask what structure is best in order to achieve the outcomes required for children and families?

It is evident from the policy and procedure manuals and protocols that were provided that much thoughtful preparatory policy work has been undertaken and recorded by NTFC. However, it remains unclear whether and, if so how, these policies are implemented and the nature of the accountability structures for operationalising workforce policies, monitoring performance and evaluating outcomes. Whilst most NTFC staff who commented to the Inquiry respect the relationships and value the leverage opportunities provided by being part of a broader DHF structure, it is apparent to them that NTFC is competing for resources to meet their priorities with other DHF priorities. Terms such as, ‘poor cousins’, ‘low profile, ‘absence of understanding’ and ‘competition for resources’ dominated discussions with NTFC staff.

Outside of the NTFC staffing profile, it was not possible to obtain a clear or comprehensive picture of the workforce arrangements and requirements in the hugely complex and much broader Northern Territory service environment of interlocking services funded in

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984 Submission: DHF.
985 Kon Vatskalis (Minister for Child Protection), 19 April 2010, Healthy Territory: Major boost to child protection services, media release,
a myriad of programs by multiple authorities and tiers of government that supply child, family and community services at a primary, secondary and tertiary level. However, submissions, hearings and documents supplied by DHF provide ample evidence of the huge complexity in the Northern Territory service delivery landscape and the competition between services for good staff. Whatever the additional workforce need, there is an evident and urgent requirement to increase partnerships, collaboration and relationships between programs, agencies and personnel and to develop a more integrated child and family welfare workforce plan for Northern Territory (see Chapter 11). This will, of course require capacity building in relation to staff numbers and also the skills and willpower to enter new collaborative arrangements.

Case loads

The workload allocation approach to services for the protection and care of children by NTFC is unclear. The DHF submission advises that there has never been nor is there now a workload indicator for the dedicated child protection services in place in Northern Territory. Hence there cannot be, nor is there, any reasonable measure or reporting of workload performance, pressure or stress at this time. It is also apparent from this submission that there is no workload measure for the associated and very important Youth and Individual and Family Support Services or for Aboriginal Community Workers. The DHF submission recognises that the need for a workload allocation strategy is urgent.

The DHF submission also notes that a NTFC workforce involves more than dedicated child protection, family support and out-of-home care workers and requires people across a range of operational, policy, research and administrative areas. No allocation formula was able to be provided for these positions either. In relation to child protection staff, the DHF submission draws parallels between the difficulty of recruiting staff for NTFC with that of recruiting and retaining remote health staff including Aboriginal Health Workers. It comments:

attracting and retaining skilled and experienced child protection staff both in the professional and nonprofessional workforce is the single biggest issue for the Northern Territory care and protection system.

The submission reports that the organisation has no capacity to standardise caseloads and, at the time of writing this report, the evidence is that some regional area workers are carrying complex caseloads of around 40 children. One NTFC worker told the Inquiry she had a current workload of over 60 cases.

Determining appropriate caseloads for staff working in the wide range of child and family services is occupying researchers and managers in all child welfare jurisdictions across the world. Generally, caseload is defined ‘as the number of cases/clients/families handled by a full time equivalent direct worker at any one time or over a stated

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986 Submission: DHF.
987 Ibid.
period’. In the most part analysts have been preoccupied with calculating formulae for the two dedicated personnel items of child protection and out of home care. However, in the light of the changing orientation to child protection practices and in particular the imperatives associated with the implementation of the new National Child Protection Framework, the formulae that are being developed are required to address ratios of staff that include the range of service areas from universal and early intervention, community development and family support to tertiary child protection, intervention and treatment and alternative care for children and young people.

The continuum of services aimed at promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people as well as supporting their families and communities needs to be addressed. It is imperative that caseload ratios for dedicated child protection workers are addressed. These ratios also need to include a formula for supervision and administrative support.

Currently, caseload recommendations across jurisdictions vary wildly and may refer to a case as a child, a ‘case-type’ (often associated with intensity of work required) or a family. Some formulae have been won through class actions by workers. Some include a calculation for complexity. Others differentiate between open cases, active cases, and investigations.

The suggested number of caseloads for early intervention and the provision of family support programs range between 6 and 29 cases for each worker. Recommendations and actual child protection caseloads vary between 10 and 25 per worker and out of home care vary between 6 and 20. Supervisor/caseworker ratios are less variable and generally suggest ratios between 1:8 and 1:5. On the basis of recommendations from Gwen Murray, who conducted a review of abuse in care, the Western Australian Government has accepted a benchmark ratio of 1:15 for caseworkers. No formulae were located that paid attention to the question of differentiating caseload in as complex an environment as the Northern Territory although the Wood Report has suggested caseloads of Out of Home Care 1:15; Family Support 1:10 or 1:20; Child Protection 1:15 to 1:6.

What is absolutely clear is that the best outcomes for children and families and retention of competent staff are directly associated with clarity about task as well as manageability of workload. Departmental staff advised that as child protection notifications come in, a prioritisation system around risk indicators has had to emerge and ‘people just take it on’. It was acknowledged that with the introduction of Structured Decision Making as an assessment model in Northern Territory, the pressures on workload are already more evident.

In workload calculation provided for the Inquiry, a self acknowledged, retrospective and ‘rudimentary measure of caseload’ was provided using a formula that is relatively opaque and which arguably adopts a ‘best guess’ approach. Using the formula (which on the particular day of 1 November 2009) counted open cases plus some unresolved intake and a proportion of backlog cases, and dividing these by the number of ‘actual staff’ of 90, the average caseload per staff member is calculated at 25. This calculation appears not to include any work associated with other variables such as the highly intensive...
investigatory processes in what are not yet open cases, so it may not be helpful. What is telling, however, is that even using this rudimentary analysis, estimated caseloads in the Top End are more than double those in Alice Springs (see Table 12.2).

It is also important to note the calculation made in the DHF submission about the implications of formalising a generally recommended caseload ratio of 1:15 would require a 50 percent increase in ‘casework staff’.

Table 12.2. Caseload Individual Region Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>No. of ‘open’ cases</th>
<th>No. of case workers P1/P2</th>
<th>Average caseload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Australia</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top End (inc. Darwin Remote, Katherine and Nhulunbuy)</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2253</strong></td>
<td><strong>90</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The DHF submission comments:

It is clear that NTFC workers have caseloads greater than would be considered appropriate (based on other jurisdictions).\(^9^9^3\)

It also acknowledges:

Delivering child protection services to remote communities can cost from three to four times more than delivering services in urban centres.\(^9^9^4\)

It is of some considerable concern that there is no workload allocation model or caseload calculation formula in place for the dedicated services that are responsible for responding to reports about abuse and harm to children in Northern Territory. However, it is noted that, along with addressing other urgent matters, the DHF submission asserts that the NTFC Care and Protection Quality Sub-Committee has formulated a comprehensive and compelling set of priority projects that aims to address workload crisis:\(^9^9^5\)

- Time in Motion Study
- Quantification of demand on NTFC services
- Demand Forecast model
- High Demand Strategy
- Strategy for unallocated cases
- Intake Review
- Workload (Caseload) Strategy.

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\(^9^9^3\) Submission: DHF.
\(^9^9^4\) Submission: DHF.
\(^9^9^5\) Submission: DHF.
Again, it is equally clear that the only way that any of these priority areas will be addressed is if there is a very significant resource allocation made to them.

**Recruitment and retention**

It has already been noted that workforce recruitment and retention issues confront human services throughout the world – although certain geographic regions provide particular challenges in this regard.\(^{996}\) No doubt, one of these is the Northern Territory. The DHF submission notes that it is apparent that service delivery in remote communities often relies on a mix of part time and casual staff and that the Northern Territory staff workforce is characterised by ‘high staff turnover, unsustainable workloads, high absenteeism and burnout’. Indeed, annual staff turnover rates are recorded to be as high as 80 percent in some offices.\(^{997}\) The following data in Table 12.3 was provided by DHF in response to a request for information about ‘turnover in work units’.\(^{998}\)

### Table 12.3. Annual Turnover Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Separations 2008-09</th>
<th>Percent Annual Turnover Rate 2008-09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NTFC Division Wide</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>26.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTFC Executive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgets &amp; Finance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Protection Services (Branch Wide)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>146.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top End</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Australia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote Aboriginal &amp; Community Workers Team</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Child Protection</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Home Care Branch wide Area</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Services – Branch Wide</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Services Executive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Justice Policy &amp; Program Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin Family Support Centre</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice Springs Family Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Individual Support Services – Branch Wide</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Individual Support Services - Executive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Parenting Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic &amp; Family Violence Policy Team</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault Referral Centre</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy &amp; System Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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996 NSW Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Body, 2007, *Community Services Training Needs in Rural and Remote NSW*, NSW Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Body, Gladesville, NSW.

997 Submission: DHF.

998 DHF Response to Request to the Board of Inquiry: Data Regarding Intake and Response Services, 18 May, 2010.
In this DHF response a number of qualifications are made including:

the actual turnover of staff in individual work units (i.e. loss of staff from that particular work unit) is in some cases significantly higher than the indicated figures. Counts of this figure would need to be compiled manually through comparison of individual staffing records.

Despite the problems with definitive calculations, there is little doubt about the significance of current turnover and retention issues in the NTFC. It is useful to note the comments about retention and turnover rates in child protection services in general that are made in a recent Australian publication:

So, why do they depart in such numbers? The reasons are complex and interrelated but the research evidence is clear that it is primarily the result of organisational factors rather than individual or community ones.999

The DHF submission and others refer to long term and recent plans to manage the recruitment problems and to implement ‘imaginative initiatives’. One of these they report is the Quality Summit in April 2009 held by NTFC. Following this a number of strategies were put in place to increase the recruitment and retention of professional staff.

It is salutary for the Inquiry to read and to hear that these recruitment and retention processes are jeopardised by the high workload demand this placed on an already depleted policy and management staff – themselves under huge pressure. As well as this, it comments that despite the success of some recruitment strategies:

in some months, the rate of ‘separations’ almost equals the rate of commencements.1000

Workforce support

In terms of employee support and development, the NTFC has a Care and Protection Policy and Procedures Manual Version 2.0 (NTFC Manual, July 2009) and well developed human resource, industrial and occupational health and safety policies. It has a well articulated Grievance Management Policy and Workplace Bullying policy. It has developed a new Supervision Policy (that has not yet received DHF approval), although the current Practice Standards (referring to the established supervision policy) already assert:

The Manager will be responsible for ensuring that all staff, whatever their work role, receive formal supervision at regular intervals from their Team Leader. The Manager will provide regular supervision to Team Leaders.1001

999  Lonne et al., Reforming child protection, p.67.
1000 ibid.
However, it also acknowledges that due to a number of factors including resource constraints, staff shortages, geography:

Limited capacity exists within NTFC to adequately resource the learning, development and supervisory needs of a diverse care and protection workforce that comprises nonprofessional and professional staff.\(^{1002}\)

The proposed supervision policy recommends the use of a clear and comprehensive supervision contract and that professional staff responsible for supervision do not carry caseloads.

The NTFC provided the Inquiry with a spreadsheet and a policy framework that identifies the retrospective and ongoing induction and training modules that are delivered but asserts that induction is ‘ad hoc and supervision is often conducted on the run.’\(^{1003}\) It is evident that significant work has been put into developing a range of training modules and a hierarchy of induction processes and an excellent supervision policy at the same time that there appears to be little capacity to implement these or for the workforce to avail themselves of the opportunities.

### Issues raised in Submissions and Hearings

#### Work structure and environment

Many of the submissions that mention workforce talk of the need to name the problem confronting staff that are working with children and families and most of these welcomed the Inquiry because of what they see is an urgent need to support workers to assist children and families. All submissions allude to the fact that there are ‘particular drivers’ within the context of Northern Territory that make the problems here unique. They all emphasise in different ways the need for a viable Aboriginal workforce and cultural competence among the current workforce (‘culturally appropriate practitioners across the spectrum’).

Most submissions from Aboriginal agencies address the need for principles to underpin a workforce framework that has been or should be developed. They also talk to the need for a broad-based workforce intersecting with child protection and the requirement to develop ‘a new model’ and pathway possibilities i.e., entry points for work at various levels.\(^{1004}\)

The majority of submissions address their comments at the level of micro workforce issues such as staffing concerns although at a macro level, there is evidence of confusion about the location of NTFC within the Department and questions related to the inequities of funding and disparity of working conditions between health, education and protective services. Submissions raise questions about the division being a separate entity in DHF and a couple argue for the abolition of NTFC. The submission from the NTFC Advisory Council (NTFCAC), established by the Minister in 2009 and comprised of representatives of the community sector to provide ‘independent advice and perspectives to the Minister,\(^\text{1002}\) Submission: DHF. \(^\text{1003}\) Northern Territory Families and Children, *Policy and Procedures Manual, Version 2.0*. \(^\text{1004}\) Submission: NTCOSS.
Government and the Department on key issues impacting upon children and families’, comments in its submission:

A restructure is not the answer to the systemic, organisational culture, clinical governance and practice issues that directly impact on the integrity of the Northern Territory’s child protection system. Experience elsewhere in Australia, such as in WA has shown that the restructuring and repositioning of Child Protection did not improve the system. 1005

This same submission adds:

The problems with the current system ... relate to issues ... such as poor service delivery ... poor clinical governance and clinical and practice supervision; lack of leadership to implement good practice through professional training and development; lack of leadership commitment and support to implement protocols to work with other agencies to provide the highest level of care and protection to children in the Northern Territory and a lack of leadership and will to share information in a responsible and timely manner for the care and protection of children in the Northern Territory. .. Other broader systems need to be strengthened and improved such as more thorough probity and fit and proper person standards and processes to better reflect the vulnerabilities of the environment in many areas of the Northern Territory. And we stress the need for the child protection system to be adequately resourced. 1006

In presenting its comprehensive submission in which it argues for a new orientation to the safety and wellbeing of children, the Tangentyere Council asserts:

the need of children at risk in the Northern Territory is greater than any department can be resourced to address. In many ways the Child Protection System is set up to fail 1007.

While highlighting the need for cultural competence amongst child and family protection practitioners, this submission also describes issues that ‘get in the way’ of current practice and the ability to move to a new model of practice based on a continuum of service:

- Recruitment
- Induction, training and supervision
- Staff shortage
- High turnover of staff
- Burn out - high client to staff ratio
- Inexperience of staff
- Poor managerial support
- Demand outstripping capacity means staff are unable to work in a strength based approach
- Inconsistent case worker allocation i.e. different workers for the same child

1005 Submission: NTFCAC.
1006 Ibid.
1007 Submission: Tangentyere Council.
Many submissions commented on the importance of paying attention to the cross sectoral work environment. Whilst only one submission asks about the ‘possibility of locating statutory authority in [an] NGO’ a number of people address the problem of how to change the culture of the current statutory service to enable it to work effectively with the non government sector. A few submissions and hearings address the current fragility and instability of professional numbers and strength within the NGO sector and the need for an expansion of capability of these services. Others call for more clarity in relation to workforce needs at the nexus between statutory responsibility and family support:

Not sure who FACS could outsource to and where the distinction between ‘statutory responsibility’ (which FACS have) and the support role often played by NGOs begins and ends if responsibilities are devolved. Clinic staff might play a greater role, but there [is] a need to increase staff, the capacity to do more health promotion activities, and comprehensive training in child protection.1008

Picking up on themes from previous chapters, the NTCOSS submission1009 representing the NGO sector in the Northern Territory is salutary:

Against this backdrop, the Northern Territory Child Protection system has struggled for many years to cope with the workload pressures of placed on it. The socio-economic context, the geographic and demographic context, poor cultural knowledge, and poor procedures and practices within the Northern Territory Child protection system have resulted in the following consequences:

- Failure to adhere to existing policies
- Lack of case planning
- Very high staff turnover, which when combined with lack of case planning, leads to discontinuities in cases and at best ad hoc decision making
- Rushed decision making by case workers without time to consult other parties to the case such as extended families, foster carers, schools etc
- Failure to focus on the needs of the child in the rush to get to the next case
- Breakdown of relations with Aboriginal and other NGOs, schools and foster carers
- At times the Aboriginal child placement principles get blamed for poor placements, when the real culprit is poor decision making
- Removal of children when risk is low due to poor cross cultural work
- Lack of action for children and young people at high risk
- Removal of children who have other safe family care alternatives
- Disconnection from family, community, country and identity for many children
- Lack of action for children at high risk

1008 Submission: NTFCAC.
1009 Submission: NTCOSS.
• Exposing children to risk through inappropriate placements
• Detention (secure care) of young people as a result of inadequate systems responses.

Alongside the evidence of dedication and commitment, significant personal, organisational and professional trauma and unrest amongst NTFC staff is also evident. People talk about a work environment where distress and disruption are endemic and about their fear that there are ‘risks of [the] system becoming even more dysfunctional’ as result in part of ‘even more inquiries’. Many mention the fragility of both the system and the staff. Others express their concern about the ‘politicisation of child protection’ and the worry that ‘the system could completely collapse if we unleash even more criticism.’ One submission talks to an apprehension about ‘decisions being made that appear to be related to harm due to professional practice’. Others speak about the dangers to children and to staff in the current system.1010

While the picture painted is intentionally stark, there is no intention to promote a sense of despair, rather to bring the focus on reality, what can be done, and how it can be achieved. In such situations commentators often refer to a ‘system in crisis.’ This holistic attitude alone can cause people to see the crisis as too big. The proposition of this submission is that for workforce and workplace issues (these inevitably factor in to every other issue the Inquiry is looking into) a reframing into ‘crises within the system’ allows for each tension to be deconstructed and dealt with in a more manageable and less overwhelming way.1011

Improving work structure and environment

It is evident is that there is an urgent need to develop the community services workforce that has very broad responsibility for the health and wellbeing of Northern Territory children, families and communities – and one that aims to protect and care for children rather than a ‘child protection system’. The care and protection of children is a responsibility all carry – families, communities, governments and non government agencies. The community service workforce needs to be culturally representative and literate in relation to the spirit and reality of Aboriginal people.

The workforce needs people with a range of skills and training to be able to provide services within the integrated service model proposed by the Inquiry (and see later in this chapter for suggested workforce competencies). It also requires that these workers are enabled to continue to develop their skills and increase their capacity for discernment and flexibility. There need to be pathways for career development across the spectrum of work. None of this should be seen to diminish the requirement for highly qualified and skilled workers that can and must work at the extreme end of statutory service responsibility for and with children who are at high risk of harm and who need alternative care arrangements.

1010 Submission: Hannah Moran.
1011 Submission: Jerry Sweeting.
The Inquiry acknowledges the importance of the DHF Strategic Workforce Plans for both the general and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforces. However, what is necessary is a new whole of government strategic commitment to the designing of work tasks and a workforce that is able to engage with the specific tasks of caring for and protecting children. The workforce must be re-shaped. This will require an innovative program of reform that enables the workforce to be seen as attractive, with multiple entry points and pathways to progression. It requires a strong Aboriginal and cross cultural presence – ‘to grow our own’.

The goal must be ‘A coherent, functional and transparent department where staff are qualified, well trained, well supported and tenure is permanent employment not short term contracts – this would build capacity, integrity, commitment, stability and continuity – vital in supporting fragile families and protecting children’.

**Recommendation 12.1**

That Northern Territory Families and Children develops a comprehensive workforce strategy based on clearly stated values and principles that:

- reflects the required progressive move to a strong early intervention focus and service provision that covers the continuum of universal, secondary and tertiary services
- involves the employment and continued training of well qualified, culturally aware and competent child safety and protective personnel who can identify risk and work in situations where there is significant risk to children as well as being able to utilise community development approaches for early intervention and preventative services
- promotes an Aboriginal workforce employment and engagement strategy developed in partnership with Aboriginal advisers and agencies that creates ‘on-country’ employment, education, training and employment development pathways for Aboriginal people working in family support and protective services from volunteer through to postgraduate level
- is characterised by a strong partnership engagement with the non-government sector in planning and implementation.

**Urgency: Within 18 months**

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1012 DHF Strategic Workforce Plan 2008-2011; DHF Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategic Workforce Plan 2008-2011.

1013 Submission: DHF.
Recommendation 12.2
That Northern Territory Families and Children develops a model of workforce and resource planning in partnership with the Northern Territory Treasury, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment and relevant discipline groups at Charles Darwin University, Batchelor Institute, Centre for Remote Health and other relevant training organisations around child safety and wellbeing services.

Urgency: Within 18 months

Work conditions and practice demands
Difficulties with work conditions and associated practice demands are highlighted in all submissions that attend to workforce issues. Often untenable stress is reported to be associated with increasing demands, complexity, cultural challenges, isolation, poor working conditions, high case loads and the absence of support and supervision. On the other hand, it was heartening also to hear, ‘there is a forum of thinkers who can inspire the way forward’ and to bear witness to the extraordinary resilience of many of the people who took the time to attend hearings and write submissions.

Working conditions
All of the submissions from frontline staff including managers and team leaders speak of untenable work conditions. These are powerfully portrayed in many submissions and hearings:

- There is insufficient office space and not enough interview/access rooms... the situation is a logistical nightmare...At times contact visits between children and parents are held outside the Office in the street.  

- But you go out on the Monday, and the first community was about 600 km away. I would get there late in the afternoon, do some bits and pieces, spend the whole of the next day doing casework in the community and then drive to the next community which was about 100 km to 120 km down the track. [By yourself?] Yes. Actually, most of the time it was in a car not a 4-wheel drive because we could not get 4-wheel drives. No mobile phone, no radios. No 4WD driver training.

- FACS resource issues impact upon practice. Long distances are involved and the quality and effectiveness of ongoing case management by FACS of children at risk when there is so much distance involved is a question of grave concern.

- There is no accommodation for more permanent workers in remote communities and there is a shortage of skilled health, youth and children’s workers.

1014 Submission: Jennie Guinane.
1015 Hearing: Witness 5.
1016 Submission: NTFCAC, Appendix 4.
1017 Ibid.
In the Northern Territory, working with unmanageable caseloads resulting from too few staff, high staff attrition rates, under-qualified staff, and many unfilled positions, is compounded by demographic and geographical complexities, and vast tracts of impaired infrastructure. Couple this with inferior supervision provision, and insufficient professional support and development for staff; the potential for failures in service delivery is clear.¹⁰¹⁸

Many staff members and commentators from other agencies observe that pay and conditions for NTFC workers compare very unfavourably with those in health, education, fire, police, the armed forces and other allied services. Apart from poor office facilities, other significant disparities in areas such as housing, travel, remuneration rates, salary sacrificing and leave arrangements are highlighted. The Inquiry was advised by staff that these disparities are partly a result of child protection not being recognised as an ‘essential service’.

**High stress**

Most submissions that mention workforce and work issues focus on the failures of organisational arrangements and indicated high degrees of dissatisfaction with both paper and electronic systems and the lack of response from management despite recurring complaints and evidence of problems. Terms and phrases used to describe work conditions include the following ‘endless knee jerk reactions’, ‘endless inquiries’, ‘a sense of doom and gloom’ and ‘siege mentality’.

- Very focused on protecting children but overwhelmed
- Scrambling together to get paper work done in time – 70 percent paper work
- Endless Ministerials and complaint responses
- Don’t get to see children and families.

The following comments from separate senior practitioners testify to the problems:

People always say to me that my job in child protection must be really hard and I must see some terrible stuff. Well, the job can be challenging and horrendous. Abuse and neglect of children does happen, but the hardest part of my job that makes me the most upset and angry is the system I am working within. It is the system that re-abuses the kids and re-traumatises already vulnerable and traumatised children.¹⁰¹⁹

The throughput of staff is alarming and staffing numbers inadequate to cope with the work.¹⁰²⁰

Currently, and for some time now, NTFC has failed to meet its statutory and policy requirements, however, this failure in no way reflects on the people who work in this area as, generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, drive and self-sacrificing attitude of workers is to be commended and respected. At the core of Child Protection Services is a group of workers who generally have high ideals, strong motivations to effect change and a passion for working with and

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¹⁰¹⁸ Submission: Jerry Sweeting.
¹⁰¹⁹ Submission: Confidential.
¹⁰²⁰ Submission: Lynne Boardman.
improving the lives of children in distress.\textsuperscript{1021}

A culture of avoidance and hopelessness amongst staff who work for NTFC, so many are burnt out, their caseloads are too high, the expectations and responsibilities are ever increasing and there is little community support (and rarely any thanks) for the important role that they do in keeping children safe.\textsuperscript{1022}

**Increased work demand/notifications/caseload**

The national and international literature is also replete with evidence about the increases in reporting in relation to the protection of children. The Northern Territory provides no exception and this is referred to elsewhere in this report. In particular:

The Northern Territory’s tertiary child protection system, as with other child protection systems, is grappling with increasing numbers of notifications of child harm and neglect. This rapidly rising workload is placing enormous stress upon the system, its workforce and families.\textsuperscript{1023}

The following comments provide evidence of the reality and some of the complexity and impact of this increase:

The child protection system in the Northern Territory appears to be overwhelmed with the volume of notifications received. Case workers have huge, unrealistic workloads. There is a constant rapid turnover of workers. Many of the staff are from interstate and overseas and have little understanding of the issues. It is a very steep learning curve for them with relatively little experienced senior support working in this confronting and challenging environment.\textsuperscript{1024}

The amount of paperwork is incredible for each and every child, and rightly so. We are dealing with the most vulnerable and often the most damaged portion of the population. It is not surprising therefore that it is also the most emotionally charged for all concerned. BUT... the flip side is that NTFC staff are now so caught up in justifying our actions on paper that we spend more time sitting at a computer than we do with our clients and their families. Is it any wonder that we do not know that hypothetically a Foster Carer is abusing their charge or that we are unaware that a child has moved to another community, or that a child placed with her relatives in one community is [wandering] the streets begging for food and covered with sores and placing herself at considerable risk. Why don’t we know? Surely this should be our core business. What is wrong with this picture?\textsuperscript{1025}

The pressure of carrying workloads that exceed workers’ capacity is relentless and as a consequence the service provided is more often than not a crisis-driven response. Apart from workers carrying excessive caseloads, the Office as a whole is subject to continuous demands that exceed its capacity to respond. The approach therefore is constantly one of ‘risk management’\textsuperscript{1026}.

\textsuperscript{1021} Submission: Jennie Guinane.
\textsuperscript{1022} Submission: Hannah Moran.
\textsuperscript{1023} Submission: DHF.
\textsuperscript{1024} Submission: Dr Clare MacVicar.
\textsuperscript{1025} Submission: NTFC Barkly.
\textsuperscript{1026} Submission: Jennie Guinane.
The submission from a remote workplace emphasises the implications of increased workload on capacity to meet the needs for assessing and assisting vulnerable children and those at high risk and on ‘the effect it has on staff capacity to undertake any preventative or community education activities.’ It explains that staff from this office ‘normally’ managed caseloads between 25 and 30 and had no increase in staff allocations ‘whilst the reporting of child abuse and neglect has risen substantially in recent years’.

The submission describes the negative implications of workload demand for all staff and on management, supervision and training.\(^{1027}\)

Another experienced NTFC employee says:

> Very, very difficult in the field. Huge, unrealistic workloads. Everything crisis driven. Very few opportunities for best practice.\(^{1028}\)

At a more personal level, an advanced NTFC practitioner provides the following description of an impossible workload and professional situation:

> In June 2009 I had a case load of over 80 open child protection cases. I believe this is due to inadequate staffing numbers, incompetent staff who have been employed by the Department and cannot complete [child protection] investigations and not enough designated professional positions. Response time frames are rarely met. At times only ‘Child in Dangers’ are investigated. Other child protection cases are often not investigated for over a year.\(^{1029}\)

Another experienced and obviously committed worker says:

> The Child Protection system will not improve until the crippling work load is acknowledged and acted upon. Many staff burn out, break down and leave. Others choose to transfer to positions that do not include case work, ‘on the ground’ investigation or court work. Unrealistic workloads have been the climate of child protection for many decades throughout Australia yet case workers are continually burdened with a case load that is humanly impossible to manage effectively resulting in poor outcomes.\(^{1030}\)

**Information Technology Support**

The Inquiry has heard conflicting evidence regarding the NTFC Information Technology System. Frontline workers complain that the IT system is cumbersome, user unfriendly or a “nightmare”\(^{1031}\). There are complaints about specific aspects of the system resulting in the use of paper-based, or MS Word-based work-arounds used to circumvent aspects of the system which appear to the workers to be unfit for purpose. There are complaints from more senior NTFC workers that they cannot access information or reports from the system in a timely manner.

\(^{1027}\) Submission: Remote NTFC.
\(^{1028}\) Hearing: Senior NTFC worker.
\(^{1029}\) Submission: Confidential.
\(^{1030}\) Submission: Kathryn Auger.
\(^{1031}\) Hearings: Witnesses 2, 7, 11 and 48.
The DHF Strategic Review and Information Services present a contrary view\textsuperscript{1032}. Their claim is that Community Care Information System (CCIS) is well designed, provided by a responsive vendor with whom there is a productive relationship resulting in useful and timely updates, which does have capacity to run appropriate reports in a timely manner. Their claim is that the system is satisfactory albeit with room for improvement, but the problems arise when workers use the system without training. They claim CCIS is used effectively in other branches of DHF, where training can be rolled out adequately to those who need to use the system.

The Inquiry heard from a frontline worker who defends CCIS and concurs with the assertions of the Information Services’ leadership that the deficiencies are not in the IT system but rather in the lack of training of new workers during orientation and induction, and probably ongoing training and professional development also\textsuperscript{1031}.

The Inquiry finds that the problem is the workers’ ability, or more accurately the lack of it, to use a satisfactory but not intuitive computer program, rather than the program itself. The disconnect between Information Services’ leadership and frontline workers is striking and must be addressed. The NTFC Information Management Group (NTFCIMG) is the conduit through which to connect the needs and views of the Information Services with those of the NTFC staff. However the committee membership comprises high level Darwin-based NTFC leaders as well as IT experts only. There are no frontline workers who would understand the day to day uses, needs and work-arounds of the IT system, yet their views and opinions should be seen as central.

The capabilities of the IT system to make staff work easier should be explored through the NTFCIMG. For example, it may be that there can be templates constructed for writing care plans for children in OOHC, with drop down lists to prompt important subjects to be covered.

**Staffing: type, turnover, recruitment and retention**

It is barely surprising that research suggests that ‘those who are most prepared to do the job are also the most likely to remain on the job.’ \textsuperscript{1034}

> Staff members leave their job on a regular basis not because they don’t like the work but because the work load is too demanding, the mind is over stimulated and workers realise very quickly that what is expected is impossible to achieve.\textsuperscript{1035}

Problems with recruitment strategies occupy the comments of a number of submissions in relation to staffing:

- ‘constant staff changes and people coming and going before they have proper orientation to the system’
- ‘short term contracts’

\textsuperscript{1032} Hearing: DHF Strategic Review and Information Services.  
\textsuperscript{1033} Hearing: Witness 9.  
\textsuperscript{1034} www.socialworkers.org/research.  
\textsuperscript{1035} Submission: Kathryn Auger.
• ‘recruits being torpedoed in from overseas at higher pay and levels while the permanent staff look after them’
• ‘nepotism in appointments particularly in relation to incumbents from other states’
• ‘differential payments for new recruits without reference to longer term employees’
• ‘people who struggled with the complexities of coming here and who have no idea about culture and isolation’.

These comments from a practitioner, who has now left NTFC, reflect observations of many submissions and hearings:

Huge staff turnover and with no process in place to address the issues why staff leave. There were (and I suspect it is still that way) no exit interviews. I was never given an exit interview nor were 2 other full time [employees] who left at the time I did. This was from a Department who reportedly had a 44 percent rate of turnover for its staff. 1036

The submission adds:

There were no guidelines around recruitment procedures that seemed to dismiss EEO principles, and protects the department around the consistency and process it used (or doesn't have) around the interviewing process and how staff are selected.

A number of submissions from workers in the field make comments such as the following:

‘You are just thrown into it’ and ‘you have to sink or swim’ and ‘you have to hit the ground running’.

Short term solutions leading to long term problems - Appointments seem to be made to fill ‘bods on seats’ rather than on the basis of whether [the] appointee is appropriate. 1037

An optimistic academic observed:

In Australia, and other white Anglo-western countries, child protection agencies have a workforce that is predominantly female, white, progressively more inexperienced, and under-qualified. This applies to the Northern Territory too. However, the demographics and geography of the Northern Territory presents some unique challenges, but also opportunities to create innovative recruitment and retention strategies that reflect the diverse Indigenous and multi-cultural nature of the population. 1038

1036 Submission: Former NTFC worker.
1037 Hearing: Senior NTFC worker.
1038 Submission: Jerry Sweeting.
A number of submissions recommend a re-thinking of the disciplinary base for working with vulnerable children and families. Noting ‘the seriously overburdened workforce in Northern Territory Families and Children’, one senior practitioner provided some strong research evidence about the opportunities of utilising the skills of child health nurses recommending that child health nurses would welcome the opportunity ‘to work in collaboration with child protection practitioners’ and are ‘an untapped resource for supporting parents to provide a nurturing and safe environment for their children.’

A number of submissions urge the Inquiry to recommend the trialling and acceptance of new initiatives aimed at diversifying the workforce to enable better recruitment, improve the ‘fit-for-task’, and to facilitate improved work arrangements. These include the engagement of support workers to assist case managers, re-allocation of work to administrative staff, the engagement of family support workers and youth workers and the employment of more Aboriginal support staff. Of significance in relation to this are the new work structure initiatives that NTFC is trialling in the Palmerston Office. This trial is reported to be ‘meeting with considerable success.’

There is abundant evidence from research that worker recruitment is a futile exercise unless significant attention is paid to worker retention issues. The following statement from a research team investigating retention issues for the child welfare workforce in Canada observes:

> Considerable evidence supports the positive influence of variables organisational managers can control, including job autonomy, supportive supervision, workload, promotional opportunities and perception of personal safety.

The Inquiry was alerted to the significance of these observations in the words of a NTFC manager who foreshadowed their own imminent resignation:

> We all work seven days a week, the team is in here on weekends. We do the best job we can and we think the work is really important. But I spend most of my time chasing bits of paper and trying to follow the paper chain... New staff don’t get paid for weeks and I end up lending them money just so they can live. Staff feel vulnerable and we try hard to keep them safe and show them they are valued. But supervision doesn’t get a look in, I am exhausted and to keep in touch with my kids I bring them in to work. I get no assistance from the hierarchy – just more expectations.

Recruitment is clearly a matter that is being taken seriously by the Northern Territory government as testified in the summary of recruitment campaigns that came to the attention of the Inquiry during its hearings and as presented in the DHF submission. Whilst acknowledging the ‘desperate need’ for recruiting qualified child protection staff, and some ‘excellent overseas personnel’ many people making comment to the Inquiry expressed concern about the risk of ‘misleading advertising’, ‘empty promises’ and inappropriate handling of ‘foreign’ recruits. Most significantly, the critique about

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1039 Submission and Hearing: Marie Land.
1040 Submission: Jennie Guinane.
1042 Interview: NTFC Office.
overseas and interstate recruitment focused on the gap in cultural knowledge and the lack of preparation of such recruits for the complex and harsh world of remote area practice. Others observed that differentials in salary and conditions for new recruits were creating more problems in an already fraught workplace environment.

Complexity, culture and isolation

It is uncontroversial to say that the care and protection of children in the Northern Territory provides huge challenges in a vast geographic region with a dispersed and sparse population.

Some, but surprisingly few, submissions talk to the really volatile and confronting work world of frontline staff and the complexity of that work and decision making – although the message is much stronger in the reports from the hearings. The character, tone, atmosphere and feel of the environment for workers in all of the human services in regional and remote communities let alone urban centres and town camps, is deeply impacted by living conditions.

Substandard accommodation, poverty, squalor, lack of facilities for hygiene, poor infrastructure, disempowerment and the relentless absence of organisation are just some intertwining elements of the physical and emotional environment that are reported to confront workers. In discussion, one Aboriginal employer said:

"It is almost impossible to understand how we can locate a workforce that has to either mirror the people who are struggling or, as an outsider, work with the contrasts and complexity of cultures and ways of living that are deep, powerful and totally unfamiliar – often with language that is also unknown."

Decision making about what constitutes harm to children when lower standards of care are normalised can be highly complex (as identified in Chapter 7). There is an associated need for more clarity in procedures, policies and supervision practices. It is evident that at a deeply personal level, people working in all human services in the Northern Territory and often in relative isolation in environments foreign to their own life experience and framework, have to manage a significant cognitive dissonance. They must accommodate to the environment in which they must ‘normalise’ events and arrangements, work to legislative requirements, discern well around complex and often heated family and community disturbances and make very serious decisions about the welfare of children and families in fragile situations.

Workforce competencies

A system of care approach to promoting child safety and wellbeing requires core competencies for the workforce involved in child abuse prevention and response. It is important that workers in this area think not of themselves as delivering a service but as ‘being of service’. Supports and training for a workforce for promoting child safety and wellbeing should focus on the development of the following competencies:

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1043 Submission: NTFCAC, Appendix 4.
1044 Submission: Dr Clare MacVicar.
• Knowledge of the public health model, child development and family functioning, the problem of maltreatment and methods of prevention

• Core attitudes, including a belief that child maltreatment is preventable, that professionals have an important role in prevention, that families are partners in preventing violence, and that evaluation is a critical element

• Core competencies in interventions, including an ability to conduct screening, implement evidence-based parenting programs, provide mental health services, and coordinate and/or participate in evaluation efforts

• Competencies in management, including an ability to introduce changes in procedures and structures, participate in interdisciplinary teams and work on integrated efforts, and master technology for better results in service

• Cultural competence, that is ‘service providers must have the knowledge, skills, attitudes, policies and structures needed to offer support and care that is responsive and tailored to the needs of culturally diverse groups’.1046 If expanded it can also include the understanding of cross-field culture, terminology and language in order to effectively participate in multidisciplinary teams and collaborate in integrated initiatives.1047

The system for protecting children also needs to recognise that there is already involvement of multiple generations of community members in service provision in remote communities that could be utilised through a model of community child care.1048 The important role that Aboriginal men and women play in transferring skills to young parents needs to be recognised and supported through the promotion of a skilled Aboriginal workforce.1049

The need for work re-design

It is apparent from reports to the Inquiry and numerous community visits that current NTFC working conditions and workloads are unmanageable, untenable, unsustainable and are likely to cause more harm than good for the children, families, communities and the Northern Territory workforce that aims to serve them. It is essential to clarify job descriptions and job design so as to be able to recruit successfully for manageable tasks. It is also essential to develop local level services and place-based models to meet local demands and to create and maintain healthy and viable workplaces along with remuneration levels for remote practice that are equitable for those already living and working there.

Work re-design is imperative. And the work re-design must recognise the significance of cultural capacity and recognise Aboriginal cultural strength as well as enabling the engagement of professional practitioners who are able to make very tough and decisions about the safety of children. Any work design must incorporate important community development principles that are foundational for any worker who is to effectively work in


1047 Adapted from Knoz, 2001, cited in ibid.

1048 Hearing: Witness 28.

Northern Territory – whether in non Aboriginal or non Aboriginal urban environments, ‘urban’ town camps’ or communities in regional and remote areas. Finally, work re-design must recognise the need for career pathways for practice as well as through to management. Senior practitioner roles provide such pathways that enable critical skills to be retained within the direct service workforce.

**Recommendation 12.3**

That Northern Territory Families and Children’s Workforce Development Unit be reviewed in the light of other recommendations, restructured and accordingly resourced in order to enable a culture of excellence.

Urgency: Within 18 months

**Recommendation 12.4**

That Northern Territory Families and Children re-shapes its workforce by:

- developing a transparent resource allocation methodology across Northern Territory Families and Children;
- undertaking a comprehensive analysis of roles and functions required and a review of current position descriptions in order to determine the appropriate and most effective role and function for service delivery, paying attention to the:
  - Number of personnel
  - Skills, qualifications and disciplines of personnel
  - Level of knowledge and skills required
  - Professional development needs of workers
  - Training and education provision
- Developing a range of new positions to meet the requirements of the new model of service delivery
- Ensuring the presence and visibility of multiple entry points to and pathways through service delivery for a range of people at various stages of their education and development.

Urgency: Immediate to less than 6 months
Recommendation 12.5
That Northern Territory Families and Children reviews the specific demands of urban, regional and remote area service delivery and:

- establishes benchmark caseload ratios to enable acceptable staff levels and appropriate and manageable caseloads
- formulates specific ratios for the three practice areas noting the current benchmarks that have not been calibrated for jurisdictions that include remote area practice - Out of Home Care 1:15; Family Support 1:10 to 1:20; Child Protection 1:6 to 1:15.
- develops specific proposals for remuneration and innovative performance and incentive based strategies (such as provision of housing, rental subsidies, travel allowances, retention bonuses, salary packaging, etc) and that proposals for remote practice are equitable for people regardless of their original domicile.

Urgency: Immediate to less than 6 months

Recommendation 12.6
That in conjunction with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, Northern Territory Families and Children:

- Reviews all locations where there is a ‘higher than usual’ turnover of staff and immediately reviews the circumstances in that region or office.
- Maintain regular monitoring of staff turnover utilising a mechanism for obtaining regular staff feedback, with a view to setting performance targets for reducing turnover.

Urgency: Within 18 months

Recommendation 12.7
That Northern Territory Families and Children reviews and evaluates the overseas and interstate recruitment strategies.

Urgency: Within 18 months
**Induction and training**

Matters related to induction and training that are mentioned in submissions and hearings include:

- Lack of induction and orientation
- Ad hoc opportunities for training
- Induction following three to six months employment
- No cultural training
- No planned staff development or evaluation
- No introduction to policy and procedure manual (‘didn’t even know we had one’).

The following abbreviated summary was provided by one past employee:\(^{1050}\)

- A level of training that was completely inadequate for Child Protection Case managers. Despite concerns being voiced about this - nothing seemed to change. Still the same old format remained. Still the same old training
- Case managers being recruited from overseas with absolutely no experience or training in child protection, and yet who were expected to conduct formal investigations and assessments on children, and then having to wait months to be given any training at all, albeit entirely inadequate
- Virtually all Northern Territory case managers responsible for conducting investigations having no training whatsoever in basic child interviewing techniques or procedures
- Supervision for case managers being done on an ad hoc basis, by team leaders and managers who had no training in formal supervision
- People in positions of power with no prior experience in leadership, or people management. Yet these people were driving the direction of the department
- Procedures on the way investigations take place and the standard to which they are written up varies from office to office
- No support given to carers. No initial training given to foster carers, and Departmental Foster carers let go for years without ever being reassessed or being given training.

The submission from Alice Springs Hospital makes important observations about the impact of failure of induction and training on the interdisciplinary and interagency capacity:

> NTFC employees are often on short term contracts, have had minimal orientation and do not have any orientation to the hospital resulting poor communication, misunderstanding, lack of process and inconsistent procedures. This results in the inability to form strong inter professional relationships.\(^{1051}\)

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1050 Submission: Former NTFC worker.
1051 Submission: Alice Springs Hospital.
In a research project with child protection workers, Nettie Flaherty, a Northern Territory academic undertaking her research in the area of child neglect, provides useful findings in relation to the needs for interagency collaboration; workforce recruitment and retention; supervision and support structures; and staff training and development. Most importantly, in her research she found amongst other things that:

- None of the research participants indicated that there was a structured approach to initial or ongoing education and training
- Workers made the distinction between opportunities to learn the administrative aspects of the role (What form do I use? What is the process for? How do I?) and the underpinning knowledge and skills required to undertake the role effectively, with the former occurring more often than the latter
- Many workers spoke about the lack of preparation for the cultural context of practice: many workers had never worked with Aboriginal people before either as clients or as colleagues. ‘Working it out for yourself’ was frequently identified as the strategy for developing skills to work cross culturally. Where workers were afforded the opportunity to work with an experienced Aboriginal Community Worker they commented on the usefulness of this, and the sense of safety this collaboration provided. However, many workers did not have this opportunity
- A number of workers spoke about undertaking reading about the history of the Stolen Generations. However, having read about this they were uncertain and confused about how to put this knowledge to use in their practice with Aboriginal families
- A number of workers were paying for professional supervision privately because they knew the supportive and educational aspects of supervision could not be provided by the organisation. Workers spoke about ‘everything being done on the run’ with little time for critical thinking or reflective practice. This caused them distress.

Flaherty summarises thus:

Overwhelmingly the reflections from child protection workers raised the issue of inadequate preparation for the role, and for the context of practice. A number of workers stated that they had not received adequate orientation or induction.

Most workers reported having to begin case work before they had undertaken the mandatory ‘Introduction to’ either child protection or out of home care Departmental courses. For those that had participated in the mandatory courses, interviewees expressed a low level of satisfaction. In a similar vein, other submissions talked of the:

Huge gap between policy and practice. Inadequate orientation and training. Training is seen as a low priority.

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1052 Submission: Nettie Flaherty.
1053 Hearing: Senior NTFC worker.
A senior manager expressed her unguarded distress at discovering that staff in an NTFC office:

Had a very low level of training of any type and had poor understanding of any procedural manuals that were around the office. The casual case worker did not even seem to have done induction training, yet was dealing with children and their families on his own. On exploring why there was so little training, I was told this was because of chronic staff shortages resulting in staff not being available to back fill positions while staff members were training. The manager also indicated that she thought this was similar to other offices of NTFC.\textsuperscript{1054}

In a submission from the Centre for Remote Health, Charles Darwin University /Flinders University Professor Wakerman presents an outline of the comprehensive training packages, including one that has been developed with funding from the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH) and the Department of Health and Ageing. This package includes training for remote area practitioners working with child wellbeing and child protection concerns.

It is evident that this well evaluated and high quality education and support training is being made available and well utilised for interdisciplinary groups in remote area practice in Northern Territory. This submission also reported that ‘support has not been forthcoming’\textsuperscript{1055} from DHF in relation to offers to extend this important training to other staff. This is of some concern given that what is also clear from this submission is that in the evaluation, participants in this training identify significant deficits of cultural competence and awareness as well as miscommunication and disrespect in relationships between NTFC staff and Aboriginal Health Workers (AHW) workers as well as those from other work areas and occupations. It is apparent from this and many hearings that the NTFC work culture needs to pay serious attention to generating (not simply training) cultural awareness and respect as well as cross cultural competence to enable the child and family workforce in the Northern Territory to capitalise on its strengths in caring for children and families.

An observation from the SNAICC submission to the Inquiry captures this:

The development of a strong well equipped workforce, workforce development (including professional staff and carers, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and otherwise, government or NGO) is essential to the operation of an adequate service system that can meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This will require careful planning, financial and other supports, and time.\textsuperscript{1056}

What this and other submissions and hearings attest to is the problem of a child protection service which, while importantly focused on assessing the needs of children reported to be at risk (maintaining a ‘forensic gaze’), is often not able to connect with the communities in which it works or colleagues across different work areas. Whilst acknowledging that ‘some excellent work is being undertaken with children and families’, these submissions capture the significance of the need to develop capacity amongst all staff working with vulnerable and at risk children and families, in a range of areas including:

\textsuperscript{1054} Submission: NTFC manager.
\textsuperscript{1055} Submission: Centre for Remote Health.
\textsuperscript{1056} Submission: SNAICC.
• cultural literacy and respect
• relationships and relationship building
• flexibility in work tasks
• ability to work with Aboriginal co-workers.

Supporting induction and training

NTFC’s capacity to deliver induction, training and support must be developed. In accord with the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children, it will be necessary to adopt a very broad definition of workforce that encompasses a range of disciplines that can enter the workforce at multiple levels and develop pathways for progression and development. Workforce must include the administrative supports that are needed.

A comprehensive workforce development plan has been developed by NTFC comprising attraction and retention strategies, role and position redesign, and enhanced quality assurance systems. It also pays attention to the need for specific and targeted education, training and support in the three core tertiary sector employment categories of child protection, out of home care and family support and recognises the need to upskill all of these in culturally sensitive practice. This plan needs to be endorsed and resourced by DHF and implemented. It has adopted a cross-sectoral approach and acknowledges the need for alternative service models to meet the needs of different communities. It avowedly aims for ‘a culture of performance’. It requires strong leadership and a significant investment in dedicated HR resources for NTFC.1057

It is unclear what formal arrangements exist between NTFC and the professional discipline groups such as social work and psychology at CDU but clearly some formal arrangements for traineeships, support and ongoing professional development are essential if the Northern Territory is to continue to implement its goal of ‘growing our own’.

A range of Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificate courses in children’s services are available at Charles Darwin University and Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. These demonstrate good pathways to and articulation with degrees such as social work, remote health and welfare studies. In order to develop these pathways, postgraduate certificates are essential and, it is understood by the Inquiry, are being developed.

Highly competent and dedicated practitioners must be supported to gain further qualifications in the Northern Territory. Alongside this, timely educational pathways need to be further developed (local, place-based, VET, tertiary) with the support of cadetship programs. Whilst it is important to enable entry of staff at multiple levels, it is also vital to facilitate and develop incentives for staff to gain formal qualifications and postgraduate qualifications. All senior and supervising staff need eventually to have an advanced qualification in a relevant degree in addition to experience. In saying this, it is vital to acknowledge the equivalence of Aboriginal knowledge in recognising competence.

1057 Submission: DHF.
Recommendation 12.8
That Northern Territory Families and Children reviews and implements the Northern Territory Families and Children Learning Development Framework and associated strategies to address induction, training, supervision and support needs of the workforce and ensures that induction is compulsory and is conducted before practice staff commence duties.
Urgency: Within 18 months

Recommendation 12.9
That Northern Territory Families and Children adopts a model of cross sectoral and cross disciplinary education and training to promote collaboration, relationships and continuity of care that includes:

- Education for education, justice and health staff working with children about the role of Northern Territory Families and Children
- Education for Northern Territory Families and Children staff about the role of child and family health nurses and Aboriginal health workers
- The utilisation of funded cadetships and traineeships.

Further, that the Department of Health and Families considers making a joint appointment with the Discipline of Social Work in the School of Health Sciences at Charles Darwin University in order to encourage practice support and research between the two organisations and facilitate the development of career pathways.
Urgency: Within 18 months

Industrial issues and occupational health and safety
A number of people making submissions on workforce matters requested anonymity. Many of these talked to their fear of reprisal should it be known that they were making comment. One previous employee of NTFC says:

I am in a position of privilege (not working for the system) to state what I see and how I feel safely, I do not believe that the current NTFC staff would feel such safety even with the concessions that have been made with regard to this Inquiry.

The following list of concerns summarises what she and other contributors say:

- Staff being ‘blocked by people above them’
- An evolving culture in which professionals are in tension with other workers
- Sickness and absenteeism – never followed up
- Lack of accountability for actions
- No acknowledgment or respect

Submission: Senior NTFC Manager.
• Pay and equity issues
• Bullying and promises broken
• ‘Goes through to a very high level’ – standards and accountability missing
• Practice feels unsupported by policy and management
• ‘Institutional racism.’

Most disconcerting to read was the following from a Senior Manager:

The workers at this and other Child Protection Services Offices, are threatened, abused yelled and screamed at, spat at, are subject to threats of violence to themselves and directed at ‘blowing up the Office’, have things thrown at them, have cigarette lighters flicked in their faces and have experienced the Office reception areas being smashed up or some other form of aggression or violence on almost a daily basis yet there appears to be no real concern from anywhere in the Department that this is unacceptable.

This manager compares these conditions with those of colleagues in Royal Darwin Hospital (RDH) where it is reported ‘there is a zero tolerance policy to aggression’.

A previous employee who asked not to be named said:

As an example, there was no training offered in self defence until just before I finished working with NTFC, and long after I had been assaulted by a client and had been threatened with harm/violence on a number of occasions. I never had the opportunity to undertake a 4WD course, despite having to spend considerable time working in remote communities.

And another very experienced ex employee asking that her details be kept confidential comments:

I can honestly say the majority of my experience working here has been seriously compromised by the lack of knowledge, inconsistencies and duty of care exercised by staff and predominantly by the management team in the work unit in which I have worked.

This person adds:

Bullying occurred on an hourly basis as a result of the clique in situ of certain individuals to execute their power over staff member[s] who vocally disagreed to bad practice, poor decision making. When practitioners spoke out, these individuals were ‘frozen out’, allocated more cases, expected to manage without adequate support from Family or Team Support Workers, ridiculed, court matters push back and unrealistic expectations made to force you to leave the work unit.

1059 Submission: Remote Aboriginal Community Worker.
1060 Submission: Senior NTFC Manager.
1061 Submission and Hearing: Confidential.
1062 Submission and Hearing: Confidential.
I have too much to say in terms of the bullying and harassment that takes place within Child Protection Services. It is these practices that immobilise and force good staff to leave the department to work elsewhere. It is a major problem that has left a legacy of malpractice, corruption that has further permeated a culture that serves to denigrate its workers, clients and systems - hence why community relations [are] terribly poor. No work has gone into changing the profile of this organisation, which is viewed by demoralised community as an organisation that further alienates people it is meant to serve, support and assist to overcome their problems and to make reunification a reality for most who have entered the care system, but are left to drift.

Yet another employee who was prepared to speak to the Inquiry but wished to remain anonymous said:

I write my suggestions with some trepidation. In 2007..., office staff met with Executive Staff members from Darwin and expressed issues that required addressing such as support for staff, adequate staffing levels, training for staff-nothing was addressed. Workers are continually told that changes are being made. Nothing has changed.1063

A number of the personal submissions from employees and ex employees of FACS and NTFC are poignant and demonstrate a range of feelings of despair associated with poor support, bullying, burnout and vicarious trauma:

When I was at one time ‘loosely’ managed by [NTFC] I received very minimal support from management, there was no inspiration/innovation apparent in leaders, very poor standards re: supervision and any new ideas were quickly quashed as were requests for basic resources (i.e. cars/appropriate accommodation/desks). I would write a monthly report and rarely got any feedback or support. I observed that there is no direct career path in NTFC and only very minimal support. I can recall commenting to my partner once that nobody (with the exception of Administration staff) would have noticed if I was there or not (my place of employment) ... This is an example of how little care was shown to me by my line manager/s at the time and how little interest there was in the work that I was engaging within the community. I wasn’t alone in feeling this way.1064

Despite the evidence of much concern and agitation, most of the submissions also talk to the hope for the future and make suggestions about how to improve it. Most note the importance of ‘naming’ the problems and identify the need for ‘fundamental change’ rather than ‘more tinkering’.

A most disconcerting comment was made by a previous employee:

1063 Submission: Confidential.
1064 Submission: Remote Aboriginal Community Worker.
On a number of occasions I witnessed bullying of staff by their line managers. However it was clear that those line managers had no training what so ever in managing people. Staff in HR aligned themselves with those senior managers and gave little support to victims of bullying... [there is] a culture within the upper echelons of management that did not take kindly to criticism of any of the shortfalls of the departments’ practices.\textsuperscript{1065}

Scapegoating is named in a number of the Hearings and submissions, for example:

There is a culture of scapegoating. When cases go badly, for whatever reason, the Department will pick a likely person and blame them on an individual and personal level for the incident.\textsuperscript{1066}

In its submission, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) acknowledges, and indeed in its submission reflects, the range of industrial and workplace concerns reported by people making submissions to this Inquiry. It indicates that members ‘have for years consistently reported the same industrial issues across Northern Territory regions, to the CPSU’. And that the ‘CPSU holds the view that these issues are not insurmountable and can with adequate resourcing and quality leadership be better managed’. And it makes a number of useful suggestions some of which are incorporated into recommendations to follow.\textsuperscript{1067}

The Inquiry did receive advice and some information that NTFC staff had been included as a component group in DHF morale surveys in 2008/09. It was not possible to obtain any clear picture from the aggregated survey data that was supplied.

It is apparent to the Inquiry that poor work conditions are severely impacting on the capacity for the NTFC workforce to conduct its business. It is also evident from hearings and submissions that this has resulted in pockets in which there exists a dangerous culture of blame, intimidation and bullying within NTFC. It appears to be recognised across the board and is reported to be visible to other agencies.\textsuperscript{1068} All evidence is that such a culture will militate against the retention of staff and even more importantly, violates the core principles of justice, fairness and non discrimination that are paramount in all service delivery. It is not unrealistic to speculate that the reported culture of blame and bullying is, at least in part, related to untenable work conditions and the failure to pay attention to the needs of staff for support in their very difficult work.

It is impossible to believe that such a situation can do anything other than cause more distress to already vulnerable children and families and must at least militate against successful work with them. How this has developed and been allowed to be maintained is not clear to the Inquiry. It is clearly counterproductive to any plans for improving service delivery and must be understood and managed as a matter of some urgency.

\textsuperscript{1065} Submission: Foster Carer.  
\textsuperscript{1066} Submission: Confidential.  
\textsuperscript{1067} Submission: CPSU.  
\textsuperscript{1068} Submission: AMSANT.
Recommendation 12.10
That the Department of Health and Families organises for an independently conducted morale survey with all Northern Territory Families and Children staff (possibly to be conducted in conjunction with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment) and establish performance measures by which to calculate the improvement of staff morale and use as a benchmark for regular re-assessments.
Urgency: Within 18 months

Recommendation 12.11
That Northern Territory Families and Children undertakes exit interviews of all departing staff and that these are audited by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment.
Urgency: Within 18 months

Recommendation 12.12
That an independent review of Northern Territory Families and Children is conducted with a focus on care and support of workers, work conditions, treatment of staff and workplace protection.
Urgency: Within 18 months

Support, supervision and mentoring
There is a vast amount of literature attesting to the importance of supervision as a support, educational and administrative imperative for human service professionals.\textsuperscript{1069}
This literature has been strongly developed in social work but spans all human service occupational groups.

All scholars agree that making good judgements in an emotionally laden child welfare context of risk and fear, under conditions of uncertainty requires critical thinking and the capacity to reflect on decisions. It seems uncontroversial to say that a prerequisite for good decision making is that workers have the duty and the right to discuss serious decisions with advisors both before and after the event. It is also important to note that supervision encompasses much more than formal and individual one-to-one deliberations about decisions. It includes the opportunities for formal study groups, group discussions, peer learning and mentoring.

For people working in remote areas in the Northern Territory some (but not all) supervision can of course be managed electronically. Importantly, supervision is far

from being an ‘added extra’ but constitutes a range of activities that provide the best opportunity for quality decision making and assists in the retention of the very precious staff complement that has been recruited with such evident difficulty. And in terms of the significance of supervision in relation to monitoring quality practice and compliance, the recent comment by the Victorian Ombudsman is noteworthy:

If appropriate levels of supervision are not occurring the department’s fundamental quality assurance mechanism is compromised.1070

In focusing on the frontline support needs of people working with vulnerable children and families and augmenting the work of Gibbs1071, Apte identifies some of the particular emotional pressures that these staff experience:

- Fear of harm to the child
- Concern for their own physical safety
- Concern about raising their own anxieties for fear of being seen to be weak
- Self blame if things go wrong
- Anger and frustration with the agency when things go wrong1072

And these pressures do not include the emotional weight that accompany the sort of context in which Northern Territory workers carry out their tasks and which has been described so poignantly to the Inquiry by so many people. High expectations to find solutions to complex problems, emotional dedication, relentless challenges such as isolation, lack of resources, helplessness and the difficulty of maintaining hope, exhaustion, and poor working conditions are amongst the ingredients that provide a rich soil for burnout, vicarious trauma and despair. Apte’s work and that of so many others have highlighted the need to provide even higher levels of support to facilitate the resilience required when dealing with ‘vulnerable families, particularly when there are issues towards child protection, even at early intervention level.’

Flaherty makes the following observation on the basis of her local research:

Satisfactory supervision has been identified in the literature as a contributing factor to both job satisfaction and as a buffer against job stress. Internationally, several studies have highlighted high levels of stress among child protection workers, and working in a rural and/or remote environment has also been identified as factor in job stress. It is critical for frontline workers that they receive adequate supervision that attends to supportive and developmental needs. It is not unusual that supervisors often struggle to provide these aspects within supervision either because of the pressurised work environment or because they are relatively new and/or inexperienced themselves.1073.
Quoting from the relatively recent and very influential United Kingdom Victoria Climbie Report, she notes the warning therein that has relevance here:

There is a risk that this Inquiry, like many others, will promote bureaucratic changes (i.e. at the level of organisations structures, written protocols and monitoring procedures) that are distant from frontline staff’s need to improve their understanding of complex cases and to acquire and apply appropriate skills.¹⁰⁷⁴

It is very evident that, despite the presence of a policy on supervision requirements, this activity is rarely undertaken by NTFC team leaders/supervisors and when it does occur is random and informal. In a number of hearings, staff highlight the absence of any induction, any supervision or indeed of any support or mentoring of any kind alongside working conditions that would challenge the most resilient worker.

No supervision. In the past three years I have had supervision on four occasions. I have not had any supervision within the past six months. I believe I have a right to supervision for my own professional development but most importantly to be held accountable for the work I am doing which impacts the safety of children.¹⁰⁷⁵

And the following comment highlights the integral and integrative nature of supervision in the remote Northern Territory context:

If the Northern Territory Government are serious about making a difference regarding child abuse the absolute first thing they need to do is support those workers who are ‘on the ground’ and out there doing the investigations. Child protection workers in the [Remote] office need Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers or Indigenous Child Protection Workers in every community within [area]. In addition, child protection staff must have access to a vehicle when in remote communities.¹⁰⁷⁶

The requirement for mentoring at every level of service was commented upon in a number of hearings, submissions and public forums. Mentoring new workers, mentoring people into management, and mentoring young people into work in order to encourage them into pathways of family support services, were all encouraged.

The position of Practice Advisor exists in the child welfare sector in many jurisdictions. The role might include professional advice and consultation, familiarisation with regional culture, induction to protocols and guidelines, attention to administrative requirements as well as staff induction and supervision. It would also be important in advising on complex cases. In developing such a role it would be important to consider how these positions might develop links with the central NTFC quality management staff, and how they might operate outside of the usual child protection line management structure.

¹⁰⁷⁴  Ibid.
¹⁰⁷⁵  Hearing: Confidential.
¹⁰⁷⁶  Submission: Kathryn Auger.
In summary, there are some key suggestions about support, supervision, and mentoring that are made in submissions and hearings:

- ‘must involve other workers/departments to get a more coherent system going’
- ‘the tasks that they are allocated need to be altered’
- ‘important to select for the role – people have to be able to support and monitor and control’
- supervision a high priority for the Department.

These ideas are well captured in the words of one contributor who said that following the Inquiry and in order to realise its goals and its potential as an effective agency in Northern Territory, NTFC needed to develop organisational, supervision, training and management systems that would develop the following:

- A Culture of Collective Problem Solvers
- A Culture of Excellence
- A Culture of Inspiration
- A Culture of Nurturing

Recommendation 12.13

That a mentorship program with senior members of Department of Health and Families staff is developed and ‘implanted’ to promote a supportive work environment for new or junior members of Northern Territory Families and Children

Urgency: Within 2-3 years
Recommendation 12.14
That the Department of Health and Families endorses and resources the proposed Northern Territory Families and Children supervision policy and:

- Ensures that time is allocated to supervision and training of staff by allocating service closure times
- Monitors its application by inviting regular feedback from all staff
- Includes a CCIS staffing marker regarding worker supervision which is used in management reports
- Ensures that aggregated information from supervision is recorded and conveyed to dedicated senior personnel who can utilise it for the refinement of policy, practice, training and workforce development
- Ensures that all staff in senior/supervisory positions have the advanced qualifications and experience to fulfil their role and meet organisational performance requirements
- Instigates a program of supervision training for all senior staff – including team leaders, managers and directors
- Augments supervision with a mentorship model that sends a strong message that staff are valued, supported and assisted to do the work they are required to do
- Develops a comprehensive mechanism for cultural competence that includes an ethical and values framework and that is cross-sectoral, cross divisional and cross departmental
- Ensures that team leaders do not carry case management responsibilities so that they can support staff learning and performance and the development of quality services.

Urgency: Immediate to less than 6 months

Recommendation 12.15
That Northern Territory Families and Children develops and implements the role of Practice Advisors in all operational offices.

Urgency: Within 18 months
Aboriginal Service Sector

It is has been said so often by Aboriginal leaders, and commentators and is well recognised in the literature and in numerous reports, that a prerequisite for effective services for Aboriginal families and communities is that as much as is possible they are provided by or with the support of Aboriginal people themselves. This is recognised in the Northern Territory Public Sector Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy 2010–2012, which affirms:

A strong commitment to employment and career development opportunities for Indigenous Australians is required across agencies. All agencies have responsibility for addressing the focus areas outlined in the strategy. In particular, chief executives and senior managers must meet the challenge of enhancing Indigenous employment in their agency. Indigenous employment needs to be incorporated into all business planning, workforce strategies and executive contract officers’ performance reviews.\textsuperscript{1078}

This strategy emphasises that ‘agencies should be involved in first formulating agency-specific strategies before a sector-wide strategy is determined’, and that, ‘agencies should internally strengthen their resolve for achieving sustainable shift in policy deliberation and implementation’. It does not mention any specific workforce group. Arguably there is no more important workforce group in which to embed and grow an Aboriginal workforce than in the services of communities where children and families need support, nurturing and protection.

Over recent years a host of national, state and territory government and non-government strategies have promoted models and frameworks for Aboriginal education and increased participation in the workforce.\textsuperscript{1079} The imperatives in all of these documents are consistent in their call for increased education, training and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people.

There is nothing quite as searing or as graphic as the descriptions of the problem of the ‘displacement of workers’ and the loss of Aboriginal employment with its accompanying despair that is presented by Richard Trudgen in his powerful book, ‘Why Warriors Lay Down and Die’.\textsuperscript{1080} It should be essential reading on school curricula. In his book, Trudgen shows how there has been and continues to be an incomprehensible disengagement between policy and practice at the level of supporting even a well trained and educated Aboriginal community workforce.

Submissions were received from 15 Aboriginal controlled organisations and there were an additional range of hearings conducted with a range of these and other such organisations and their leaders. A number of submissions note that ‘Central Australian Congress is doing a very good job’, and ‘within health others too e.g. Katherine West Health Board’. One states ‘there is no reason not to have an Aboriginal service sector in [child protection]’.


\textsuperscript{1080} R Trudgen, 2000, \textit{Why warriors lie down and die: Towards an understanding of why the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land face the greatest crisis in health and education since European contact}, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc, Darwin.
A number of submissions make urgent appeals in relation to the need for an enhanced Aboriginal workforce:

With close to 80 percent of NTFC’s child protection case load involving Aboriginal children and families, it is fundamental that the NTFC workforce has the strongest cross-cultural skills in Australia and that the values base of this workforce positions staff to work respectfully with Aboriginal people.\(^{1081}\)

Having local Indigenous workers is crucial in providing NTFC services for the following reasons; language barriers, cultural security and worker safety, the ability to build trust and rapport with communities who will, on average, only see NTFC staff every four to six weeks. ... It is imperative that NTFC staff are assisted by local people in order to understand for example, that a certain community member cannot communicate with another community member because of kinship rules. If a worker were to unintentionally not adhere to these rules or appear to ‘force’ someone to communicate with someone they should not this could at worst place a staff member in a dangerous situation or at least destroy any trust they may have built within that community. Given the sensitive issues frequently involved in a child protection investigation, these issues are further pronounced. \(^{1082}\)

An experienced child protection practitioner commented to the Inquiry:

The biggest shock I encountered whilst working with Northern Territory Families and Children (NTFC) in [area] was, despite the majority of clients being Indigenous, there was only one Indigenous worker allocated to the whole of [the area] and one Aboriginal Community Worker (ACW) in the [regional] office. The Indigenous ... worker allocated to the [office] and stationed at [area] is employed through a pilot program known as Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers (RAFCW) which is an excellent initiative however [area office] was allocated only one RAFCW.

Eight years ago there were Indigenous ... child protection support workers in most of the communities serviced by NTFC and these workers supported non Indigenous case workers when they visited remote communities. Today case workers continually find themselves out in communities without any Indigenous support for locating families, interpreting, supporting interaction on a culturally appropriate level, providing workers with general community information, alerting workers to impending danger, providing Indigenous community members with a contact point once the Case Worker has returned to [area office]. \(^{1083}\)

However, alongside the need to grow a strong Aboriginal public sector workforce what is evidenced in the hearings and submissions to this Inquiry is an urgent need to grow NGOs that are auspiced, managed and run with local Aboriginal people and to make significant and creative investment in the engagement, education and support of an Aboriginal workforce from the ground up. One or more Aboriginal child care agencies (ACCAs) – of necessity employing a majority of Aboriginal workers - are seen as immediate priorities, as recommended in Chapter 4.

\(^{1081}\) Submission: Alice Springs Hospital.
\(^{1082}\) Submission: Remote Office of NTFC.
\(^{1083}\) Submission: Kathryn Auger.
When services are delivered in mainstream agencies it is imperative that these agencies are ‘culturally literate’, respectful, aware of, and sensitive to, Aboriginal culture, family and child rearing practices. Westerman and Hilman,\textsuperscript{1084} Aboriginal psychologists, assert that among other reasons for the failure of many mainstream programs to meet the needs of Aboriginal Australians is their lack of appreciation of the experience of Aboriginal people – all of whom are victims of past colonisation practices and many of whom are now victims of family violence and child abuse, or are at risk of such abuse.

No submissions or hearings provide any alternative view about the significance of growing the Aboriginal workforce. Those that do mention this component of the workforce are fervent in urging that the development of the Aboriginal workforce and pathways for workers from a very basic community support level right up to management is a priority. Many submissions express distress about what they call the rhetoric of government commitment to such a policy and some are heavily disillusioned about there being enough Northern Territory Government will or real understanding about the seriousness of failure to set let alone achieve outcomes in this area.

An encouraging submission was received from Save the Children in the Northern Territory which (albeit being a small agency with a small staff) states:

> In the Northern Territory our small staff team is 95 percent Aboriginal drawn from the local community. Save the Children has provided training, mentoring and support for the development of this team that has seen all staff receive qualifications or begin a pathway to achieving this. The use of Indigenous consultants to guide the development process has enabled the organisation to develop significant partnerships across our work.

> We look to establish all our operations within the context of the local community, and look to co-tenant with existing service providers to embed the program in a strong community and cultural context.

> Save the Children works with our partners to build a competent and responsive local workforce to provide quality and culturally safe services to children and their families. Save the Children seeks an integrated management structure that is responsive to history and experiences of the community. We utilise established and culturally affective decision making structures to form the management and governance basis of all programs.\textsuperscript{1085}

Other concerns expressed are as follows:

- Real lack of knowledge about what the term child protection means in local and remote Aboriginal communities
- Strong criticism of the lack of cultural competence of some of the local workers
- The use and development of an Aboriginal workforce must avoid ‘additional burden being placed on Aboriginal people’ - local or otherwise
- There is a need ‘to start with what we have got and grow from there – ‘grow our own’


\textsuperscript{1085} Submission: Save the Children.
• Community control can’t be dictated from the centre and needs to start with where it is already
• Aboriginal workforce needs to be grown from the community up – from volunteer to basic to TAFE to university and beyond
• Need for many more cadetships in welfare and community services and social work
• The need to examine why previous services fell over – ‘history of Alice Springs and Darwin service closure similar and different’
• A requirement that a body of cultural work needs to be developed and pulled together to inform Aboriginal practice in relation to the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, families and communities
• Aboriginal services want support to do this work and recognise there is a need for non Aboriginal input with the plan for eventual independence (see Chapter 4).

There is a surfeit of comments about the absence of cultural literacy amongst NTFC workers – particularly but not only those who have been recruited from other countries and states, for example:

NTFC workers often have Indigenous studies as part of a degree qualification, they are often accompanied by Aboriginal Community Workers when they are working with Indigenous families. Nevertheless, they only receive one day ACAP training, this is insufficient to ensure they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the complex cultural issues relevant to Central Australia. 1086

The following comments from Muriel Bamblett in 2007 summarise the parameters and requirements for dramatically increased Aboriginal workforce participation:

• a principled investment for the future of Aboriginal children, families and communities so that we can overcome the effects of over 200 years of dominant culture abuse and neglect
• a social investment approach which is rights-based and culturally respectful and acknowledges the impact of the past
• embedding culture in service delivery and being holistic and strengths-based in order to create the best outcomes. It’s about recognising that our Aboriginal strengths come from our culture
• partnerships not mainstreaming – and recreating local communities of care so that Aboriginal people are empowered and once again thrive in this land – as the creator spirits always intended.

She summarises:

• By creating local communities of care – such locally-based social investments, premised on human rights and respect for culture, will go a long way to restoring Aboriginal communities
• This is the bridge we want to see, a bridge based on a shared understanding of Aboriginal strengths, not contemporary perceptions of Aboriginal deficiencies. 1087

1086 Submission: Alice Springs Hospital.
Given that almost 70 percent of children in the child protection system are Aboriginal and our knowledge of how current systems, programs and services are failing to engage Aboriginal families in real and meaningful change it is critical to employ more Aboriginal staff to work in child welfare. However if there is not an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal skills and knowledge that Aboriginal workers bring to child protection then the capacity of the service system to make real and sustainable changes will be undermined.

**Recommendation 12.16**
That direct efforts and resources to support Aboriginal Employment Strategy initiatives are implemented.
Urgency: Within 18 months

**Recommendation 12.17**
That Northern Territory Families and Children develops Key Performance Indicators to demonstrate the goals of Aboriginal workforce planning, with annual reporting on achievements.
Urgency: Immediate to less than 6 months