

Submission to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory 2010

I wish to submit the following to the Inquiry. I have had several years working for NTFCS (2007 – present) and a year living on the remote Kimberley Community of Warmun as the Community Child Protection Worker (2008-2009). Further to that I have spent 23 years working for the NSW Child Protection Department.

There are many areas upon which I could comment, but given the amount of submissions you will receive have decided to focus on just one area – staffing.

There are 2 key ingredients in Child Protection – the clients and the staff. One can develop the best policies, practices, frameworks etc in the world, however all these will be totally useless without a strong, consistent, educated and culturally sensitive workforce. Many studies have already shown that the constant change of caseworkers for children and families places good quality casework outcomes at risk and also frequently allows for children and families to fall through the gaps.

When I arrived in Alice Springs in 2007 I soon became aware of the number of out of state and out of country social workers being brought to the office to fill vacancies and the huge cost of this to the organisation. Whilst I appreciate the need to fill vacancies it is my opinion that filling vacancies in this way is very short sighted and has no view to the long term solution. This manner of filling vacancies is still the norm.

The reasons for it being costly are:

- Airfares
- Free accommodation (up to 8 weeks)
- Relocation expenses
- Training
- Few staff remaining for lengthy periods – thus investment in training is lost
- Cultural ignorance

When I was there in 2008 I put forward the idea of investing in local recruitment, training and education. My suggestion is for the Department to commence a Social Worker Cadetship/Internship Scheme to recruit both Indigenous and non Indigenous local staff (with a weighting to employment of Indigenous staff based on the client group).

This proposal would cover the following:

- Annual recruitment of approx 4-6 cadet staff
- Full University fees to be paid – there is a University offering a Social Work degree in the town
- Recruits to attend full-time University

- Recruits to work in the Alice Springs Office as trainee Caseworkers in University Vacations
- Recruits to be bonded for a period of 4 years following completion of Social Work Degree

The advantages of such a scheme are:

- Yearly delivery of 4-6 new Social Work Graduates as Caseworkers who are already experienced as a result of their vacation placements at the office
- An educated and an informed workforce
- Graduates would have local and cultural knowledge
- Local Graduates are usually keen to remain in their home town and thus the financial benefit would be long term
- Over a 10 year period the Department would have built its capacity to work closely with communities in the child protection area
- Succession planning

Please note that my proposal focuses on Alice Springs as I have not worked in Darwin or Katherine and do not propose to know how best to address their staffing needs.

Submitted by:
Kay Gilbert