

CHANGES NEEDED TO PROTECT CHILDREN

EARLY INTERVENTION AND STRUCTURAL CHANGES ARE KEY

Connections UnitingCare has today expressed sadness about the tragic failures of a system that sees a young child assaulted and fighting for her life in hospital and her father, due to appear in court over the assault, found dead near his home.

The Premier John Brumby has admitted the state's child protection system failed the toddler, saying earlier today to the media that 'Clearly the system has failed.'

'As one of Victoria's largest welfare agencies and Victoria's provider of the largest ChildFIRST, a key community intake and referral service, Connections is well-placed to identify key problems and recommend important policy, funding and structural changes,' says Connections Chief Executive Officer Angela Forbes.

Connections has identified the importance of early intervention and structural changes as the first steps to improve the child protection system.

Early intervention - From the previous child welfare legislation through to the current *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, the Victorian Child Protection service has focused on assessing significant and immediate risk leading to a model of episodic intervention. This approach has not dealt with underlying causal factors and has not prevented further harm to children. It also failed to take account of the increasing body of literature that has pointed to the value of early intervention and prevention services and of the cumulative harm to children.

'Essentially the Government needs to move to an investment and increased emphasis in the preventative, family strengthening and community services – an investment in this end of the system would alleviate the pressures currently experienced by Child Protection,' stated Ms Forbes.

Family Services (i.e. counselling, in-home support) like those provided by Connections, if funded adequately across the sector and embraced more wholeheartedly would enable Case Workers to get in early and provide support to those in need before any issues became worse.

Structural changes – Other Australian states have independent Child Safety Commissioners. They investigate complaints against Child Protection services and identify problems in the system. In most states, the Commissioner reports directly to Parliament, making them open and accountable. In Victoria however, the Child Safety Commissioner reports directly to the Minister responsible for Child Protection services.

'We think an independent Child Safety Commissioner and a greater separation between government and the child protection system is important. We want to see robust and tenacious assessments of a system that exists to protect children – we want the system to be preventative-focussed and resourced to ensure that children and families are cared for when they need us, not when it's all too late,' says Ms Forbes.

Media: Connections Chief Executive Officer Angela Forbes is available for interview. Contact Connections Communications and Fundraising Manager, Matt Clear on 03 9271 0800 or 0403 229 094 or matt.clear@connections.org.au

Connections is a community welfare agency of the Uniting Church's UnitingCare network in Australia providing a range of innovative and early intervention programs that support vulnerable children, young people and their families giving them a better chance in life now and in the future.