

VICTORIA'S MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN NEED OUR HELP

OMBUDSMAN'S REPORT HIGHLIGHTS MAJOR ISSUES

Connections UnitingCare has joined with other child, youth and family support organisations calling for changes to provide the most effective support to Victoria's most vulnerable children in the wake of the damning Victorian Ombudsman's report.

The Ombudsman's investigation found that as of 19 June, 2197 child protection cases, or 22.6 per cent, had not been allocated to a case worker. It also found that children had been placed in the care of sex offenders and said that some staff manipulated figures to meet performance targets. The report also illustrated tragic and heartbreaking stories.

'We can see from this report and we know from our own experience, that this is a system under intense pressure and indeed strain. The stories and issues highlighted in this report show that collectively we need to take action on this issue. We welcome the Government's swift response with the acceptance of the recommendations made by the Ombudsman and the will to take immediate action,' says Connections Chief Executive Officer Angela Forbes.

Connections UnitingCare particularly welcomes the response from the Government that it will follow the recommendation of the Ombudsman and ask the Victorian Law Reform Commission to review options for overhauling court processes in relation to child protection matters.

'It is widely agreed that the adversarial nature and degree of disputation in the legal process is not working in the best interests of the child,' said Ms Forbes. 'We welcome a focus of reform on this part of the system and indeed suggest that reforms in general have not gone far enough in the past and that some of the issues being raised now highlight a failure of reform over quite some time.'

In response to issues raised in the Ombudsman's report and from the grounded experience of Connections, we say that:

- » Protecting children is much broader than just 'a child protection system',
- » Expanding mandatory reporting is not a solution to correcting any flaws in the system,
- » Child FIRST needs to be further strengthened to provide early intervention and family support services,

» A long term workforce strategy beyond recruitment is needed across our child youth and family services to ensure highly skilled responses for all families,

» It is the responsibility of the wider community to value and care about children wherever they are.

Each year more than 42,000 reports of children at risk of abuse and neglect come to the attention of child protection services in Victoria. If we act sooner, with real early intervention and family supports, many of these children and their families could find positive solutions to their problems before they entered crisis.

‘We want the State Government to invest in family support today to save a child tomorrow,’ said Ms Forbes. ‘And we, as a community, must accept our collective responsibility to ensure all children feel safe and parents are supported in times of need.’

As a community, including parents, we have a responsibility to provide a safe and secure environment for children. We need to move to a focus on the family strengthening, early intervention side to ensure we are working to prevent abuse and the tragic stories like those highlighted in the Ombudsman’s report.

Connections’ has also noted the structural conflicts of interest that were examined in the Ombudsman’s report.

‘We have noted before that we think there needs to be a greater separation between government and the child protection system,’ stated Ms Forbes.

‘Essentially, we think it leads to a better system when you have robust and tenacious assessments of a system that exists to protect children. At the moment, as the Ombudsman’s report has shown, this doesn’t happen. Connections wants 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.

» Click the title to download a copy of the Ombudsman’s report: [Investigation into the Department of Human Services Child Protection Program.](#)

Media: Connections UnitingCare 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