

AN INVESTIGATION OF FOSTER CARE IN AUSTRALIA

A STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE AUSTRALIAN FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION AND FUNDED BY THE COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

The purpose of the study was to assess the support needs of and provisions for foster carers and to address issues related to the prevention of abuse within the foster care sector. The Report is the result of reading current materials, interviewing people and conducting a survey of foster carers across Australia. There were 812 responses to the survey which represents approximately 10% of foster carers attached to both government and non-government agencies. This is a large enough sample to provide a statistical analysis of how foster carers feel across the nation. Some of the survey results were:

- Forty two percent have been fostering for 1-5 years and 25% for 6-10 years. Thirty eight percent were aged between 45 – 54 years; 30% between 35-44; and 20% were over 55. Of the sample, 41% were employed as professionals, managers, administrators or para professionals, 22% had no breadwinners in the family or were retired or pensioners with the others covering a range of occupations.
- That support is seen as important to foster carers is highlighted by the fact that 84% rated it as absolutely essential or very important. Forty one percent said they got “just enough support to get by on”. Over 50% rated the **quality** of support as average (35%) very poor (12%) or extremely poor (4%). The support that foster carers felt they got came mostly from their family and friends (55%) rather than from ‘official’ sources.
- Introductory and initial training received a rating of extremely good or very good from over 70% of respondents. Subsequent training was rated slightly lower at 60%.
- The report found that only 65% said they had a printed manual or guidebook. The 24 hour emergency help line was rated extremely good or very good by 35%, average by 20% and very poor or extremely poor by 14%.
- A significant response was that 72% of foster carers rated the information provided about the foster child being placed with them as average, very poor, or extremely poor.
- The almost unanimous opinion from foster carers is that the financial support offered to cover their expenses is not sufficient.
- Support for foster carers when an allegation of abuse or neglect is made against them emerged as one of the most contentious issues. Forty three percent of foster carers said they knew of foster carers who have ceased fostering because of a lack of support at the time of an allegation. Respondents indicated the top sources of support at such a time (over 70%), were family and friends, fellow foster carers and foster carer associations. Governments were seen by 40% as offering extremely poor support and Agencies were seen by 23 % as offering very poor or extremely poor support.

Using these and other responses and the interviews and readings, the Report found the following areas to be ones that require attention to achieve improvements in the foster care sector as a whole and for foster carers in particular:

1. National Approach on Foster Care

The foster care sector as a whole, would benefit from a nationally agreed position on foster care. A National Approach in Foster Care would need to address the following issues:

1. The provision of quality foster care for children.
2. Differentiation between foster care for children in voluntary or short-term placements and children in long-term placements.

3. Indigenous and ethnic placement principles and practices.
4. Recognition of kinship foster care.
5. The funding required for government and non-government agencies to provide a quality service for foster carers and the children they care for.
6. The roles of children and natural families in the provision of foster care.
7. The quality of the relationship between foster carers and workers.

2. National and State Associations of Foster Carers

The pivotal role of foster carers is as unpaid Volunteers. They provide 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year care for children who live apart from their parents as a result of abuse or neglect in the birth home. With over 90% of children in care being cared for by foster carers, it is essential that foster carers have a formal way of joining together for mutual support and to have a means of representing, and advocating for, foster carers and the children for whom they care.

3. Working Together to Improve Community Support

As discussed in this report, foster care appears still to be filled with outdated stereotypic notions, which are an obstacle to constructive development of the sector. To change attitudes in the community at large is difficult at any time and for anyone. Yet it seems that until some of these century-old views are replaced, the image of foster care will continue to be viewed negatively and undervalued.

In addition to negative and stereotypic attitudes in the community there, appear to be negative and even unprofessional attitudes among some administrators, social workers and case managers and foster carers. There is a pressing need for the various stakeholders within the sector to work together in a more holistic and appreciative understanding of each other's roles, needs, responsibilities and rights. Changes occurring in the states at the present time, and the national government's focus on building stronger families, provides an opportunity for the building of positive and constructive approaches to improved foster care.

4. Recruitment, Training and Accreditation

Recruitment, training, and accreditation are strong precursors and predictors of the expertise, morale and motivation of foster carers. They are issues that have been neglected for many years in this under-resourced sector. Now is the time when these matters should be addressed. Foster and kinship carers need adequate training, and the stories about children being placed with people who are not trained or who have not received specialist training, support this need. Foster and kinship carers also deserve to have their skills recognised and the fact that they are volunteers should not be sufficient reason for them not to receive recognition and accreditation.

5. Recording of Statistics

The foster care sector is greatly handicapped by the lack of statistical information. There are far too many unanswered and unanswerable questions in the sector as it currently exists. The result is that policies and procedures can be adopted without a firm, factual basis. There is a need for a national policy on the collection, reporting and availability of statistical information including:

- The children in foster and kinship care.
- Foster carers including kinship carers.
- Indigenous and ethnic foster care.
- Issues relating to allegations against foster carers.
- Placement numbers, breakdowns, etc.

6. Financial support for Foster Carers

Foster carers are volunteers but they need to be trained, supported, and recompensed for the cost of the care they provide. As any of them will readily testify, foster caring is unlike many other forms of volunteering because it is an on-going 24 hour-a-day commitment. There is a fine line to be drawn between using the willing contribution of volunteers and exploiting them. There is a need for an agreement between Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments to ensure sufficient funds are available from both to meet the needs of the children.

7. Standards of Care, Allegations and Support

Allegations of abuse and the handling of those allegations by all parties is a particularly sensitive, painful and urgent area of need within foster care. It, along with the quality of relationships between carers and workers, were the two 'stand out' areas of concern in the consultations and discussions held for this Report.

There are undoubted urgent needs in this area, for both foster care and kinship care, encompassing the following:

- Rights of carers under investigation;
- Independence of investigators;
- Rights of carers for review and appeal;
- Support and advocacy for carers under investigation;
- Availability of accurate and full information for carers;
- Agreed due process for the handling of allegations;
- Enforcement of due process;
- Legal issues;
- Confidentiality;
- Treatment of carers and records when allegations have not been substantiated.

8. Standards for Foster Care

There has been much talk within the sector about standards, and separate attempts have been and are being made in different jurisdictions to develop standards. While this is a proper right of individual States/Territories to develop such standards, it would be in the best interests of Australian children if national standards were to be developed. There may doubtless be different methods of implementing those standards in different States/Territories, but the sector, as a whole, needs national baseline benchmarks for performance. There is a precedent in the national baseline out-of-home care standards.

The adoption of some standard terminology and an agreed structure and process for performance monitoring in the sector against the agreed national standards will also make a very significant contribution to the sector throughout.

9. Program Management

Deliberate steps must be taken to address systems abuse through the establishment of standards and performance indicators, and also through more specific program management changes so that those who are vulnerable in the system no longer suffer at its hands. A national program evaluation of foster care provision should be undertaken.

This would have as its primary concern accountability to the parliament, and through it to the community, of resources put into foster care in this country.

10. Research and Development

Almost every chapter in this report has touched on issues that could benefit from research. What is always needed, however, for any research to take place is funding. The provision of funding will not only stimulate research but it can direct it to the most important areas.

11. A Role for the Commonwealth Government

The recommendations listed in this report require a cooperative approach of the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments and Community Organizations working together for significant improvements to occur in the foster care sector.

The Commonwealth and State Ministers Advisory Council is the relevant body to ensure that national action is agreed to and implemented. However, input from community organisations is critical and a means of achieving this needs to be developed.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1.1

That a National approach on foster care including Indigenous and kinship care be developed as a cooperative venture by the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments and peak community organisations directly involved in foster care .

RECOMMENDATION 1.2

That National and State/Territory Governments work with and involve the State and National Associations of foster carers and help fund their support.

RECOMMENDATION 1.3

That all governments and non-government organisations commit to working together to present the community with a contemporary view of foster care to increase community support and recognition.

RECOMMENDATION 2.1

That the Commonwealth and State/Territories initiate a national approach for the recruitment, training and accreditation of foster carers with a national accreditation of foster carers including those providing kinship care.

RECOMMENDATION 2.2

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories establish a policy on statistical recording of information pertinent to foster care and initiate a national collection process.

RECOMMENDATION 2.3

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories address the issues of providing full costs of foster care so that the combination of state and commonwealth support is sufficient to fully recompense foster carers in all aspects of providing foster care to meet the needs of the children.

RECOMMENDATION 2.4

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories develop ways to support foster carers to reduce instances of allegations and develop processes for handling allegations against foster carers including the national collection of statistics related to allegations.

RECOMMENDATION 3.1

That the Commonwealth and States/Territories prepare a set of standards to apply specifically to foster care to replace the current national baseline out-of-home care standards.

RECOMMENDATION 3.2

That a tiered national program evaluation of foster care provision be undertaken to provide accountability to the Australian community of the resources committed to foster care.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3

That governments commission and/or fund appropriate research into foster care as a means of further development of foster care in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 4.1

That the Commonwealth host a round table for representatives of peak national bodies predominantly involved in foster care along with senior Commonwealth and State/Territories representatives to discuss the recommendations of this report and to plan for action to occur.