



FOSTER CARE – THE CURRENT CONTEXT – 2005

Since its inception in 2000, AFCA has worked to improve the care of children and young people and the conditions of foster, relative and kinship carers and their families. The two reports, *Supporting Strong Parenting in the Australian Foster Care Sector* and *The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out of Home Care in Australia* provided the foundation for future actions to achieve these improvements. In 2002, AFCA produced the first of its annual publication of *Securing a Safe and Effective Foster Care System*. Reports on achieving the Priorities and Position Statements in this publication were prepared in 2003 and 2004 from information from the State/Territory Associations and presented to the AFCA Conferences in those years. In 2003 and 2004, conference participants were encouraged to complete a survey and the results of this, as well as other input from workshops at each Conference, have been taken into account in preparing each of the 2004 and 2005 editions of *Securing a Safe and Effective Foster Care System*.

It is very clear that the conditions of foster, relative and kinship carers and their families have not improved substantially over the past two years. There is evidence that Governments, Departments and Agencies may talk of improvement but not much is changing in the areas of most need. The Progress Report for 2004 (pp. 8-9) shows very clearly that the crucial areas of Support and Allegations are still serious problems even after they have been consistently identified as areas requiring urgent positive attention. The latest responses to the Position Statements indicate that progress on these issues is still inappropriate or inadequate.

There is also evidence that foster, relative and kinship carers are not being involved sufficiently in care practice and when they are involved their input is not treated seriously or with respect. The Progress Report indicates that one State/Territory stands out as doing very well. The reason for this appears to be that foster carers are involved and respected, and processes are in place to ensure that the rights of children and young people in care, and carers, can be protected by access to independent support when responding to or challenging decisions they consider to be inappropriate or wrong.

The Costs of Caring update for 2004 (pp.10-12) shows that, in spite of this report showing clearly that the fostering allowance/subsidy was totally inadequate across Australia in 2000, in some States/Territories it is now relatively worse in 2004 when taking CPI into account. This reinforces the perception that foster, relative and kinship carers are not held in high respect.

Many States and Territories continue to talk about improving their recruitment strategies to increase the number of foster carers. They do not focus attention on the retention of foster carers they already have and seem to continue to work on the basis there are always new people willing to become foster carers. The changing national and regional demographics, the stories shared with friends and neighbours, and the reflection in the media of the poor treatment of foster carers and children and young people must all counter the current belief that it doesn't matter how foster carers are treated because if they leave then new ones can be recruited to take their place. Unless States/Territories change this approach, the supply of new recruits will dry up even more quickly because of the unsatisfactory policies and practices now being pursued that fuel the poor publicity for foster care. While some see relative and kinship care as being the answer, if the same treatment of these carers also continues then problems will increase in this area as well in future policy and practice.

States/Territories are facing the real prospect that in the near future they will have to move to a fully paid workforce of foster carers at what will be a huge cost, and ultimately see a return to institutionalised care.

The good-will of volunteer foster carers has almost been destroyed by the current policies and attitudes of the States/Territories. It is probably time now to start planning for full cost caring as States/Territories appear not to have listened to calls to improve their policy and practice.