



Securing a Safe and Effective Foster Care System

Australian Foster Care Association
Priorities and Position Statements

2005

For Foster, Relative and
Kinship Care Across Australia

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SECURING A SAFE AND EFFECTIVE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

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FOREWORD

The backbone of alternative care options for the most vulnerable children and young people in Australia are the volunteer foster, relative and kinship carers. These carers volunteer their time, skills and commitment to children and young people to care for those who are unable to continue living in their own homes. As the number of notifications of child abuse and neglect continue to rise throughout the country, child protection systems struggle more and more to provide adequate protection and support for those most in need.

Unfortunately we now have an environment where:

- the needs of children and young people entering the alternative care system are far more demanding and complex than they have been previously;
- the number of children and young people needing to find a new home away from home continues to increase;
- the numbers of foster carers continues to drop with systems no longer able to breach the gap between the carer resignation rate and carer recruitment;
- the number of relative and kinship carers is rising but these carers are struggling more and more to cope with the demands of the placement;
- relative and kinship carers can not breach the gap left by departing volunteer foster carers; and
- the gap between the skills and talents of volunteers and the skills, experience and qualifications required for the frequently more complex placements is widening.

The most critical factor in sustaining a placement is support – support for children and young people to access required services, and support for carers providing the day to day care of the children and young people.

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) is the national peak body for foster, relative and kinship carers and enjoys the support of all State and Territory peak associations. AFCA and its State and Territory member associations are committed to working with governments to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people in care. To this end AFCA has developed a series of Policy and Position Statements to facilitate achievement of better practice and outcomes in alternative home based care. These statements have been adopted by all State and Territory associations and are included in this document. AFCA, in consultation with its members and carers throughout Australia, also establishes a set of national priorities on which to focus each year. These Policy and Position Statements and priorities are reviewed annually and reported on at the National Foster Care Conference. These progress reports are also included in this document.

AFCA works closely with all State and Territory Associations to support Australia's carers to provide the best possible care and protection for our most vulnerable children and young people. AFCA work is also supported by many committed professionals and researchers. On behalf of all carers. I would particularly like to thank Dr Frank Young for his support and assistance in the preparation of this document and commend it to you.

Bev Orr
President
Australian Foster Care Association

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

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.

AUSTRALIAN FOSTER CARE ASSOCIATION PRIORITIES FOR ACTION IN 2005

At the National Foster Care Conference in October 2004, AFCA members, State and Territory Foster Care Association representatives and foster carers reviewed AFCA's priorities and position statements for 2004 and contributed to setting the focus for action in 2005.

In general the Conference participants, the Conference Survey, and input from State and Territory Associations indicated that the priorities should remain except for the addition of one related to issues which affect foster families (Priority 2 in State and Territory Governments below) and the inclusion of foster/relative carers in the development and implementation of the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers.

This booklet, *Securing a Safe and Effective Foster Care System 2005*, will provide all Foster Care Associations with a focus for cohesive action across the country in raising through the various levels of government a number of issues that have been determined to be problematic for foster carers and the children and young people they care for regardless of where they live.

With this in mind, the following strategy has been agreed upon:

- Specific issues will be identified and raised with Directors-General/Department Secretaries nation wide by individual State and Territory Associations.
- The reports entitled *Supporting Strong Parenting in the Australian Foster Care Sector*, *The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out of Home Care in Australia* and *A Comparative Analysis of Carer Payments in Australia* should continue to guide State and Territory governments to achieve improvement.
- Specific issues will be raised with State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments with a focus on continuing the cooperative national approach shown in the development of National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers in 2003 and 2004. AFCA believes that more consistency in policy, practice, funding, and reporting across the nation will lead to better outcomes for children and young people in care.

The priority issues to be raised with Directors-General are:

1. Involvement of foster, relative and kinship carers in the development and implementation of the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers which includes the establishment of National Standards for foster care.
2. The retention of foster carers through respect for them and their work and the provision of appropriate support to meet the needs of the children they care for as well as the related needs of the foster family.
3. Processes developed and implemented to respond to allegations against foster carers which ensure the safety and well-being of the child while respecting the foster family and providing a system that is fair, just, timely and accountable.

The issues to be raised with State and Territory Governments are:

1. State/Territory Governments have the statutory responsibility for the care of children and young people under child protection orders and as the parent/guardian they have a duty to provide the funds to ensure that all the needs of these children and young people are met. Adequate weekly basic fostering allowances, other allowances, medical and therapeutic costs, together with appropriate respite for foster carers are essential to meet this statutory responsibility and Governments should not expect costs to be subsidised by the foster family.
2. State/Territory Governments must accept that they have responsibilities for the well-being and protection of foster carers and their families. This should include the following:
 - ensuring that foster carers are reimbursed for damage to or loss of property [of the carer or a third party] caused by the actions of a child or young person in care.
 - support for carers to operate within normally accepted occupational health and safety guidelines in caring for children especially those with a disability.
 - provision of legitimate counselling costs when foster families suffer because of the actions of children and young people in care or because of decisions by workers whether government or agency.
 - provision of legitimate legal expenses occurred in contesting decisions by government or agency workers that negatively impact on the caring situation.
3. Relative and kinship care are appropriate care options for children and young people under child protection orders but these carers should receive the same financial and other support as foster carers with a recognition that relative and kinship care can have complex and demanding intra-family and cultural issues as well.

The issues to be raised with the Commonwealth Government are:

1. Payment of full Family Tax Benefit, or Youth Allowance, and full Child Care Benefit for all children in foster care.
2. Responsible and adequate preparation for the transition of young people leaving care must include support for them to acquire the skills for independent living (including continuing to live with their foster family if that is the case) with an emphasis on entry into employment or further study and support to achieve this continuing beyond 18 years of age.
3. Continued Australian Government leadership in the implementation of the National Foster Care Plan and the development of appropriate responses to the other recommendations contained in the AFCA report entitled *Supporting Strong Parenting in the Foster Care Sector*.

To assist in seeking progress in these areas in 2005, AFCA has prepared this booklet which contains more detailed discussion of issues related to the above priorities.

AFCA is determined to work for progress together with each State and Territory. By working together to achieve the outcomes sought, we can make fostering more satisfying and achieve better outcomes for children and young people, foster carers and workers.

NATIONAL REPORT – AFCA PRIORITIES 2004

State and Territory Associations provided responses from their committees on the progress being made on the 2004 AFCA Priorities. Responses were graded either 'Satisfactory' or 'Unsatisfactory' and the table below provides the collation of these responses by Priority and then by State/Territory.

The table clearly shows that there are two major areas of concern – in relation to retention of foster carers and in allegations of abuse against foster carers.

These have been on-going concerns and the responses emphatically reinforce that positive progress is not being achieved. The future safety of children is at risk if sufficient placements are not available in foster care.

The response from Governments have not seen significant improvement in these areas despite Governments acknowledging the need for action and making positive comments about foster carers for many years. There seems to be an attitude that new foster carers can always be found and so support and respect for current ones is not a priority.

These two Priorities need to be the focus of AFCA action in all States/Territories and Nationally if children are to have placements available for them when needed. This applies to approved foster carers, relative and kinship carers because all suffer under the current conditions.

The other concern from the table is the wide variation across the States/Territories. Two States/Territories (D and E) have major concerns across all priorities and this must be negatively impacting on child protection in those, while two other States/Territories (B and G) are optimistic that the priorities are at least appearing to be addressed positively.

AFCA needs to focus on how States/Territories that are seen as very negative can be encouraged to work to change their approach for the well-being of children and foster/relative carers.

AFCA PRIORITIES 2004

The States/Territories have been randomly assigned letters A to H so they are not identified but response patterns can be seen individually and collectively.

Priorities with Directors-General	Satisfactory		Unsatisfactory	
	Letters	Count	Letters	Count
1. Implementation of the National Foster Care Plan, which includes the establishment of National Standards for foster care.	ABCG	4	DF	2
2. The retention of foster carers through respect for them and their work and the provision of appropriate support to meet the needs of the children they care for as well as the related needs of the foster family.	B	1	ACDEF G	6
3. Processes developed and implemented to respond to allegations against foster carers, which ensure the safety and well-being of the child while respecting the foster family; and providing a system that is fair, just, timely and accountable.	G	1	ABCDE F	6

Priorities with State/Territory Governments	Satisfactory		Unsatisfactory	
1. State/Territory Governments have the statutory responsibility for the care of children under child protection orders and as the corporate parent/guardian they have a duty to provide the funds to ensure that all the needs of children are met. Adequate weekly basic fostering allowances, other allowances, medical and therapeutic costs, together with appropriate respite for foster carers are essential to meet the statutory responsibility and Governments should not expect costs to be supplemented by the foster family.	BFG	3	ACDE	4
2. Use of the reports entitled <i>The Costs of Caring: A Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate Out of Home Care in Australia</i> and <i>Supporting Strong Parenting in the Foster Care Sector</i> should guide responses to support and related foster care issues.	ABFG	4	CDE	3
3. Relative/kinship care is an appropriate care option for children under child protection orders but these carers should receive the same financial and other support as foster carers with a recognition that relative/kinship care can have complex and demanding intra-family issues as well.	ABG	3	CDEF	4

Priorities with Commonwealth Government	Satisfactory		Unsatisfactory	
1. Payment of full Family Tax Benefit or Youth Allowance, and full Child Care Benefit for all children in foster care.	ABG	3	CDEF	4
2. Responsible and adequate preparation for the transition of young people leaving care must include support for them to acquire the skills for independent living (including continuing to live with their foster family if that is the case) with an emphasis on entry into employment or further study and support to achieve this continuing beyond 18 years of age.	BCFG	4	ADE	3
3. Continued Australian Government leadership in the implementation of the National Foster Care Plan and the development of appropriate responses to the other recommendations contained in the AFCA report entitled <i>Supporting Strong Parenting in the Foster Care Sector</i> .	ABCG	4	DEF	3
TOTALS		27		35
State/Territory Summary totals				
A.		5		4
B.		8		1
C.		3		6
D.		0		9
E.		0		8
F.		3		6
G.		8		1
H.				

NATIONAL REPORT – AFCA POSITIONS 2004

All State and Territory Associations provided responses from their committees on progress being made on the AFCA Positions 2004 and these have been collated in the table below.

There is a range of actions occurring across the twelve positions with some only being raised, some being considered, and some finalised. However, in each of these three categories, the unsatisfactory responses are around twice the satisfactory ones.

The responses show that eight of the twelve positions are a cause of serious concern.

Support for foster carers is of major importance as there is no doubt a direct link between this and retention of foster carers. The result for accountability is also linked to retention because where those involved feel that they are not being held to account for their actions, there is no reason for them to change their behaviour.

The National Plan For Foster Children, Young People and their Carers 2004-2006 has Support as one of its four areas for action. This Report shows that Support should be the major focus of progress for the Plan.

The negative results in relation to allegations of abuse; to financial conditions; to long term stability of care; to respect for carer privacy and information; and to foster carer rights all show that significant change in approach and attitude is required if foster care (including relative/kinship care) is to continue to be available for abused and neglected children.

The result for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care is also a cause for concern and indicates that it is still not receiving the attention it requires.

The totals for the different States /Territories indicate that one is doing very well while two are doing very badly and two are doing badly. AFCA will need to investigate why one is doing so much better and see what factors are at work to achieve this and then work with the poorer performing ones to see if some of these factors can be incorporated into their policy and practice.

AFCA will need to consider how the Positions can be progressed better in 2005 all across the nation but particularly in the ones identified as doing very badly and badly.

RESPONSES – AFCA POSITIONS 2004

The States/Territories have been randomly assigned letters A to H so they are not identified but response patterns can be seen individually and collectively.

	Position only raised but initial response is		Position is still being considered and progress is		Position has been decided and result overall is		Totals	
	Satis	Unsatis	Satis	Unsatis	Satis	Unsatis	Satis	Unsatis
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care	G	D	A	CF	--	B	2	4
Allegations of Abuse in Foster Care	CG	E	--	ABF	--	D	2	5
Financial Conditions in Foster Care	--	--	F	ABC	G	DE	2	5
Good Practice in Foster Care	--	A	CFG	BDE	--	--	3	4
Long-term Stability in Foster Care	--	D	G	ABC	F	E	2	5
Relative and Kinship Care	C	D	BG	E	--	AF	3	4
Support for Foster Carers	--	A	--	CDEFG	B	--	1	6
Training and Accreditation of Foster Carers	C	A	B	DEF	G	--	3	4
Accountability in Foster Care	--	AD	G	BCE	--	F	1	6
Children and Young People with a Disability in Foster Care	--	DF	ABG	CE	--	--	3	4
Foster Carer Personal and Identifying Information	--	D	--	AE	BG	CF	2	5
Foster Carers' Rights	--	A	B	CEF	G	D	2	5
TOTALS	5	13	14	33	7	11	26	57
States/Territories Totals	Satis	Unsatis						
A	2	10						
B	6	6						
C	4	8						
D	0	12						
E	0	11						
F	3	9						
G	11	1						
H								

THE COSTS OF CARING – UPDATED TO 1 JULY 2004

A Study in 2000 produced through research a range of costs of caring for foster children in a foster family and produced a table comparing the allowances paid by the States/Territories with the research findings. *The Costs of Caring: a Study of Appropriate Foster Care Payments for Stable and Adequate out of Home Care in Australia* showed that States and Territories allowances were far below the research recommendation. The following tables show that there have been some improvements but that some allowances have changed very little and some not at all in the four years following the Study and **all are still well below the research findings**.

COMPARISON OF 1 JULY 2004 STATE/TERRITORIES WEEKLY STANDARD SUBSIDIES WITH RESEARCH RECOMMENDED SUBSIDY (ADJUSTED FOR CPI FROM 2000 to 2004)

TABLE 1: The Foster Care Estimates (FCE) compared to the Standard Subsidy Levels for all States/Territories by age of the child (\$ per week) Notes: 1These figures are indicative only and must be read with regard to the impact of contingency payments 2 Increased rates as at 1 July 2004 with the recommended FC rate increased for CPI similar to Commonwealth indexation processes.

TABLE FOR 1 July 2004

Age	TAS	WA	NT	SA	VIC	ACT	QLD	NSW ²	FCE
0-1	124	90	108	89	113	112	124	175	173
2	124	90	108	89	113	112	130	175	-
3	84	90	108	89	113	112	130	175	172
4	84	90	108	89	113	112	130	175	-
5	84	90	117	96	113	127	130	175	-
6	107	90	117	96	113	127	152	175	185
7	107	113	117	96	113	127	152	175	-
8	107	113	140	103	118	149	152	175	-
9	107	113	140	103	118	149	152	175	-
10	125	113	140	103	118	149	152	175	217
11	125	113	140	103	134	149	184	175	-
12	125	113	158	125	134	171	184	175	-
13	125	136	158	125	180	171	184	175	-
14	165	136	158	125	180	171	184	175	267/273 ¹
15	165	136	190	153	180	207	184	175	-
16	84	136	190	153	180	207	174	175	-
17	84	136	190	153	180	207	174	175	-

Notes: All dollar amounts rounded.
 (1) Amount of \$267 applies to a boy aged 14. Amount of \$273 applies to a girl aged 14.
 (2) NSW subsidy includes many contingencies paid separately in other States/Territories

Table 1 presents an overview of the standard subsidy payments for all States and Territories compared to the estimated basic, everyday costs specific to fostering as determined by this study. In providing the standard subsidy, States and Territories generally expect this to cover basic living costs associated with housing, food, power and gas, transport to and from daily activities, basic recreation, standard ongoing school requirements and the bulk of ongoing clothing. Some States expect other items to be

paid for out of the standard subsidy, for example the NSW standard subsidy is expected to cover health, education and also childcare.

Both current and recommended standard subsidy payments do not cover additional child related costs that are needed to fully provide for the child or young person. These include things such as medicines, disability aids, school functions and camps, tutoring, ongoing sporting and recreational activities, dental, medical and therapeutic work, etc. Currently, in some circumstances, States and Territories may make these additional payments when a cost is incurred. These are known as contingency payments. **However, it should be noted that most of these are discretionary payments, and the report found payment to be both arbitrary and slow.**

Table 2 below shows the improved allowances in States/Territories and the real improvement in allowances after adjusting for CPI over the period from the Study in 2000 to 1 July 2004. To get the **real improvement** by States/Territories, the CPI adjustment calculated for the research finding is subtracted from the improved allowances of the States/Territories. This shows that between 2000 and 2004:

- ACT and QLD have improved in all 17 age groups after CPI adjustment
- VIC has increased in 13 age groups after CPI adjustment
- TAS has increased in 12 age groups after CPI adjustment (clothing is now included in allowance so figures have been adjusted for this)
- WA has decreased in 11 age groups after CPI adjustment
- NT has decreased 12 age groups after CPI adjustment
- NSW and SA have decreased in all age 17 groups after CPI adjustment.

The Table shows that the situation has deteriorated significantly in four States/Territories and that where there are real improvements after adjusting for CPI, they are small in comparison to the significant improvements recommended by the Study in 2000.

While money is not the only determinant for retention of foster carers and is only one aspect of support that foster carers request, the picture provided by Table 2 is clear indication that the States/Territories are not doing enough to support and retain foster carers. While Commonwealth benefits do provide some assistance to some foster carers in addition to State/Territory allowances, they are not available to support all children in care. The Commonwealth and States/Territories need to resolve their issues quickly if they are going to continue to use foster care to protect and care for abused and neglected children.

The National Plan includes the financial support for children and young people in care as an area to be addressed. This should be a priority for action in the National Plan for both States/Territories and Commonwealth.

CHANGES IN ALLOWANCES OVER PERIOD 2000 TO 2004 AND REAL CHANGES AFTER CPI ADJUSTMENT

Table 2 shows the increases in allowances made by each State/Territory over the period; the increase in the research findings (FCE) which is the CPI increase for the same period; and the real increase in State/Territory allowances (shown by [+] or [-]) when the CPI increase in the research findings is applied to the comparable State/Territory figures.

Age	TAS	WA	NT	SA	VIC	ACT	QLD	NSW	CPI incr
0-1	32 [+16]	11 [-5]	11 [-5]	4 [-12]	23 [+12]	20 [+4]	31 [+17]	nil [-16]	16
2	32 [+16]	11 [-5]	11 [-5]	4 [-12]	36 [+20]	20 [+4]	30 [+14]	nil [-16]	-
3	1 [-15]	11 [-5]	11 [-5]	4 [-12]	36 [+20]	20 [+4]	30 [+14]	nil [-16]	16
4	1 [-15]	11 [-5]	11 [-5]	4 [-12]	36 [+20]	20 [+4]	30 [+14]	nil [-16]	-
5	1 [-15]	11 [-5]	16 [0]	5 [-11]	36 [+20]	22 [+6]	30 [+14]	nil [-16]	-
6	22 [+5]	11 [-6]	16 [-1]	5 [-12]	36 [+19]	22 [+5]	31 [+14]	nil [-17]	17
7	21 [+4]	34 [+17]	16 [-1]	5 [-12]	36 [+19]	22 [+5]	31 [+14]	nil [-17]	-
8	21 [+4]	34 [+17]	20 [+3]	5 [-12]	25 [+8]	26 [+9]	31 [+14]	nil [-17]	-
9	21 [+4]	34 [+17]	20 [+3]	5 [-12]	25 [+8]	26 [+9]	31 [+14]	nil [-17]	-
10	36 [+16]	34 [+14]	20 [0]	5 [-15]	25 [+5]	26 [+6]	31 [+11]	nil [-20]	20
11	36 [+16]	34 [+14]	20 [0]	5 [-15]	22 [+2]	26 [+6]	39 [+19]	nil [-20]	-
12	25 [+5]	34 [+14]	22 [-2]	7 [-13]	22 [+2]	30 [+10]	39 [+19]	nil [-20]	-
13	25 [+5]	18 [-2]	22 [-2]	7 [-13]	23 [+3]	30 [+10]	39 [+19]	nil [-20]	-
14	55 [+30]	18 [-7]	22 [-3]	7 [-18]	23 [-2]	30 [+5]	39 [+14]	nil [-25]	25
15	55 [+30]	18 [-7]	27 [-2]	8 [-17]	23 [-2]	36 [+11]	39 [+14]	nil [-25]	-
16	- 6 [-31]	18 [-7]	27 [-2]	8 [-17]	23 [-2]	36 [+11]	37 [+12]	nil [-25]	-
17	-6 [-31]	18 [-7]	27 [-2]	8 [-17]	23 [-2]	36 [+11]	37 [+12]	nil [-25]	-

*Notes: All dollar amounts rounded.
Tasmania has now included clothing into allowance and so figures have been adjusted to allow this to be reflected in outcomes.*

NOTE: States/Territories have discretionary payments for specific purposes and most have an allowance when a child is first placed in care to help with initial starting-up costs. Allowances for respite, disability, medical and behavioural issues also exist.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Care

Position:

AFCA recognises SNAICC as the National body responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care and is committed to working with and supporting SNAICC in the raising of issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers and children and young people in the care system. AFCA believes that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, including relatives, should be provided with the same level of training, and financial and non-financial support as other carers. Wherever possible, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people needing a placement must be placed within their own community.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement, but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, Indigenous carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are over-represented in the care system throughout the country. This situation requires both urgent attention and special culturally appropriate programs to address the particular issues faced by this group.

Acknowledgements:

1. The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the care system is unacceptable but addressing this must not leave children in abusive situations.
2. The current problems faced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are the responsibility of us all.
3. Early intervention and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is crucial.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers need to be assessed with recognition of their cultural practices and within their community norms and boundaries.
5. Notwithstanding that abuse can occur in any community, no child should endure abuse within those cultural norms. Every child has a right to be safe and secure.
6. Despite every best effort to place an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, some children and young people may not be able to be placed with appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers. Non-Indigenous foster carers should complete a cultural orientation program.
7. Aboriginal children can move around within their family often and this can lead to more damage/trauma.

Issues:

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers require training, assessment and supports that are culturally sensitive, culturally appropriate, and recognise the life experiences and community practices of the people.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers need to be recruited, trained, assessed and supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, agencies or community councils. They should have an assigned worker to maintain contact and supervision of placement, to provide support to both carer and child/young person, and to help in meeting standards of care.
3. Financial and non-financial support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers should be the same as that afforded to other foster carers.
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers will commonly be relatives of the children and young people placed with them and this in itself requires special support and understanding
5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers should be included in the decision-making regarding placement and movement of children and young people in the care system.
6. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle should be strictly adhered to but if such a placement is not possible or leaves the child exposed to those who abused the child, then a sensitive alternate placement should occur.

7. National genealogical tracking should be part of standard casework for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care.
8. There needs to be recognition that issues facing remote, rural, urban and traditional people are very different, requiring different solutions, programs, sensitivities.
9. Children in care should be supported to gain cultural knowledge and experience their culture.
10. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers need to be provided with opportunities to attend training and discussion forums within their State and nationally to exchange ideas and experiences, to gain support from other carers.
11. Non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers need to be supported to gain cultural knowledge and have access to appropriate training and cultural support structures.

Accountability in Foster Care

Position:

Children and young people who have been taken into care because of abuse and neglect in their own family are entitled to be safe from abuse and neglect by the system, workers and Foster Families. This means there needs to be effective accountability protocols for the system (Government Departments and Non-Government Organisations), workers (Government and Non-Government), and Foster Families, which should be open and transparent and have consequences for any actions, which significantly harm a child or young person or significantly impact negatively on their wellbeing.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to sector accountability. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Accountability needs to be related to the safety and well being of the child. The needs of the child must be paramount and any action taken must be in the best interests of the child. Significant harm should be identified as something that threatens the safety of the child/young person rather than the quality of the care provided.

Acknowledgements:

1. Alternative Care is a difficult and complex area where it is identified that actions need to be taken in context
2. Foster Carers provide care 24 hours a day 7 days a week for children and young people who can be damaged and present on-going challenges that need to be addressed in a family situation to help them progress.
3. Workers have a responsibility to children, birth families and foster families to ensure that any process is fair, transparent and equitable and has the best interests of the child as focus.
4. There need to be accountability processes that ensure government funding is being used effectively.

Issues:

1. The system needs to have policies and practices that are suggestive of good practice and recognize the diversity of families and the difficult roles of workers and foster families.
2. Workers should be adequately trained and supported to provide children and young people and foster families with support and with good decisions related to the care of the children and young people in the foster family.
3. Foster families should be adequately trained and supported to provide quality care for the children and young people in their care.
4. Foster families and workers need to accept that there has to be an appropriate system of monitoring their actions and the care of the children and young people so that the community as a whole can have confidence in the foster care system.
5. Foster families should be able to demonstrate that allowances provided to care for the children have been used to provide quality care. This should involve visits and discussions with foster families and children and young people to monitor and enhance the quality of care provided. (Note: this does not include itemised accounts but the range and quality of resources and activities provided for the child.)
6. Government has a responsibility to ensure adequate funds are available to provide the appropriate services to enable the system, workers and foster families to meet their responsibilities.
7. Government has a whole-of-government responsibility to ensure that all Government Departments provide quality resources and support to children and young people in care and their foster families.

Allegations of Abuse in Foster Care

Position:

All parties in foster care share a responsibility to ensure that children and young people in placement are provided with quality care free from abuse. At all times the safety of the child or young person, and the foster family, is paramount.

The raising and addressing of concerns and allegations of abuse in foster care must be acknowledged as a stressful time for all those involved. The principles of openness, honesty, dignity, fairness, due process and equity must apply. Investigations of allegations must be conducted in the least intrusive manner whilst ensuring that they are thorough and accurate and detailed information is obtained.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to the raising of issues or allegations. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Allegations can occur in foster care due simply to the nature of the work undertaken and the experiences of the children and young people requiring care. A range of issues may be raised involving the day-to-day activities of the foster family; the standard of care afforded the child or the harm or risk of harm to the child. Foster carers are particularly vulnerable and worldwide research indicates that the longer carers are in the system, the higher their chances of being notified to the authorities.

Acknowledgements:

1. Foster carers need to be informed and educated in relation to the raising of concerns and allegations against them, their rights and responsibilities in these circumstances, and the processes that will be followed.
2. Foster care families are not required to be “super” or “perfect” families. They are “real” families and will experience many of the disagreements, competition for attention, juggling of everyone’s needs, medical crises, tantrums, etc. as any other family.
3. Some children and young people coming into care, or their parents, have a history of making allegations in order to break down a placement. They need to be assisted to understand the consequences of their behaviour.
4. Foster carers are not the only party responsible for the protection of the child or young person and the provision of quality care. This can only be achieved if all parties work collaboratively in a supportive and open relationship where responsibility is shared. Failure of workers to respond to requests for assistance or failure to provide agreed support must be taken into account in any investigation.

Issues:

1. Foster carers need to be informed and educated in relation to the raising of concerns and allegations against them, their rights and responsibilities in these circumstances and the processes that will be followed.
2. The process and framework used to address concerns and allegations in foster care must be published and made readily accessible to foster carers.
3. Concerns and allegations raised need to be treated with sensitivity, and a process undertaken that ensures the protection of the child or young person and the protection and dignity of the foster carer/s.
4. Decision-making regarding how to approach the raising and assessment of concerns involving foster carers must have a consistent framework.
5. Where possible, concerns need to be raised in the least intrusive manner, that is, as part of general casework. Where this is not possible, low key, informal assessment needs to occur. Only in the most serious of cases should foster carers be subjected to a full formal assessment that may also include members of other Departments such as the police.
6. Foster carers, in all cases except where criminal activity may have occurred, have a right to be informed in person or by telephone and then in writing that concerns have been raised, specifically what these are, how they are to be addressed and within what timeframe.

7. Foster carers have a right to access legal advice and support and to be assisted by an advocate.
8. During any process where concerns are raised, foster carers should have free access to independent and departmental counselling, and support for themselves and the children in their care, access to their State or Territory Association, family, friends and other members of their support network.
9. Where allegations are to be addressed with the foster carer in a formal way, this should be conducted by an independent authority or person not directly involved with the foster carer or the child or young person in placement.
10. Children should not automatically be removed from a placement. Removal should only occur in extreme cases.
11. Foster carers should not automatically have their license/approval withdrawn. Withdrawal should only occur in serious cases. Additional training and support should first be offered. Discussions should occur as to the most appropriate placement types. All carers having their license/approval altered or withdrawn must have appeal rights.
12. Foster carers are to be acknowledged for the difficult work they do and have the opportunity to defend themselves against any concerns or allegations raised in a way that is fair and non-judgemental.
13. Communication during the raising of a concern or allegation must be verbally clear and extensive in detail and must also be made available to the foster carer in writing.
14. In all interactions with foster carers over concerns or allegations, those making the assessment must take into consideration the effects of the contribution or lack of response by other parties to the situation. That is, has the placement agreement been adhered to, have requests from the foster carer for support and services been responded to, have offers of assistance been made etc.
15. Timelines for the commencement and completion of any process must be clear and should be within 24 hours of the receipt of information for commencement and not longer than 30 working days for completion (except in exceptional circumstances).
16. Outcomes of meetings and assessments should be well documented and should focus on future development rather than punitive measures.
17. Copies of all reports and outcome documents must be provided to the foster carer within the 30 working days timeframe for completion.
18. The outcome of an investigation should be advised to all parties interviewed as a part of the investigation process. This is particularly important in instances of non-substantiation.
19. Copies of reports signed by the foster carer and as received by the foster carer must also be filed on the foster carer file, and on the file of the child or young person to whom the concerns or allegations relate.
20. Foster carers must be informed of their right to appeal any information contained in the reports or any action resulting from the assessment. They must be assisted in accessing their rights of appeal.
21. Follow-up with the foster carer and the child or young person must occur and should include the offer of free debriefing or counselling by an independent person.
22. Financial costs associated with legal advice, lost income from work, babysitting costs, counselling etc should be met by the Department where the concerns or allegations are unsubstantiated. Foster carers must be informed of their right to claim financial outlays.

Children and Young People With a Disability in Foster Care

Position:

Children and young people with disabilities in the care of the State/Territory have the same rights as all young people in care. In consideration of their special needs they have the right to adequate support services and financial assistance to enable them to learn and participate in family activities and mainstream society to their maximum potential. Foster families caring for these children have a right to adequate support services including financial assistance and training to enable the provision of consistent quality care and stability for the child/young person in their care.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognized Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to children and young people with disabilities, who are in care. This statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people with disabilities, in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers, social workers and others involved in the delivery of services to children/young people with disabilities, in care.
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Caring for children and young people with a disability who may have experienced abuse and neglect requires specialized care from highly skilled and well-supported foster carers.

Acknowledgements:

1. The Disability Discrimination Act applies to children and young people in care.
2. Duty of Care should be a balance between safety and the right of the individual to the experiences and risks of normal life.
3. Most foster children with disabilities are in long-term care. A home-based care placement is the preferred option.
4. Foster families require support services and financial assistance for the young person well past the age of 18 years until he/she is ready to move to alternate accommodation.
5. In the case of the foster family taking guardianship support services and financial assistance should continue.
6. Where possible and within their capacity the child/young person should contribute to decision making about all aspects of their lives.
7. The needs of foster children with disabilities are often better understood and addressed by experienced foster carers and therapists than by workers, who do not generally have the specialised training required in this area.
8. Families caring for foster children with disabilities are often financially disadvantaged due to their contribution to the cost of equipment, household alterations and extra costs incurred in enabling the foster child to fully participate in family life. The additional time associated with caring for a person with a disability reduces the opportunity for paid employment.
9. Foster carers are not covered by Occupational Health and Safety Guidelines.
10. Caring for children with disabilities automatically brings additional stress to foster carers and their family.

Issues:

1. Government disability services are not consistent between states, agencies and workers.
2. Existing support structures are not adequate. Whatever support is needed for the foster family to maintain the placement should be provided:
 - a. Adequate respite hours;
 - b. Financial assistance for home alterations and additions, accessible vehicle and equipment; and
 - c. Holistic case planning is required to identify individual specific needs and support services.

3. Additional training and accreditation for foster carers should be mandatory and appropriate to the child/young person in their care.
 - a. Independent living skills need to be taught at whatever level the child/young person is able to participate in.
 - b. The child/young person needs opportunities to participate in activities outside of the foster family to prepare for independent living.
4. Government policy assumes birth families are financially responsible for their adult children in education up to the age of 25, but generally does not continue to support foster children in the same circumstance.
5. Young people may not complete their education and may never be able to live independently. Therefore they will need ongoing financial and other support.
6. In some states support for foster families is often reduced or withdrawn at 16 years of age when the child/young person becomes eligible for the Federal disability allowance.
7. Foster Carers, educational staff, therapists and workers should collaborate to create Case Plans and Individual Education Plans with regular reviews.
8. When developing Plans for the child/young person all parties need to work respectfully together.
9. A right of choice exists for the child/young person with a disability to attend the most appropriate educational facility, whether a special or mainstream school.
10. Young people with disabilities should have equality of opportunity to continue into tertiary education.

Financial Conditions in Foster Care

Position:

As volunteers, foster carers give much of their time, home and personal resources to the children and young people who come to live with them. Foster carers should not be required to subsidise from their own income or savings, the care of these children and young people. These children and young people are the financial and moral responsibility of the State, and as such should be fully financially supported by the State and Commonwealth governments. This will ensure that children and young people in care have the same opportunities as their peers.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to the financial conditions of foster carers. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Caring for children and young people is expensive, and more so for those who have experienced abuse or neglect in their early life and have additional needs. The financial support for children and young people placed with foster carers is the joint responsibility of the States and the Commonwealth.

Acknowledgements:

1. Foster carers are volunteers and are currently heavily subsidising the care of children and young people across the nation.
2. Foster carers do not receive a salary or regular income from foster care.
3. Foster carers do not wish to be paid in a professional sense for the work they do (except in some specific cases), but cannot sustain the current level of costs associated with being a foster carer.
4. Inequity exists across the nation in regard to reimbursement rates to foster carers.
5. Some foster carers are deemed ineligible for various Commonwealth payments due to income/assets testing, when children or young people in care are deemed to be the dependents of their foster carers rather than of the State.
6. All foster carers should be held accountable in a broad sense (not itemised accounting but rather the range and quality of resources and activities provided) for the monies they receive for the care of the children and young people placed with them.
7. Foster carer reimbursement must continue NOT to be classed as income to maintain tax-exempt status.

Issues:

1. Fostering allowance and clothing allowance need to be paid to foster carers immediately a placement commences, not in retrospect.
2. An upfront placement payment needs to be paid
3. Reimbursement of additional costs to foster carers needs to be timely, adequate, documented, accessible, transparent in process and consistently applied. These need to be kept to a minimum and the majority of payments, once agreed to, should occur on a regular cycle
4. Assessments of the needs of highly challenging children needs to be completed quickly and additional financial costs associated with their care agreed upon.
5. Dual payment of foster carers for the same child or young person needs to occur where the child or young person is placed in planned respite care as part of case management or in respite so that the full-time or usual foster carer can take a break before resuming an on-going caring role.
6. Costs, apart from on-going daily needs, involved in the education of a foster child should be paid (eg: camps, tutoring, text books, equipment, fees, representing school, senior formal etc).
7. Children and young people in care need to have free access to ambulance transport, preschool, kindergarten and childcare based on the child's Health Care Card recipient status.
8. Funds need to be made available for children and young people in care to achieve social and physical development through attendance at such activities as drama, music, ballet, sport, tutoring etc.
9. Family Tax Benefit and Child Care Benefit (or an equivalent payment) should be automatically available for all children and young people in care.

Foster Carers' Personal and Identifying Information

Position:

Foster carers have a duty of care to ensure that all foster children, their own children and other family members are safe. When foster children join a foster family, strategies need to be put in place to ensure the safety of everyone in the foster family unit.

To satisfy the information needs of the birth family when a child is taken into care, non-identifying information such as the make up of the foster family unit, the number of children and adults in the home, the type of school the child will be attending (if different), whether the foster parent/s work in general terms, special cultural or Indigenous reassurances, etc should be provided to the birth family in the first instance.

The release by a worker of any foster family's identifying or personal information is only to be made with the written approval of the foster carers after they have been provided with a full assessment of the risks associated with such a disclosure, and it has been determined by the worker that the release of the identifying information would not create any risk to the child or foster family, and/or risk in terms of placement stability. The final decision on release is the right of the foster carers not the worker/system.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement, but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to the release of foster carer' personal and identifying information. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Appropriate protection of foster families from community risk factors;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, birth families and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Many foster children come from unsafe environments. The release of personal and identifying information about a foster family has the potential to put the child in care and that foster family at risk, both whilst the foster child is in the home and after the child has left the home. Information about the foster family must NOT be shared with third parties, including birth families, unless it is approved by the foster carers after they have received clear written advice that there is NO current /potential risk associated with the release of the information.

Acknowledgements:

1. Foster carers are volunteers and are not paid as employees to provide foster care.
2. Foster carers volunteer their homes, skills and time to care for the community's abused, neglected and 'at risk' children.
3. Foster carers do NOT automatically volunteer to waive the privacy rights they enjoy in our society as normal, law abiding citizens.
4. When a child or young person comes into care, their birth family will seek information about where their child is. Foster carers are aware that there are often good reasons for the birth families of children in care to be provided with certain information about foster carers in order to re-assure the birth parent/s that their child is being properly cared for.

Issues:

1. Foster carer identifying information is often included in documents that may be passed onto third parties without the knowledge of the foster family. Sharing this information can jeopardise the safety and protection of the foster family unit both whilst the foster child is in the foster home and after the foster child has left.
2. Foster family information can appear on Court documents which are passed to other parties without an appreciation of the implications for the foster carer family. This can be partly addressed by substituting the department or agency address or telephone number in place of the foster family's address and telephone numbers on such documents.
3. Workers must not release or share foster carer information with third parties, including birth families, without first obtaining the written approval of the foster carer family.

4. To enable foster carers to make an informed decision, the worker must provide them with a written assessment of the risks associated with releasing information and must be held accountable for that assessment outcome.
5. Assessments or determinations made to release personal or identifying information about a foster family without the full participation of the foster carer/ family in the process, and the carers providing their written approval to the release of the information, on a case by case basis must not occur.
6. The release of any personal or identifying carer information to any third parties, or for purposes other than what the information was originally collected for, without the written approval of the foster carer/s concerned must not occur.
7. The Federal Privacy Commissioner's eleven Information Privacy Principles that apply to certain government agencies, the non-government and health sectors and the ten National Privacy Principles should also apply to foster carers.

Foster Carers' Rights

Position:

The role of the foster carer carries much responsibility, but often without equivalent rights. When rights and responsibilities are unbalanced, issues and concerns can arise which can impact on the quality and availability of foster care. Foster carers' rights need acknowledgement to ensure quality care and stability for children/young people in care, and the safety and stability for the foster family.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to foster carers' rights.

This statement has been produced to encourage -

- Retention of foster carers throughout Australia
- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care.
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, workers, children/young people in care and all other stakeholders
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Foster carers are essential and valuable members of an important team concerned with the well being of children/young people in foster care and as such require indisputable rights in relation to their role, their person and their family.

Acknowledgements:

1. Foster carers have the right to be treated with dignity and respect by all staff involved in the case management of the child/young person in care.
2. Foster carers have a right to be an advocate/representative for the child/young person in their care. (Exceptions would be where the child is lodging a complaint against the foster carer concerned or where the carer's capacity to advocate is hindered by a conflict between their interests and those of the child.)
3. Foster carers have a common law Duty Of Care to the child in their care and Departments/NGOs/CSOs/agencies have a Duty of Care towards foster families to ensure no foreseeable harm comes to them in caring for a child, and that the foster families have the necessary and appropriate support and financial assistance to carry out their role.
4. Foster carers have a right to information and training in relation to the rights of children placed in their care including: appropriate standards of care, freedom of expression, involvement in decision-making that affects them, making complaints about the standard of services provided by the Departments/NGOs/CSOs/agencies, and having complaints resolved in an approved and legal way.

Issues

1. Foster carers have a right to:
2. Be treated with consideration, respect for personal dignity, and privacy.
3. Be included as a valued member of the service team.
4. Receive support services which assist in the care of the child in their home including an open and timely response from department/agency personnel.
5. Be provided with all information regarding the child that will impact on the child, members of their family, or their family life throughout the time they care for the foster child. In particular, they will be provided with an assessment of risk associated with the release of personal/identifying information before making a decision about whether to approve this release.
6. Have input into the case plan (including any permanency plan) for the child in their care.
7. Assurance of safety for their family by having the sole right to approve the release of their personal/identifying information to third parties including birth families on a case by case basis.
8. Assistance in dealing with loss and separation when a child leaves their home.
9. Be informed of all agency policies and procedures that relate to their role as foster carer.
10. Receive training that will enhance their skills and ability to cope as foster carers
11. Be informed of how to receive services and reach personnel on a 24-hour day 7 days a week basis.

12. Be granted a reasonable plan for relief from the role of foster carer.
13. Confidentiality regarding issues that arise in their foster family
14. Not be discriminated against on the basis of religion, race, colour, creed, sex, national origins, age, or physical handicap.
15. Receive evaluation and feedback on their role as foster carers.

Good Practice in Foster Care

Position:

Foster carers and workers in the sector must strive for continuous improvement of service to children and young people in the care of the State. Good practice must be the minimum acceptable practice in foster care and better practice shared across the sector on a regular basis. Governments must be encouraged to commit resources to the researching, piloting and implementation of programs and projects designed to improve outcomes for children and young people in care and that support the notion of developing partnerships. Our ultimate goal is to achieve best practice in the provision of care for all children and young people in care.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to good practice. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- The retention of foster families as active carers;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Good practice in foster care predominately depends on the commitment of all parties involved to work on issues of partnership. Where good practice occurs, the outcomes for children and young people in care are significantly improved. Further, the work satisfaction levels of both workers and foster carers increases.

Acknowledgements:

1. Good practice is occurring around the nation and needs to be acknowledged, shared and celebrated.
2. Good practice needs to appear in the simplest of tasks through to the management of extremely complex tasks.
3. Good practice is the responsibility of all parties within the sector.
4. Evidence based good practice from overseas needs to be researched and, where appropriate, strived for in Australia.

Issues:

1. The achievement of good practice needs a commitment by all stakeholders. An open, honest and trusting relationship between them is needed to allow good practice to develop.
2. Good practice can only be achieved where parties have a mutual respect for each other's roles and are committed to equality of power.
3. Good practice includes:
 - recognising the role, expertise, life skills and contribution of foster carers, and the treatment of foster carers as an equal member of the corporate parent/caring team;
 - the children and young people in care are involved in decision making concerning their lives wherever possible and appropriate;
 - actions and interactions such as how people are spoken to, the level of information shared, open and honest communication and the provision of support;
 - adherence to the requirements of legislation and commitment to policy such as placement agreements, planning meetings, reimbursement of claims, handling of concerns and allegations, renewal of approval, etc;
 - commitment to responsibilities such as the development of children's life histories, encouragement of positive family contact, dealing with the emotions and behaviours of children in placement, etc;
 - improvement in learning such as ongoing training, attendance at seminars, support groups, etc; and
 - recognition of the role of others, such as the sharing of positives and negatives, joining in social events, etc.

4. For the future development of good practice, the following are required:
 - a system for the collection and publication of good practice from the eyes of all parties involved;
 - gatherings focussing on the showcasing of good practice;
 - shared practice workshops; and
 - funding to pilot and report on programs and projects to improve outcomes for children and young people in care.

Long Term Stability in Foster Care

Position:

Children and young people in the care of the State have a right to return to the care of their family where this is safe and appropriate. Where this cannot be achieved within a reasonable time period, they have a right to secure, continuous, long-term care where they can achieve stability and have the best possible chance to grow into happy, mature, responsible adults.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to permanency or long-term stability. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Many children and young people entering the care system often drift with decisions made only about their short-term care. Permanency or long-term stability for children and young people in care has an impact on the identity of the child or young person. It is one of the most significantly important variables in the success and ongoing stability of placement for a child entering the care system from a young age. Decisions about stability are made in a variety of ways across the country.

Acknowledgements:

1. The decision for a child or young person to remain in care in the long-term is a serious one, but nonetheless one that needs to be made so that planning with direction can occur.
2. The focus of the decision to place a child or young person in long-term care must be focussed on the child, not the biological parents. Wherever possible and developmentally appropriate, the children or young people should be involved in decision making about their care.
3. Decisions such as that for a child or young person to remain in care long-term should not be made by front line workers but by senior staff. Following such a decision, the role of front line staff would be to consistently implement the plan of stability.
4. Governments should have the right to step in and remove the decision making power from parents where this is necessary to ensure the long-term stability of a child or young person.
5. The needs of foster carers and children or young people in care are best met in a system that clearly differentiates the provision of short-term care and long-term care.

Issues:

Efforts for the reconnection of children or young people with their families should occur at an intensive level from when the child or young person is taken into care. If progress is occurring, then efforts for reunification should continue. When progress is not acceptable and reunification cannot occur, a decision must be made on a stable, long-term placement. If a second or subsequent child is taken into care from the same family, decisions on reunification or long-term care should be fast tracked.

1. Once a decision for long-term care has been made, careful selection of the foster carers must be undertaken to ensure the needs of the child or young person are matched to the strengths of the carer. (Carers include foster carers, relative carers, guardians and adoptive parents.)
2. Where foster carers are designated short-term or long-term care providers, consideration should be given to continuing the current placement and altering the status of the foster carer should this be an option supported by all parties.
3. Contact between the child or young person in long-term care and their family should be encouraged and arranged between the carer and the parent wherever possible but needs to be in the best interests of the child. Consideration needs to be given to the frequency and type of contact given the long-term nature of the placement and the goal of stability for the child or young person.
4. Long-term care should be supported financially in the same way as other care placements.
5. Worker support should be available to the carer and child or young person when needed.
6. At all times, young people in care, and where appropriate, children, should be consulted about their placement including any discussion of reunification.

Relative and Kinship Care

Position:

Relative care, sometimes also known as kinship care, of children requiring alternative care should be encouraged and fully supported. Where relative care is considered to be the best option for the child, the relative carers and the child should have full access to support and services as if they were in mainstream foster care. This should include financial and personal support for both the relative carer and the child or young person. Relative carers should be trained, accredited and accountable for the provision of a quality service, similar to accredited or approved foster carers.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to relative care. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Relative care occurs when a child or young person is taken into care and placed with a person approved or nominated under state legislation as a relative carer (sometimes also referred to as kin or kinship carer). A relative carer may be a person:

- To whom the child is related by blood or marriage; or
- Who is a member of the child's community; or
- Who is considered as family or a close friend; or
- Someone with whom the child has a previous significant connection.

Acknowledgements:

1. Relative care is the preferred option for placing a child or young person taken into care if a safe and appropriate placement is available and sufficient support is provided.
2. Placements with relative carers can occur prior to any approved training occurring and if the relative carers have no previous experience of fostering, they should be trained, assessed and accredited to ensure that the placement is appropriate for the child or young person and also for the relative carers as soon after the placement as possible.

Issues:

1. Formal initial and on-going training and approval/accreditation should be available for relative carers with the same support and conditions as for accredited or approved foster carers. This includes renewal of accreditation or approval.
2. A suitable process for providing initial information (including written, video, or computer based materials) needs to be available and used at the time of placement (or beforehand if possible).
3. Relative carers should have an assigned worker to maintain contact with both relative carers and the child or young person in care in order to provide support and to help in meeting standards of care which will be monitored as for other foster carers.
4. Support should be provided to assist with sensitive intra-family issues as well as to facilitate any child-specific and on-going training required.
5. Financial support should include all relevant State subsidies/allowances and respite as well as all Commonwealth Benefits available to accredited or approved foster carers.
6. Relative carers should be aware of the standards of care and accountability required of them and these should be no less than for approved or accredited foster carers.
7. Relative carers provide care for a child requiring protection and should have access to the same support, training, processes and rights as approved or accredited foster carers as well as meeting the same responsibilities.
8. If relative carers are subject to an allegation, it should be treated in the same respectful and open process as for accredited or approved foster carers.
9. Relative carers should be encouraged to join a local support group of foster carers and to become a member of their State Foster Care Association.

Support for Foster Carers

Position:

Foster carers are volunteers who give of their time, skill, love, home, personal resources and family to care for children and young people unable to live at home with their own families. Foster carers commit to these children and young people 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In order to provide a high level of quality care, foster carers need the assistance and support of a network of people. This network needs to be readily accessible and immediately responsive to the foster carer.

Commentary:

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to support for foster carers. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

Support for foster carers encompasses a wide range of areas. It can include everything from a listening ear when needed, to the commitment of funds to undertake major extensions to a home to facilitate placement of a sibling group.

Acknowledgements:

1. Foster carers are volunteers.
2. Foster carers are not paid for what they do.
3. Foster carers are multi-skilled people and whilst many do not have a formal qualification, their life experience is invaluable.
4. When a foster carer contacts a departmental worker, agency worker, or foster care association, they are looking for genuine understanding and consideration for the difficult tasks they face.
5. Current levels of support to foster carers are inadequate and the continuation of the fostering system is at risk if this is not addressed as a matter of urgency.

Issues:

1. Foster carers are significantly under resourced in the area of support.
2. Foster carers need support in the form of:
 - prompt and comprehensive responses when a foster carer contacts a worker for a decision/solution/advice/answer
 - full re-imburement of foster child related costs;
 - access to appropriate support on a 24 hour basis;
 - regular respite and leave entitlements;
 - dedicated telephone lines to officers/workers for requests;
 - computers for email communication with workers;
 - regular follow-up visits and planning meetings with workers;
 - trauma and grief counselling by independent counsellors;
 - full and accurate information about the child or young person prior to placement;
 - up front placement grants and allowances from State and Commonwealth departments;
 - placement grants for new children, sibling groups or children with special needs;
 - full reimbursement for additional out-of-pocket expenses and a fast and efficient system for claims;
 - full inclusion in information sharing and discussion of decisions that affect the child or young person;
 - full assistance with medical and educational needs of the child or young person;
 - additional support for the care of children and young people with disabilities;
 - regular training, and support to attend conferences and seminars;
 - funded advocacy and legal services, lobby groups and peer support groups;
 - insurance cover; and
 - regular updates of policy changes, newsletters and foster carer manuals.

Training and Accreditation of Foster Carers

Position:

All foster carers, including relative carers, must receive initial pre-service training that is designed to equip them with the basic knowledge needed to provide effective foster care. Ongoing training and specialist training must be made available to all foster carers throughout the year. Costs associated with foster carers attendance at training should be fully met by the foster care agency or the Department. Foster carers should be encouraged and assisted to attend further and additional training, seminars, workshops and state and national conferences. Initial accreditation and renewal of accreditation/approval of foster carers is necessary to ensure children are being cared for appropriately.

Commentary

The Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) membership consists of representatives of the recognised Foster Care Associations of each State and Territory. The above statement represents the position of AFCA as at 1 January 2005. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement but rather covers the major issues raised by foster carers in relation to training and accreditation. The statement has been produced to encourage:

- Quality outcomes for children and young people in care;
- Satisfying partnerships between foster carers, relative carers and workers; and
- Consistency across the nation.

Definition:

The full and ongoing training and accreditation of foster carers is critical to the standard of care provided to the children and young people in placement. Acquisition of knowledge and the development of a strength based model of partnership can only occur through groups of foster carers and workers coming together and sharing their experiences. The opportunity for learning must be afforded to every foster carer in every State.

Acknowledgements:

1. More and up-to-date knowledge means better working relationships and better outcomes for children and young people in care.
2. Without initial and ongoing training, foster carers are putting themselves and the children and young people for whom they care at risk.
3. Much can be achieved from the opportunity of workers and foster carers learning and teaching together.

Issues:

1. Prior to accreditation/assessment, foster carers should undergo a minimum number of hours of training, covering the same basic content, providing an accurate and honest picture of fostering. This could possibly be linked to a nationally accredited course. Relative carers should also have access to this training.
2. Training of foster carers must involve the State or Territory Foster Care Association and/or foster carers for the duration of the training.
3. Foster carers interested in becoming trainers should undergo training for this task.
4. Foster carers participating in training as part of the training team should be paid or recompensed (eg: equal number of hours of housekeeping paid for).
5. All costs associated with foster carers attending training should be met by the foster care agency or department to ensure that foster carers are not out of pocket (travel, parking, babysitting etc).
6. Assessment and approval/accreditation of foster carers should be conducted in partnership by a worker and a trained foster carer.
7. Newly approved/accredited foster carers should be mentored by a more experienced foster carer in a buddy system.
8. A series of follow-up training sessions should be available to new foster carers during their first year.
9. A range of ongoing and specialist training packages should be available to all foster carers throughout the year. Specifically these should include First Aid and infectious diseases training, and wherever possible, also include courses in general parenting skills to cope with a range of behaviours in children.
10. A variety of media should be used to assist in learning (videos, audio tapes, work books, home study, online).
11. Foster carers should be approved/accredited for an initial period and have regular ongoing renewals of approval/accreditation.

SUPPORTING STRONG PARENTING IN THE AUSTRALIAN FOSTER CARE SECTOR

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 and provisions for foster carers and to address issues related the prevention of abuse within the foster care sector.

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

The Commonwealth and State Ministers Advisory Council is the important body to ensure that national action is agreed to and implemented. The Council responded to the recommendations of the Report and worked throughout 2003 to produce a National Foster Care Plan to which all governments would commit to implement.

This National Plan should be considered for approval in early 2004 and if approved will be released and see action commence on implementation. While many of the Report recommendations (see summary below) have been considered in the preparation of the Plan, those that have not been included will still need to be pursued at the appropriate times.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

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 2

Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments work with and involve the State and National Associations of foster carers, and help fund their support at a sufficient level to enable them to support carers and provide consultative forum for ongoing policy consultation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

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

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Commonwealth and State/Territories establish a policy on statistical recording of information pertinent to foster care, including the national collection of statistics related to allegations of abuse, and initiate a national collection process.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Commonwealth and States/Territory Governments initiate a national approach for the recruitment, training and accreditation of foster carers including those providing kinship care.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments 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 experience in providing appropriate care for children and young people.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Along with standards advocating respite care for foster carers, conditions be altered so that provision for fully supported respite care is available to carers and is included in all case planning.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The State/Territory governments develop ways of supporting foster carers to reduce instances of allegations of abuse in care and develop processes for handling allegations against foster carers. This should be encouraged and facilitated by the Commonwealth government because of its interest in the longer term outcomes of children, and in a manner similar to the leadership role adopted by the Commonwealth when addressing long-term homeless, juvenile justice, and carer issues.

RECOMMENDATION 9

A national approach to the handling of allegations of abuse be developed so that the inequities of the current systems can be removed and notified foster carers receive recognition and support until such time as the allegations are substantiated.

RECOMMENDATION 10

A program evaluation of foster care provision be undertaken at both Commonwealth and State/Territory levels to provide accountability to the Australian community of the resources committed to foster care.

RECOMMENDATION 11

A joint government representative body, such as the Commonwealth and State Ministers Advisory Council (CSMAC), be given responsibility for preparing and implementing a set of standards to apply specifically to foster care in place of the current national baseline out-of-home care standards.

RECOMMENDATION 12

As part of any overall review of foster carer in Australia, the possible benefits of the Alberta classification system be examined for potential application in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Revision of the structures, processes and practices concerning allegations of abuse in care in Australia, be revised so that they reflect standards and practice that are nearer to the good practice standards pertaining in Alberta, Canada.

RECOMMENDATION 14

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

RECOMMENDATION 15

The Commonwealth and State Ministers Advisory Council (CSMAC) host a round table for representatives of peak national bodies predominantly involved in foster care, along with senior Commonwealth and State/Territory representatives, to discuss the recommendations of this report and to plan for action to occur.

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