

Assisting victims of child sexual abuse

3 Nov 2014

Attorney General Brad Hazzard and Minister for Family and Community Services Gabrielle Upton today announced a suite of measures to help support survivors of institutional child sexual abuse.

The initiatives are the first step in responding to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

"The NSW Government recognises the mistakes of the past and is resolved that it should never happen again," Mr Hazzard said.

"The NSW Government is listening carefully to the personal and heartbreaking stories as they unfold at the Royal Commission and we want survivors to get the recognition and assistance they need.

"This is about instigating cultural change so we can make a difference in NSW and improve support for survivors as they navigate the difficult and complex healing process."

The NSW Government will:

- Make care records available as soon as possible. Family and Community Services aims to clear the backlog of applications from victims to access their care records through the doubling of resources.

- Establish an active place of recognition at the Parramatta Girls Home to pay tribute to the children who experienced sexual and physical abuse at this site.

- Consult with other survivors of institutional child sexual abuse and advocacy groups to examine options for a state-wide place of recognition or memorial to acknowledge past wrongs.

- Encourage survivors of child sexual or physical assault to access the unlimited free and confidential counselling that is available through the Victims Support Scheme; and

- Introduce 18 Guiding Principles to guide how NSW agencies respond to civil claims for child sexual abuse. Claims will be finalised as quickly as possible and agencies will be guided by the understanding that litigation can be a traumatic experience. State agencies will not generally raise the passage of time as a defence or reason not to allow a claim.

Mr Hazzard said the principles will make litigation a less traumatic experience for victims. "An adversarial civil litigation system is not an effective way of dealing sensitively or compassionately with survivors of sexual abuse," he said.

"This will help remove some of the barriers to victims seeking compensation for the damage they have suffered and ensure a consistent and compassionate approach across government when dealing with civil claims for child sexual abuse."

Ms Upton said providing faster access to FACS records will reduce the frustration victims have experienced when trying to find out more about their history.

"The Royal Commission has led to a huge amount of applications for access to state held records, with at least 40 new requests each month," she said.

"Increasing resources will allow us to clear the backlog by mid next year and help those individuals who were in state care seek some healing for the lifelong impacts they've had to endure.

"The measures we are announcing today is the Government's initial response to some issues raised before the Royal Commission – this is not our final response and we are aware that further work on the part of Government needs to be done," Ms Upton said.

The announcement has been welcomed by Leonie Sheedy, Care Leavers Australia Network's (CLAN) Executive Officer.

"The measures announced today show this government has listened to us and is acting," Ms Sheedy said.

"Better and faster access to their records will help survivors of child sexual abuse understand who they are, where they are from and reconnect with family they may not have known they had.

"I look forward to working with the Government to allow survivors and care leavers of orphanages, children's homes and foster care the assistance they need and want."

Ms Bonney Djuric, founder of Parragirls, a contact register and support network for former Parramatta Girls, commended the NSW Government in its resolve to instigate cultural change to make a difference.

"Without exception every Parramatta Girl, as indeed do other care leavers, shares a heartfelt desire to ensure what we experienced as children never happens again," Ms Djuric said.

"These measures will go a long way in ensuring this hope can be fulfilled.

"The NSW Government has evidently listened to and heard the pain and suffering experienced by survivors of the Parramatta Girls Home in testimonies given at the Royal Commission.

"In establishing an active place of recognition at the former Parramatta Girls Home the NSW Government acknowledges our experiences and the need for survivors to be supported in their healing process," she said.

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