

UPDATE 58

Royal Commission – Out of Home Care



Tuesday 10 March 2015 – Day 1

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse commenced Case Study 24 in Sydney this morning, examining policies, practices and procedures for the prevention of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care and responses to allegations of child sexual abuse occurring in out-of-home care.

The hearing is specifically looking into strategies for the prevention of child sexual abuse in contemporary out-of-home care settings, including recruitment, assessment and training of carers and the care, monitoring and oversight of children.

It is also looking into systems and policies for reporting and responding to allegations and also supporting children who have been sexually abused in out-of-home care.

This is the Royal Commission's first policy-focused public hearing. The Commission will not be hearing directly from survivors who have been abused in out-of-home care. Instead, the Commission is using narratives to provide context for the issues it is considering.

The Royal Commission will hear evidence concurrently from a range of expert witnesses with experience in the sector nationally. These include representatives from each of the state and territory governments as well as non-government out-of-home care providers, including the Catholic Church's Mary MacKillop Family Services, Marymead Child and Family Services and CatholicCare Sydney.

In her opening statement, Senior Counsel Assisting, Gail Furness told the Royal Commission valid national data about children in out-of-home care, and particularly children who have been sexually abused, is not readily available.

Ms Furness said, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, there were 43,000 children in out-of-home care as at 30 June 2014, with a national average of 6.1 children in care for every 1000 children aged up to 17 in the general population.

She went on to tell the Commission that there is no national body that collects statistics on children who have suffered sexual abuse while in out-of-home care.

Indigenous children were nine times more likely to be in care than non-Indigenous children.

Of the 3000 survivors of child sexual abuse who have spoken to the Commission during private sessions to date, out-of-home care represented more than 40 per cent of all institutions named, with much of this being related to historic cases in the 1950s and 1960s.

She said a review of studies which focused on child abuse in contemporary out-of-home care settings had found it is likely child-to-child abuse is currently more prevalent than abuse by carers or other adults.

"The major focus of preventing child sexual abuse in out of home care should be on efforts to prevent child-to-child sexual abuse rather than caregiver child sexual abuse, since this type of abuse likely represents the vast majority of observed child sexual abuse in out of home care," she said.

Ms Furness noted that there is no national body that collects statistics on children who have suffered sexual abuse while in out-of-home care.

She said the Commission had requested specific information on child sexual abuse in out-of-home care from state and territories as well as the 13 non-government providers of out-of-home care represented at the hearing. This revealed in the two years to 30 June 2014, there were 2,683 reports of abuse from government providers and 956 reports from non-government organisations.

Ms Furness said this data contains 'many limitations', including the very real possibility of double counting and the fact that information had only come from selected non-government organisations providing out-of-home care, rather than all providers.

Following Ms Furness' opening statement the Royal Commission heard from senior public servants with responsibility for out-of-home care from NSW, NT, SA, Tasmania and Victoria, who gave evidence about the way in which these jurisdictions undertake the recruitment, assessment and training of foster and kinship carers and staff in residential care.

Tomorrow the Royal Commission will hear evidence from three non-government organisations on these issues, including Ms Micaela Cronin, CEO of MacKillop Family Services.

Unlike previous case studies, there will be no findings made following this hearing. Rather, evidence gathered during the hearing will be used by the Royal Commission to formulate an issues paper on out-of-home care, to be released for responses following the hearing.

Case study 24 is listed to continue until 20 March.

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