

UPDATE 60

Royal Commission – Out of Home Care



Monday 16 March 2015 – Day 5

Case study 24 continued in Sydney today, with three senior bureaucrats with responsibility for out-of-home care in NSW, Victoria and Queensland giving evidence about the third of the five issues identified by the Royal Commission for examination in this hearing: systems policies, practices and procedures for reporting allegations of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care.

Senior Counsel Assisting Gail Furness told the Royal Commission there are different legislative requirements, practices and procedures in each state and territory for the reporting and recording of allegations of child sexual abuse.

Ms Furness told the Commission “When asked for their view as to the merits of a nationally consistent approach, non-government agencies were generally supportive. The perceived benefits included nationally consistent definitions, comparable and standardised data, the ability to share information, and the creation of equity in outcomes for children in different jurisdictions.”

Ms Furness said government responses to this proposal were more mixed, with disadvantages identified such as the need for considerable action and commitment to reach agreement, significant required amendments to legislative frameworks, data management and information technology systems. This, it was said, might have significant resource and cost implications and it may well not improve outcomes for children.

The Queensland Government in this hearing for the first time today. It was represented by Ms Cathy Taylor, Deputy Director of the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, Queensland.

Ms Taylor told the Commission that following the Forde Inquiry into the abuse of children in Queensland institutions in 1999 the provision of out-of-home care in Queensland has been progressively transferred from the government to non-government organisations. This was due, she said, to the non-government organisations having expertise, good practice and their provision of good levels of support to carers and children alike.

She said Queensland is different to other jurisdictions in that there are greater numbers of children in out-of-home care in rural and regional centres. Of the State’s seven regions, Brisbane has the lowest number of children in care.

This presents challenges, particularly in service delivery model and attracting and retaining qualified staff in rural and regional areas.

During the afternoon, the non-government panel looking at issue three took to the stand. The panel once again included Micaela Cronin, CEO of Mackillop Family Services, who gave evidence with representatives from Life Without Borders and Wesley Mission Victoria.

Ms Cronin told the Commission that in Victoria, when an allegation of sexual abuse of a child in out-of-home care is received, it is reported to the department, and in consultation with the department, to the police. The first priority however is the safety of the child concerned.

She explained that incident reports record primary information about each allegation received. She told the Commission that Mackillop is trying to become more proactive instead of reactive about the risks children face in out-of-home care.

Data regarding allegations of abuse in out-of-home care indicated that children were vulnerable to child on child abuse and also child sexual exploitation. Ms Cronin told the Commission that Mackillop is very aware of these risks, and considered them when making placement decisions. Strategies were also in place to address child sexual exploitation.

“There has been significant partnership with the department and the police around what we can do in terms of information staff can proactively gather, and sharing that, gathering as much information proactively as they can, sharing that information and working actively with the police around disrupting that activity.”

Ms Cronin discussed the ways that Mackillop is working to ensure a culture in which children in care feel they are able to disclose abuse. “You have to think of a whole range of ways and people for children to speak to ... a whole range of ways that we can encourage children and young people but also hear about what's going on, on the ground, and we've been supportive of the community visitor programs, which is another avenue for ensuring that there are a range of trusted adults who the children will have access to for speaking about their experiences.”

The hearing continues tomorrow to consider issue four: Systems, policies, practices and procedures for responding to allegations of child sexual abuse in out-of-home care.

Catholic Care Sydney, which provides out-of-home care in Sydney will be represented on the NGO panel for issue five later this week.

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