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Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and other Non-Government Organisations

Jewish Community Council of Victoria Submission – Update

8 March 2013

Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV)

The JCCV is the roof body for the Jewish community in Victoria. With 60 Jewish community organisations as Affiliate members, the JCCV has acted as the voice of Victorian Jewry for 75 Years.

The JCCV itself employs 3.5 full time equivalent staff or 4 people and we do not deal directly with children in our normal operational environment. However, about a third of our Affiliate organisations have direct contact with children, notably Jewish schools and Synagogues. A full list of our Affiliates is available on our website.

We have recommended to all our Affiliates that they should consider making submissions to the FCDC Inquiry and that they should ensure that they have procedures and policies in place for handling allegations of any criminal abuse of children.

We have received no complaints directly, and if we did we would immediately contact the appropriate authorities as in our policy below.

JCCV Child Protection Policy

In June 2012, the JCCV issued a statement to the media and our Affiliate members which was published in the Australian Jewish News:

Statement On Child Abuse

07 June 2012

There is a great [degree](#) of anxiety and pain within our community on the question of child abuse.

Child abuse in any form whatsoever and wheresoever it happens, is horrific and beyond understanding. When child abuse occurs either within a home, or within an institution, where a child expects safety and guidance and understanding, the hurt and the bewilderment are exacerbated. The ramifications, on the victims, on their families and indeed on our entire community, are life-long and cause untold damage.

In July 2011, the JCCV issued a strong and unequivocal statement about its stance on child abuse, asked all those with knowledge of alleged abuse to [contact](#) the police and offered assistance. This was followed by a joint statement from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, the Organisation of Rabbis of Australia and the Rabbinical Council of Victoria.

There seems to be a lack of clarity in the community about the JCCV position. Let me re-iterate it in the strongest possible terms.

Last year, the JCCV condemned all manner of child abuse - sexual, emotional, psychological, physical in the strongest possible terms. I repeat that condemnation and again offer support to any member of our community, either by way of referral to the appropriate authorities or services, or by way of advocacy.

The time has come when we need to go beyond statements. We must all talk and seek a resolution to the problem. The JCCV proposes to bring together schools, Rabbis and organisational leaders to discuss how we can not only support victims of prior events, but how we can best put in place methodology which will prevent future victims. My hope is that all those who are invited will attend and my further hope is that from this, will come a stronger and better community.”

JCCV Policy

The JCCV’s new Child Protection Policy was ratified by the JCCV Plenum of Affiliate members in November 2012 and entered into the JCCV Policy Platform:

“3.30 Child Protection

This Council:

3.30.1 AFFIRMS that all children have the right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

3.30.2 NOTES that the Victorian Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (2005) establishes inter alia the fundamental principles that:

- i. society as a whole shares responsibility for promoting the wellbeing and safety of children; and

- ii. those who develop and provide services, as well as parents, should give the highest priority to the promotion and protection of a child's safety, health, development, education and wellbeing.

3.30.3 ITERATES Jewish values that emphasise the importance of our youth, and Jewish laws that recognise the vulnerability of children and prohibit physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse and/or neglect and/or maltreatment of children of any and all kinds from any source.

3.30.4 ACKNOWLEDGES that the Jewish community is not immune from the scourge of child abuse in all its forms as well as neglect or the impacts on children growing up in an environment of family violence. Child abuse occurs in all societies, in all faiths, at all socio-economic levels and within all levels of religious observance.

3.30.5 ENCOURAGES Jewish communal groups and organisations which work with children to prioritise the development and implementation of child protection policies and procedures, and to provide educational programs for children and adults, to ensure the safety of those children in their care.

3.30.6 ENCOURAGES Jewish communal groups and organisations to raise awareness of the prevalence of abuse and promote the safety and protection of children throughout the community.

3.30.6 AFFIRMS its support for Recommendation 10 in the Victorian Parliamentary Enquiry into Vulnerable Children, which states:

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should develop a wide-ranging education and information campaign for parents and caregivers of all school-aged children on the prevention of child sexual abuse.

3.30.7 CALLS UPON anyone who has reasonable grounds to suspect, or knowledge that a child is being harmed, or who is at risk of harm, to report it to the appropriate authorities, namely the Department of Human Services or its equivalent and/or Victoria Police.

3.30.8 CALLS UPON the Jewish community to do its utmost to assist community members who make disclosures of abuse to find the care, help and support they need, and avoid the imposition of any stigma, ridicule or discrimination by reason of having reported the abuse or having been a victim of such abuse.”

After ratification and promulgation of the JCCV Child Protection Policy, the JCCV made a statement to the Jewish community and community organisations through our Affiliates and the Australian Jewish media (eg. Australian Jewish News and J-Wire):

Keeping sexual abuse at bay

Protecting children and young people from the risk of abuse is a communal imperative. Yet the Jewish community is not immune to the occurrence of child abuse in organisational [settings](#).

To seek to address this issue, the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), has established a Jewish Community Child Protection Reference Group to provide [information](#) and resources for community organisations and victims/survivors and their families. The Reference Group, comprised of advocates in protecting children from abuse, will act as an additional resource for community organisations to assist them in reviewing and strengthening their policies and procedures.

Throughout 2013 the Reference Group will conduct community forums hosted by the JCCV to raise awareness of child protection issues. Our call to all community organisations is to examine existing policies against established benchmarks to determine whether improvement can be achieved. Public discussion of this very confronting and disturbing issue can be difficult for a host of reasons. We commend both the Federal and State Government for taking steps in recent times to hold public inquiries into the issue of child abuse in organisational settings.

What are the implications for our community? We are blessed with a wide range of schools, shules, youth groups, sporting clubs and other community organisations [catering](#) to the needs of children and young people. It goes without saying that these organisations are dedicated to the best interests of children and young people and to enriching our community. However (and this is the confronting and disturbing element of the discussion) there is a very small minority of people who work as staff or volunteers within organisations – in the Jewish and wider communities – who have an unhealthy interest in obtaining access to children and young people. For the vast majority who do not share these deviant tendencies, it is hard to fathom the risk and easy to dismiss such talk as fanciful and alarmist.

The Child Protection Reference Group has access to best practice material and will initially meet with leaders of community organisations to share information about policies, procedures and risk management. The wider community will also be invited to attend subsequent forums. The group's role is limited. We will:

- act as an additional resource to assist community organisations to strengthen their child protection policies and procedures;
- promote resources to educate and empower parents regarding child protection; and
- assist with referrals to professional support services, where required.

Those are the current limits of our brief. It is not our role to:

- Provide direct services to victims/survivors or their families.
- Canvass specific allegations of child abuse made against any specific individual or

organisation. (This is a matter for State authorities including Victoria Police and the Department of Human Services.)

Intervene in the affairs of any community organisation.

The broad issue of 'risk management' is a fundamental responsibility for organisations charged with the care of children and young people. Children are inherently vulnerable. Parents expect – and the law requires – that children will be safe from harm or abuse at school, on camp, at a youth group, in a sporting club or in any other community setting. In many instances, community organisations already have well established and effective policies and procedures for ensuring that abuse in any of its forms is, to the greatest possible extent, prevented.

However, across the multitude of community organisations, approaches to risk management and the specific challenge of child protection will inevitably vary. In the absence of good risk management, organisations can unwittingly make themselves vulnerable to inappropriate staff and volunteers. In some of the documented cases in Australia and internationally, offenders have spent months and years befriending and grooming young people and their families only to betray that trust in order to abuse and exploit them.

Our role as a community is two-fold. First, we must accept – no matter how painful it may be – that these breaches of trust can and do occur in our community. Secondly, we should do nothing less than work towards prevention and deal with past wrongs by assisting victims/survivors wherever possible. We call on all members of the community to become better informed on issues of child protection and to engage in next year's public forums with the aim of strengthening our wonderful community organisations and safeguarding our children and young people against the unthinkable.

Nina Bassat AM, President, JCCV

On behalf of the JCCV and Jewish Community Child Protection Reference Group – Andrew Blode (Chair), Vicki Gordon, Anton Hermann, Katherine Levi, Jo Silver and Rimma Sverdlin”

JCCV Child Protection Reference Group

The JCCV Child Protection Reference Group was established by the JCCV (members as listed above) with the following aims and purpose:

Given our constitutional aims and objects below, it is incumbent upon the JCCV to facilitate discussion, to be aware of and promote best practice policy, standards and education to assist individuals, families and organisations.

1. To represent the Jewish community of Victoria;

2. To promote unity of endeavour and of action within the Jewish community of Victoria, and to co-ordinate the work of the various organisations of the Victorian Jewish community;
3. To secure, safeguard and further the religious, political, economic, social, civil and cultural rights, welfare and interest of Jews in Victoria and elsewhere;
4. To take such action as it considers necessary on behalf of the Victorian Jewish community in any matter that concerns Victorian Jewry or Jews elsewhere.

Purpose

To educate the community on how best to protect our children from abuse in an organisational setting by:

1. Promoting resources that educate parents on protecting their children;
2. Working with organisations to assist with policy development and practice; and
3. Linking victims to support services.

Next Steps

The planned next steps for the JCCV are:

- Training of relevant JCCV Executive and professional staff to be conducted by an external consultant with expertise in the area of Child Protection, and the prevention and management of child sexual abuse in 1Q2013:
 - Education about the dynamics of child sexual abuse
 - Looking at responses of other Jewish communities (in order to fill the gaps in the current response)
 - Identifying and clarifying misconceptions
 - Identifying 'best practice' community education programs
- Child Protection Forum to held including relevant parties and organisations within the Jewish Community, including for example the JCCV Child Protection Reference Group, Jewish Care, Tzedek and the Australian Jewish Psychologists Inc
- Presentation to and discussion with the JCCV Council of Presidents, which is the forum of the presidents of the 60 Affiliate organisations of the JCCV to be held Wed 10 April
- Presentation by the JCCV President to and discussion with a forum of the Principals of the Victorian Jewish schools

Again we commend the FCDC on this Inquiry and we would welcome discussing this submission or our previous submission of 21 September 2012 with the Committee. Please direct any queries to our President, Nina Bassat AM on 9272 5566 or nbassat@bigpond.net.au; or David Marlow, our Executive Director, on 9272 5642 or david@jccv.org.au

Nina Bassat AM
President
Jewish Community Council of Victoria

Appendix A

JCCV CHILD PROTECTION REFERENCE GROUP TERMS OF REFERENCE

Background

Awareness of child abuse and its associated issues is an area that has only recently come to the fore. There are few established guidelines and oversight and government regulations are slight.

There seems to be a pervasive view that organisations are doing everything possible to protect children with well-established protocols and procedures. Within the general, Jewish community, child abuse is not thought to be pervasive. Abuse comes in many forms such as neglect, sexual and physical abuse.

With the cases of paedophilia before the courts, community anxiety is high and people want action, answers and surety that children are protected within our organisations. Given our constitutional aims and objects below, it is incumbent upon the JCCV to facilitate discussion, to be aware of and promote best practice policy, standards and education to assist individuals, families and organisations.

1. To represent the Jewish community of Victoria;
2. To promote unity of endeavour and of action within the Jewish community of Victoria, and to co-ordinate the work of the various organisations of the Victorian Jewish community;
3. To secure, safeguard and further the religious, political, economic, social, civil and cultural rights, welfare and interest of Jews in Victoria and elsewhere;
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2. Working with organisations to assist with policy development and practice; and
3. Linking victims to support services.

Activity

Develop a comprehensive strategy inclusive of:

Organisations

- Education and forums - Invite all to discuss gaps in the system
 - o This meeting can be managed as a whole or broken into community sector (e.g. welfare, schools, synagogues)
- Offer a health check process through the Australian Childhood Foundation to assess organisational policy and practice
- Set best practice/promote through community to encourage organisations to act upon recommendations

Victims

- Raise awareness to encourage victims and their families to seek support
- Compile resources that support victims
- Educate staff with tools in the event that victims disclose to them

Parents

- Raise awareness as to what they need to know in relation to child abuse, how best to protect their children and what they should be demanding from organisations that look after their children.

Scope

The group's role is limited.

We will:

- act as an additional resource to assist community organisations to strengthen their child protection policies and procedures;
- promote resources to educate and empower parents regarding child protection; and
- assist with referrals to professional support services, where required

It is not our role to:

- Provide direct services to victims/survivors or their families.
- Canvass specific allegations of child abuse made against any specific individual or organisation. (This is a matter for State authorities including Victoria Police and the Department of Human Services.)
- Intervene in the affairs of any community organisation.

Time Frame

- Strategies developed and 1st meeting by February 2013 and completed by end 2013