22 January 2010

Ms Janine Bush
Executive Officer
Family and Community Development Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic. 3002

Dear Ms Bush

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria.

As the peak body for child, youth and family services organisations in Victoria, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is providing its comments within the context of services to some of Victoria's most vulnerable citizens: the children and young people who leave the State care system. This is a category of people who have been sadly overlooked in discussions of the housing shortages that afflict so many Victorians. I trust that the Centre's comments and recommendations will be useful, and will provide a starting point with which to address important needs in our community.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Lynette Buoy
Chief Executive Officer
Children and young people from a care background and homelessness: research findings and statistics

January 2010

Dr Lynette Buoy
Chief Executive Officer
Introduction

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare is the peak body for Victoria’s child, youth and family welfare sector. The Centre’s membership comprises 93 large, medium and small community service organisations (CSOs) across Victoria who provide services to some of the most vulnerable children, young people and families in our State. The Centre was established in 1912 as the Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria, and over the past 97 years has been at the forefront of policy development, research and advocacy, and learning and development in relation to the sector. The Centre is a source of commentary for the sector, driving public debate and contributing to positive government policies.

The Centre appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the current Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. Our comments are largely confined to the necessity of adequately and systematically addressing the housing needs of children and young people involved in the State care system, in particular those young people leaving State care.

Children and young people from a care background and homelessness: research findings and statistics

The Australian Institute of Family Studies, in its latest *Picture of Australia’s Children* (2009), notes that almost 65,000 children are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and that there are high unmet requests for SAAP accommodation for families with children.

In Victoria we know from an analysis of Department of Human Services Integrated Reports and Information Systems (IRIS) data relating to ChildFIRST that children and families presenting to Child Protection have increasingly complex needs and characteristics. These include:

- Family Violence
- Parental mental health issues
- Parental drug and alcohol misuse
- Poverty
- Housing/homelessness issues
- Criminal justice problems
- Social Isolation
- Children with health, disability or behavioural problems
Importantly, it is common for children and families to experience a combination of several of these issues.

The National Youth Commission’s (NYC) 2008 inquiry (*Australia’s Homeless Youth: a Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness, 2008*) documented that young people who have been in State care are over-represented in the homeless population. Of particular note was that in the 2006 Census, 15 per cent of homeless school students had been in State care in itself representing an alarming figure. (2008:125).

Additional studies referred to in the 2008 NYC report also provide strong evidence that young people from a care background are represented in large numbers in the homelessness population in Victoria. The NYC Report 2008 further states that from a group of 5,056 homeless people surveyed, 30 per cent were under the age of 18 and that nearly half of them had been in care. A study by Chamberlain and Johnson also found that 42 per cent of adults and young people in SAAP had been in State care at some stage in their lives (NYC Report 2008: 127).

Some young people have little option other than to kick-start a career in homelessness, as SAAP is often used as a formal exit pathway for children and young people who are leaving care. The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare’s 2005 report *Investing for Success: The Economics of Supporting Young People Leaving Care*, found that a significant proportion of young people leaving care in Victoria experienced homelessness. The research found that approximately one fifth of young people leaving care are doing so without any plans for their future and around a third of young people were case managed directly into homelessness services upon leaving care.

Other findings from the Centre’s research show that:

- 45 per cent of young people aged 19 to 25 were living in unstable accommodation after leaving care (homeless, refuges, sleeping rough, caravan parks etc)

- Over half of the young people had been in their accommodation for less than 6 months, indicating a high level of transience

- Over a third had moved residence between five and ten times in the 12 months prior to the research indicating a high level of instability in accommodation.

Finally the CREATE Foundation’s recently released *Report Card 2009* includes in its recommendations that “all child safety departments, in conjunction with departments of housing, must commit to achieving the COAG’s target that no child or young person will exit care into homelessness”, (2009:8).
A significant proportion of young people leaving the care system have very poor outcomes in terms of education, social connections and support from other people to help them in their transition to adulthood, and are often reliant on government services and income support to tide them over their transitions. A proportion of these young people also bear children while they are in care, and have their children also placed in care, triggering an intergenerational cycle of child protection involvement. Many of them have no social connections or parenting skills and very little support in accessing housing, income, employment. (See Case Study 1: “Ally”)

**SAAP unable to help children and families**

The data on children in the SAAP system for 2004/05 also presents a bleak picture, reflecting the pressures on the SAAP system due to inadequate supply of housing. The 2004/05 AIHW *Homeless Children in SAAP 2004/05 Summary Findings* identified that when considered as a percentage of people requiring new and immediate SAAP accommodation (excluding those continuing their accommodation) on an average day 54 per cent of adults and unaccompanied children were turned away.

Over half (55 per cent) of all people with a valid unmet request for immediate SAAP accommodation were under 20 years of age. The most common reason cited was a lack of accommodation (in 80 per cent of instances). This was either because insufficient accommodation was available at the agency itself (59 per cent) or because a referral agency was unable to refer the group on because they had no vacancies on their books (21 per cent).

Unaccompanied children presenting to SAAP services, a majority of whom were aged 14-17, reported a relatively high level of unmet need. With the high proportion of young people in the SAAP system from a care background as reported in the 2008 NYC report, it is conceivable that a high proportion of those turned away from this service were also from a care background.

AIHW data on the circumstances of children on entry into and exit from SAAP also indicates that:

- unaccompanied children have few other accommodation options and are moving between SAAP services to maintain a roof over their heads.
- The opportunity to re-establish family ties reduces as unaccompanied children get older.
- A vast majority of unaccompanied children were not in the labour force and hence not actively seeking employment before accessing SAAP support. Government pension or benefit was their main source of income. However, a greater proportion of unaccompanied children derived income from government pension after exiting SAAP.
A third of unaccompanied 14-15 year olds and over half of 16-17 year olds who accessed SAAP were not in the education system, and these proportions were relatively unchanged after SAAP support.

A need for holistic solutions and whole of government approaches

The need to overhaul the SAAP system is undeniable in the light of the data we have on the experiences of service users and service providers alike over recent years. However, the homelessness situation confronting us is complex and is caused by the inadequacies of several inter-related systems. It cannot be addressed by just fixing only that part of the system that is designed to respond to people experiencing a crisis in finding accommodation. Substantial investment is required in improvements to homelessness-specific services.

The Centre believes that what is required is to develop holistic and effective solutions which provide people who are homeless with opportunities to participate and increase their abilities to fully engage with their communities. The solutions need to be focused on the long-term, alongside immediate attention given to addressing both the demand for and supply of affordable housing, as well as support for homeless people to access services.

For this to work, however, there needs to be recognition that mainstream services such as education, health, justice and employment, do not currently have the capacity to take on work around homelessness assistance. The Centre’s experience in this area suggests that mainstream services are not systemically geared to manage the needs of the most vulnerable in delivering their services. The number of children and young people in the State care system who are disconnected and disengaged from mainstream education in Victoria is a classic case in point.

Furthermore the needs of many within our sector are often complex and interrelated, and require a multi-faceted approach. For example, it is not uncommon in the child, youth and family services area to have a single female adolescent with one or more children, in a domestic violence situation seeking homelessness assistance. (See Case Study 2: "Tina")

We must therefore not lose sight of the critical links between SAAP services and other services such as education, health, employment and training. At the same time the Government must pay attention to reforming and improving the housing sector, namely public and community housing, increasing housing stock to ensure there are adequate housing options for people transitioning
from SAAP services. The Centre would also argue for the need to ensure housing availability on a priority basis to meet the needs of young people leaving State care.

Finally, the current national context is important to consider here. The previously quoted CREATE Report Card 2009 makes the “partnership” point strongly. “Further linkages with governments should be explored across jurisdictions, and mechanisms introduced to integrate the respective contributions” (p 71).

The opportunities provided by the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children should be maximized. Protocols could be developed between Child Protection authorities and the housing sector to ensure that young people from a care background are provided access to appropriate housing on exiting care, depending on their circumstances, and are not condemned to a life of constant churn between various homelessness services. The responsibility of the States to children under 18 years of age, under their respective child protection legislation, needs to be reinforced through this process.

The Federal Government’s White Paper – “The Road Home. A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness” released in December 2008 – also provides an essential sign-post, arguing for the importance of whole-of-government approaches. However the significance of severe shortages of accommodation options and the urgent and immediate need to increase housing stocks should not be subsumed in the activity of establishing joined up responses to meet a range of needs.

**What is required across the service system?**

In the homelessness context, there is a major gap in service response from Victoria’s Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care system to young adolescents who come to the attention of child protection in their adolescent years (typically 14-16 years), and those that leave care as adolescents (16-18 years), which needs to be addressed. SAAP services have become the default safety net for these young people, even though homeless young people below school-leaving age are not the responsibility of this service. Managing the often challenging behaviour of these young people is also beyond the capacity and resources of SAAP services.

It is the Centre’s view that any attempt at addressing the homelessness situation for young people should take note of this critical service gap as a matter of urgency.

The National Youth Commission’s 2008 report noted earlier, states that SAAP services have become a ‘stop-gap’ child protection service because of the lack of services for adolescents. This situation is even more concerning when one considers that young people from the State care system are expected to leave that system and move to independence in one quick (and often
inadequately planned) step. The CREATE Report Card 2009 notes that sometimes there is only about two weeks’ notice of the move from State care to independent living. These young people are likely to have had a severely disadvantaged childhood, inadequate education, and thus experience significant social and emotional challenges.

The Centre calls for strong leadership from the State Government in ensuring that safe housing options exist for young people leaving care. SAAP is neither an ideal nor acceptable solution for young people leaving care.

Specifically the State should:

- Identify ways of increasing the stock of affordable housing, and removing barriers to accessing affordable housing for young people.
- Establish appropriate links between housing, and employment and training services.
- Support all young people with housing needs or at risk of potential homelessness. (See Case Study 3: “Belinda”)

Recommendations

While some of the following recommendations go beyond the strict terms of reference for the Parliamentary Inquiry, in the Centre’s view the following are all vital elements of a comprehensive response to address homelessness in Victoria. The highlighted points in bold are considered essential in meeting the demonstrated unmet needs that currently exist:

Policy, planning and legislative framework

- A homelessness services policy needs to be developed addressing the needs of specific target groups such as young people (especially those leaving State care), women and children escaping domestic violence, Indigenous young people and families, people with a disability, migrant families and people from a culturally diverse background.

- A comprehensive plan which focuses on developing mainstream responses to homelessness and strengthens specific services targeted at homelessness and SAAP clients. A holistic response where mainstream services and homelessness specific services work together in partnership more effectively to meet the demand for support.

- This plan should be underpinned by a legislative framework that upholds the principles of the Victorian Human Rights legislation.
• A policy shift is required to include and count children in homeless situations to ensure there are adequate resources to address the developmental needs of children experiencing homelessness, whether accompanied or unaccompanied by a parent.

Services for young people and women escaping domestic violence

• There is a significant disparity in level of access to services by young people, particularly those who are unaccompanied by an adult. The Centre strongly advocates for specific responses to young people from a care background who experience homelessness.

• Special attention and focus is required in developing appropriate housing responses for women with children escaping family violence.

Supply of affordable housing

• Adequate attention needs to be paid to issues in the supply of affordable housing in Victoria. There has been little growth in public, community and social housing for more than a decade. Affordable private rental housing has diminished and increasing numbers of people are in ‘housing stress’ and unable to sustain stability in their housing.

Employment and education support

• Most people who are homeless want to work. Current employment services have not been structured to assist people who are homeless to achieve and sustain employment outcomes. Links between employment and education and training program services dedicated to achieving outcomes for people who are homeless are critical in creating future independence.

• Education assists people to achieve important life outcomes, including people who are homeless. Any Victorian initiative should aim to assist children in homeless families and young people to sustain and attend school and continue their education. This support is particularly critical for young people who leave State care, whose educational outcomes are considerably poorer than young people in the general population.

Specialist support services

• A high proportion of the homeless population experience mental health issues. The capacity of mental health services to respond to disadvantaged people including people
who are homeless needs to be improved. Homelessness services also need to be able to increase their ability to respond effectively to people who are homeless with mental health issues.

The experience of homelessness is generally detrimental to physical health and many people who are homeless have chronic health conditions including dental health. More dedicated primary health responses based in the community are needed to enable people who are homeless to access and continue receiving adequate health care.

Workforce

- To ensure the success of the holistic approach recommended above, a substantial workforce development strategy is required that ensures workers in the wider community sector are remunerated appropriately and equitably, and given ongoing support, training and mentoring. This includes workers in homelessness, child and family welfare, family violence services, and mental health.

A note on homelessness in Indigenous communities

There is a notable prevalence of homelessness within the Aboriginal population with an over-representation of Indigenous people in the SAAP system. The Government needs to consult widely with Indigenous communities to formulate plans to address the inequities in the housing and homelessness situation for Indigenous people. The Centre strongly supports the views of Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations amongst the Centre’s membership and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) in this regard.

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Case Studies

1. “Ally”* (Extract from The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare’s article in Parity Issue September 2008)

Ally is a 17 year old girl who has lived in a range of placements including foster care, kinship care and residential placements since she was three. Ally’s parents were unable to care for her and she was placed with relatives. However, she was moved several times and was finally placed with a relative with serious alcohol problems. Ally described how she started drinking beer at age six because she would find no food in the fridge.

Ally was subsequently moved to another placement but continued with her alcohol habits. She started using drugs and smoked cigarettes, a habit that continued until she became pregnant 7 ½ months ago.

Upon being told she was pregnant, Ally reported that she voluntarily gave up drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and coffee, and has remained ‘clean’ throughout her pregnancy. She expressed her excitement about the arrival of her baby.

As placement options for young expectant mothers are limited, Ally lives in a unit for young people with disabilities, and questions the suitability of this type of accommodation for herself and her baby.

As a high school student, Ally had difficulties with her eyesight, and was prescribed two pairs of glasses by an optometrist, for sight and reading. However, she was allowed to purchase only one pair due to funding constraints, and experienced difficulties in reading, as a result. Ally also spoke about the difficulties she has experienced in purchasing essential clothing, and basics such as underwear and socks.

Ally is an intelligent, and motivated young woman, and is focused on getting a qualification in order to better herself. She attended an ‘alternative’ school completing pre-apprenticeship in a ‘beauty’ course with high grades. However, when she applied to be accepted for the full apprenticeship (she had just found out she was pregnant), her application was denied on the basis that she “did not have a permanent place to live and she was pregnant.” Despite this setback, Ally has commenced another course where her baby can be accommodated by the educational institution.

Tina and her two small children aged 18 months and four years arrived at her sister’s house in the early hours of the morning. Tina had waited until her partner and the children’s father had left for work in the country town where they lived. Tina had finally decided that the physical assault she received and that her children had witnessed the evening before was the final act of violence her partner was going to inflict upon her. At some cost to herself and her family’s safety, Tina’s sister offered shelter to Tina and her two young children. Tina, on her limited income, and with little knowledge of the public or private rental sector in Melbourne, began the search for housing, only to be told that she had little chance of securing any accommodation in either public or private housing. With two young children and no income other than Centrelink, she was unattractive to the private rental market, and with a roof over her head she was ineligible for priority housing in the public sector. Tina was not eligible to enter refuge accommodation either, as the abuse was now historical and not recent. Tensions in the small household reached a peak and Tina finally approached Berry Street with a request for the children to be placed in foster care. Tina’s reasons for asking Berry Street to provide care were based on her desire to protect her children, to ensure that they had a warm, safe place to live free of tensions and fear, and space and time to allow her to seek appropriate practical and emotional assistance to recover from the trauma of her relationship breakdown, search for work, child care and accommodation. While Berry Street could provide all these supports through their programs, they could not, however, provide her with safe, reliable and affordable housing. The cost to Tina and her children is very high: they must remain separated while Tina waits for a place to live.


Belinda first came to the attention of Child Protection authorities when she was 13 years old. A school friend had disclosed that Belinda was in a sexual relationship with one of her mother’s partners, a man of 46 years of age, with the apparent consent of her mother. Belinda was placed in a residential unit, residing with three other children. From the outset her behaviour was extremely challenging. Most concerning was her insistence on trying to maintain contact with the man who had abused her and his persistence in trying to maintain contact and contact with her. With close supervision and individual therapeutic intervention, a slow process of engagement with Belinda began to see some improvement in her behaviour and in her sense of self worth. Over three years of intensive support Belinda developed into a stable, socially acceptable young woman who was able to take herself to and from school and reside in harmony with her peers in the residential unit. Furthermore, Belinda began to understand the disadvantages of continuing contact with her former abuser and learned ways of resisting his attempts to contact her and undermine her growing sense of self worth. Belinda is now nearing the age of 18 years. She currently resides in a Lead Tenant placement, having transitioned from Residential Care into this
semi-independent form of supportive care. She attends a TAFE Hospitality Course three days a week. Belinda has an intellectual disability and is a registered client of disability services. However, her disability and relatively successful social functioning make her ineligible for a Community Residential Unit, although it is recognised that Belinda needs ongoing and consistent support to maintain the gains she has made. Belinda’s housing options from this point are uncertain, limited and dangerous, and place her at risk of making poor choices that may take her down a pathway of rejection and abusive relationships. She is eligible, and has applied for, public housing but there is a three-year waiting list. In the meantime, she may enter the refuge system; she may apply for private rental but she has a limited income and little chance of supplementing her Centrelink payments; she may access further short term transitional housing - adding to her sense of uncertainty about the future - or she may return to the man who abused her when she was a child.

* Not their real names