

Submission by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) to the Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria



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About Relationships Australia Victoria

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is a community-based, not-for-profit, secular organisation that has been supporting Victorians since 1948. Our vision is for positive, respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships for all Australians.

RAV offers a diverse range of clinical services including counselling, therapeutic case management, family violence prevention, support and recovery services for men, women and children, including men's behaviour change programs, parenting programs, group programs and family dispute resolution (mediation). RAV is a Registered Training Organisation and delivers accredited training courses and professional development workshops.

Services are delivered through 15 principal centres, a Central Office and several additional outreach sites across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. RAV has over 70 years' practice expertise in delivering services and programs for individuals, families and communities affected by family violence, child protection issues, high conflict family law disputes, mental health difficulties and extreme climatic disasters including droughts, floods and bushfires.

RAV provides a range of services that are funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) to support people who have complex needs, including due to trauma. Our specialised trauma and family mental health services include our:

- Forced Adoption Support Service, which offers counselling, information and referral to those affected by past forced adoption practices;
- Redress Support Services for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse;
- i-Connect Family Mental Health Support Services (Bairnsdale), which delivers early intervention services to and supports children and young people aged under 18, who are at risk of, or affected by, mental illness, to stay connected and engaged in education and social activities.

Introductory Comments

Since 2015, through our Forced Adoption Support Services (FASS), we have supported mothers, adoptees, fathers, siblings, other relations of adoptees and relations of mothers. Applying a person-centred approach, we have worked with each individual client to tailor our service to meet their unique needs. Across our service delivery, some key themes in our service provision have become evident.

This paper responds to the Terms of Reference for the 'inquiry into support services and responses to the issue of historical forced adoptions in Victoria', by conveying the experiences and views of the clients we have supported within our Forced Adoption Support Service by outlining:

- Key themes regarding the impact of historic practices of forced adoption;
- How our service has responded to these key themes;
- Key themes of feedback expressed to us by our clients regarding support services;
- A summary of recommendations in response to systemic problems and failures.

The Experiences and Views of Our Forced Adoption Support Service Clients

1. Key Themes Regarding the Impact of Historic Practices of Forced Adoption

Trauma and Psycho-Social Impacts

Many of our clients have experienced trauma and enduring psychological harm as a result of forced adoption due to government policies at the time of their birth, and understandably, they have expressed frustration about the limited opportunities for their experiences to be heard and understood within the broader community. These reactions are common responses to complex trauma, and the misinformed government and agency historical practices of forced adoption that took away mothers' rights to make their own choices, and treated them inhumanely. Such experiences have lifelong impacts and irrevocably change the course of a person's life and development. Some of the traumatic symptoms that our clients have told us that they have experienced and/or continue to experience fit the diagnosis of chronic and complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and include depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, triggers, flashbacks, social anxiety, dissociation, sleeping disorders and hyper-arousal. We understand that these symptoms are indicators of having survived traumatic experiences, and are normal reactions to abnormal events. A cohort of our clients have endured multiple traumas, and themes of intersecting experiences of trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse and institutionalisation, have also emerged. It is not uncommon for RAV to be supporting clients through not only our FASS, but also concurrently through our Redress Support Service, which supports people affected by institutional child sexual abuse to apply for the National Redress Scheme.

Long-term mental and physical health impacts also emanate from trauma. For many clients, social isolation and relationship difficulties emerge, often stemming from a history of disrupted attachment and interpersonal trauma that is related to forced adoption. It is an all too common story that our clients spend their days in isolation, struggling with a myriad of complex physical and mental health issues. These ongoing impacts of trauma, as a result of forced adoption can also lead to financial difficulty or issues with the use of drugs and alcohol, most-frequently as a way of self-medicating the at-times, unbearable traumatic symptoms. Consequently, these financial and physical health impacts may decrease people's capacity to earn and sustain an income, leading to long-term financial difficulties.

Our approach to supporting clients in our FASS is to avoid pathologising and to instead move toward offering education about the impacts of trauma on the body, nervous system and brain, and to recognise, with compassion, how this in turn affects how they relate to and engage with the world and others in their daily lives.

We acknowledge the remarkable courage of our clients in speaking out about their experiences of forced adoption, in seeking support, and in surviving the inhumane government policies and practices of the time. The pain endured by our clients is severe, but their courage, inner strength and resilience in the face of the challenges is inspiring.

Disenfranchised Grief

We have observed disenfranchised grief as a shared theme among our clients affected by forced adoption. The grief of this group of clients is disenfranchised as it is not acknowledged by society and there is also no ritual to mark their loss. A large number of our clients have expressed that milestones, such as birthdays, festive seasons or life events, are triggering for them as their awareness of what they have lost through forced adoption is heightened. This can include the loss of a child, a parent, a sense of belonging and shared history, and a sense of knowing who they are, among other losses.

With grief and loss not being acknowledged by society in general, there is often a sense of secrecy and shame around the issue of forced adoption. When clients come to our service, they sometimes tell us this is the first time they have disclosed anything about their forced adoption to anyone, due to the secrecy surrounding the forced adoption situation in their families and communities.

Abandonment and Interpersonal Trauma

Experiences and continual fears of abandonment, and severe and long-lasting interpersonal trauma is often an intergenerational phenomenon for our clients. Our clients have shared with us how the impacts of forced adoption have led to relationship issues including relationship breakdown in their lives. Our clients are impacted by immense grief and loss, relating to both what they have lost in the past, and how this affects their present and future. The grief impacts on relationships as loss is a continual process - representing cumulative trauma - rather than a single-incident, traumatic event.

Impacts on Parenting

A history of forced adoption impacts people's experience of parenting, whether it be on a mother who has had more children, on a child/adult being parented by a mother affected by forced adoption, or on an adopted person's relationship with their own children. Mothers have expressed to us they were fearful of having children or of these children being taken away, as well as struggling to bond with their new child. Adoptees have reported that having a child of their own brought up their trauma of being forcibly adopted and this leading to anxiety about how to parent their child amid these trauma triggers. Importantly, we highlight that we are relaying experiences of many of our clients here, and are not in any way suggesting these challenges are the case for all parents and children with an experience of forced adoption.

Searching for, and Re-Connecting with Family

We provide our clients with assistance and support to access records, search for family and understand what the content of records may mean for them. We support our clients in the process of considering contact and actually contacting family members, and with the complexities, differing expectations and challenges that come with this journey. For many clients, searching and being re-connected with family is not possible because records are not available, or their biological family is not able or willing to reconnect.

Our clients have shared their experiences of the impact of forced adoption on their identity and sense of self. Many feel that their identity was taken away and they are missing key experiences and understandings, such as genetic mirroring and knowing or having a family history, and they experience triggers such as when they are continually asked if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and they are not able to answer as they don't know.

2. How Our Service Has Responded to These Key Themes

In response to the key themes identified, we offer our clients a service that meets them at the stage they are at in their journey of comprehending both their experiences of forced adoption and the impacts of forced adoption. We are aware of the complexity and diversity of our clients' lived experiences of forced adoption, and we therefore prioritise listening to our clients when they contact our service to firstly understand what it is they need. Once a clear understanding of their service needs is reached, we may offer our clients several different supports, as outlined below.

Currently, our service has a strong focus on counselling, however this was not always the case, as prior to November 2018 we were not funded to provide counselling. Frequent feedback from our clients, however, indicated that the service they most needed was counselling, and following a recent change to the funding guidelines, we redirected the focus of our FASS to counselling in 2019. We are grateful to our clients for informing us of their most significant service needs and for guiding us as during this transition. We have changed our service to respond to our clients' needs, and to provide support that is relevant and most beneficial to people in our community affected by forced adoption. As a result of this change, we have dedicated resources to ensure that our service delivery team are skilled and trained in contemporary, best-practice trauma-counselling, which enables us to provide a safe, supportive and effective counselling service.

Since this recent shift in focus to counselling, many clients have provided positive feedback about the change and how it has greatly improved our service and increased our ability to meet their needs. The introduction of a counselling service has helped our clients as counselling can assist in addressing the emotional, psychological and interpersonal impacts of forced adoption for which clients are often most needing support.

Our service delivery team have been trained in the history of forced adoption and related issues, and the impacts on the lives of people affected, and have now developed some expertise in this specialised field. Our clients have indicated that, prior coming to our service, they had sought support from numerous mainstream professionals whom they found to be unaware of, or uninformed about forced adoption and its impacts. The clients were relieved to find a specialised FASS that was specific to their needs. Acknowledging the other forced adoption services in Victoria, RAV has always taken the opportunity to inform our clients of other forced adoption and adoption-specific services in their community, of which they were not aware.

The FASS at RAV provides counselling through emotional support and psycho-education, and by supporting trauma recovery by firstly reframing forced adoption as a traumatic experience and consequently validating the symptoms of trauma that our clients have often been enduring for decades. All too often, our clients had not understood their symptoms of trauma, as their experience of forced adoption had not been understood as a trauma.

The FASS counselling program has a focus on supporting our clients to make complex decisions about how they would like to respond to their forced adoption-related circumstances, and to navigate the system. Specifically, this can involve deciding if they want to search for biological family members and pursue being reunited with a forcibly adopted child and/or their biological mother from whom they were forcibly removed.

There is often a very understandable sense of injustice at what happened to our clients as a result of forced adoption practices imposed by past governments and policies, and coming to terms with this injustice is a long and painful process. Despite many groups and individuals, numbering thousands, who are irrevocably impacted by forced adoption policies and practices for the rest of their lives, other than the government apologies at federal and state levels, there has been no official recognition and acknowledgement of what was done to those affected, nor have formal apologies been made by the agencies, hospitals, and institutions involved in the past practices of forced adoption.

We offer emotional and counselling support to assist our clients through decision making processes about their lives, which are related to forced adoption. There is significant uncertainty for someone pursuing reunification, and unforeseen events can unfold. The journey can involve disappointment and distress, but can also be rewarding and fulfilling. The outcome of searching, re-connecting or reunification cannot be predicted, and we help our clients to cope with this uncertainty and to manage the consequences.

Additionally, we assist clients to search for adoption-related records, and we inform them of their options and rights through the provision of up-to-date information regarding search avenues and services. While this is not a core focus of our service, due to other searching-specific agencies that exist and are funded by DSS, we find our service is effective in providing our clients with information about these services, referring them, and supporting them to access and engage with such searching agencies.

RAV's FASS also provides regular Small Grants Funding to eligible groups and organisations, to build capacity and enhance support for people affected by past forced adoption policies and practices. Funding has a diverse range of supported projects and activities, including the examples of art therapy workshops, creative writing, the digitalisation of photographs of babies, children and children's homes to protect and increase access to archival materials, professional development for support group facilitators, events, the publication of forced adoption community awareness-raising materials and the establishment of a memorial statue in Sale, Gippsland.

3. Key Themes of Feedback Expressed to Us by Our Clients Regarding Support Services and Responses

We have learned a great deal from our clients about what is still needed and what could be improved in terms of responses to historic forced adoption practices.

Limited Awareness of Forced Adoption in the Mainstream Service Sector

Our clients share common experiences of receiving services from numerous professionals who are unaware of, or uninformed about, the issue of forced adoption or its impacts, resulting in clients finding themselves in the position of educators. Our clients have reported that, prior to the recent National Apology for Forced Adoptions, by the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard, on 21 March 2013, it was not common knowledge that forced adoptions occurred in Australia. This highlights the importance of, and need for, extensive, ongoing education. The Australian Psychological Society was previously funded to deliver such educational training, and further funding and promotion of such training would be one avenue to educate services, agencies and professionals, through a diverse range of accredited training bodies.

Limited Access to Records

Our clients express frustration and, at times, despair, at not being able to find information and answers to questions about their forced adoption history, as numerous agencies do not have a legal mandate to release records, or comply with record searching.

Insufficient Resources to Reach Regional Areas

Our clients have expressed anger around how the government has responded to historical forced adoption. Most importantly, our clients have informed us that there is an ongoing lack of funding for adequate services to enable affected people to access face-to-face counselling; a service that is critical and essential. Clients have indicated that services are inaccessible and often too far from away from where they live, or there are insufficient group programs available to them.

While we have focused on increasing the face-to-face component of our service delivery, our resources remain too limited to deliver face-to-face services in all geographical areas of Victoria. This means that many clients can only receive services via telephone calls, and while most clients understand the limitations of our service, many do express that a face-to-face service experience would enhance the healing, recovery and supportive impacts of our program.

4. Summarised Recommendations That May Respond to Systemic Problems and Failures

The Forced Adoption Support Service be Funded into the Future

Given the aforementioned complex and long-term traumatic impacts of forced adoption and the long-lasting effects on relationships, finances, health and wellbeing, it is recommended that Forced Adoption Support Services receive extended funding to allow clients to access support in the long-term. The experience of forced adoption is not an issue that is resolved or goes away; it is rather something that has life-long cumulative traumatic impacts, and therefore many people require life-long support.

The Forced Adoption Support Service, and Other Forced Adoption Specific Services Receive Increased Funding

As detailed above, while people living in regional areas of Victoria can receive support from RAV's FASS, they cannot always access face-to-face support from RAV or support groups delivered by other organisations. Adequately servicing regional Victoria to ensure that people are not disadvantaged in accessing services because of where they live requires extensive, increased resourcing for face-to-face services, or the adoption of video and tele-health resources.

An increase in funding resources would enable practitioners providing services at agencies such as RAV to travel and deliver services in more remote parts of the state on an ongoing basis. It would also enhance FASS providers' capacity to deliver services via digital platforms such as video technology, to clients who live in remote and rural areas.

An increase in funding for small grants would also enable RAV to expand its support of existing and new projects that increase awareness of forced adoption, and would help to enhance access to support for those affected by forced adoption, including through support groups in metropolitan and regional areas that are delivered by adoption support organisations. While meeting the requirements of the Small Grants Funding guidelines, this would allow agencies and groups to self-determine what best meets the needs of their members and community, including information awareness, support groups, healing and recovery, and artistic and creative enterprises such as art therapy and creative writing, to enable the expression of self, identity and connection to their life journey and community.

Continuing Education on Forced Adoption for Health, Social and Community Service Sector Professionals

It is recommended that further resources be dedicated towards educating professionals across all health, social and community service sectors about the issue and impacts of forced adoption. Such education, in conjunction with increased funding, would also support the expansion of face-to-face services throughout Victoria, as awareness and capacity/competency to deliver services would be increased.

Increased Forced Adoption Related Records Access and Lifting of the Statute of Limitations

It is recommended that the relevant agencies' policies on record access and searching be reviewed, with the outcome of increasing access to records for people affected by forced adoption, and that the statute of limitations which prevents prosecution of the institutions involved, be lifted. The statute of limitations presents barriers to victims accessing justice. In many cases of child sexual abuse, the statute of limitations has been lifted, and the same actions in relation to forced adoption would allow similar rights for those affected by forced adoption.

Recognition, Compensation and Support

The policies and practices that allowed forced adoption were unconscionable and inhumane. The inter-generational trauma and ongoing distress experienced by many Australians impacted by forced adoption is profound and debilitating. The level of distress and ongoing trauma that is experienced by people impacted by forced adoption is perpetuated by the combination of historical callous indifference, and current limited or inadequate responses. Currently, those affected by forced adoption cannot receive the level of recognition, compensation and support that is being provided to other people who have been traumatised by institutions in our community, such as those affected by institutional child sexual abuse.

We recommend that the Victorian government take concrete steps to implement processes to recognise the impacts of forced adoption.

In representing the views and wishes of our clients for further investigation into and recognition of the impacts of forced adoption, we recommend a transparent, independent, formal government-supported investigation. This investigation should have the power to compel parties to provide evidence into past forced adoption policies and practices, including those within medical professions and institutions involved in past forced adoption.

We also advocate for consideration to be given to the implementation of a scheme that is comparable to the current National Redress Scheme, which could provide three separate components for those affected by forced adoption:

- access to counselling separate to any existing investigation or inquiry;
- a Redress monetary acknowledgement and compensation for the long-term impacts of forced adoption; and
- acknowledgement and recognition, for those who want it, through a direct personal response (a direct apology) from the institutions, hospitals, private clinics or agencies involved in the forced adoption. A direct apology such as this is needed in addition to the existing Victorian and National Australian Government apologies.