



PeakCare
Queensland Inc.



ChildProtectionPeak



Media Release

Friday July 22, 2016

Community services sector speaks out about child protection reforms

In the midst of intense public scrutiny again being placed on the delivery of child protection services in Queensland, the State's key child protection peak bodies have elected to speak out about matters that are of most concern to them.

"The responsibility for delivering family support and child protection services is not held solely by the State Government and its departments," says Executive Director of PeakCare Lindsay Wegener. "The reality is that many of these services are actually provided by non-government organisations".

"As a collective of non-government peak bodies, we claim our right therefore to state our opinions, have our expertise recognised and our voices heard by both the elected government of the day and by opposition parties about all matters concerning the future of child protection and family support policy and services", says Lindsay.

"Our organisations are not politically aligned", says Bryan Smith, Chief Executive Officer of Foster Care Queensland. "Our advice is provided therefore without fear or favour and is based solely on our understandings about the best interests of children and their families, and in the case of my organisation, the needs and experiences of thousands of foster and kinship carers across the State who, on a daily basis, offer their hearts and homes to children in need".

"Due to the strong collaboration that takes place across our organisations, each of us is well qualified and equipped to speak to our respective areas of expertise as well as locate our commentary within an overarching concern about the pressures and challenges being faced by children, families and communities within today's society", says Lindsay Wegener.

“Amongst the shared concerns held by our organisations is the grossly disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children and families at all points of the child protection system, not only within Queensland, but nation-wide,” says Natalie Lewis, Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak.

“And first and foremost, our organisations both individually and collectively, hold the safety, well-being and best interests of children – both those who are living within their own families and those who are living away from their care – as a primary concern,” says Lucas Moore, Queensland State Coordinator of the CREATE Foundation.

“The public has, of course, a right to feel confident in the quality and effectiveness of the services being provided to protect Queensland children from harm,” says Lindsay Wegener. “And governments should be held to account for their performance”.

“Well-publicised data recently released by the Government clearly suggest that increased attention needs to be placed on reducing the time taken to respond to reports of suspected child abuse or neglect,” says Bryan Smith. “The data also shows however some very promising indications of system improvements that have arisen out of implementing recommendations of the year-long Carmody Inquiry into Child Protection that was concluded in July 2013.

“Close to 10,000 families accessed newly established Family and Child Connect Services and the number of intakes to Child Safety Service Centres has fallen by close to 16%, around 20,000 in total, which suggests that the investment that has been made in prevention and early intervention services is starting to take effect.”

“It was almost exactly three years ago that our organisations welcomed the tabling of the Carmody Inquiry Report and two years ago that we welcomed the former LNP government’s release of its response to the Inquiry’s recommendations,” says Natalie Lewis. “We applauded, and continue to applaud, the former government for backing their commitment to implementing the 10 year Roadmap recommended by the Carmody Inquiry with a \$406 million investment over five years. We similarly applaud the current government for continuing and building on that investment.”

“Three years after release of the Carmody Inquiry report, it is now ironic to revisit and read the foreword to that report,” says Lindsay Wegener. “Within the foreword, Tim Carmody described child protection as one of the most vexing areas of public policy and identified three main causes of systemic failure – too little money spent on early intervention, a risk-averse culture that over-reacts or over-compensates for hostile

media and community scrutiny, and linked with this, a tendency for all parts of society to shift responsibility onto Child Safety.

“The child protection system is yet again under the spotlight and facing intense community scrutiny. In an almost prophetic manner, Tim Carmody’s words can be taken as a warning about how all elected officials, government and non-government organisations and their personnel, the media and the public as a whole should now be responding to this current high level of scrutiny being placed on child protection if the best outcomes are to be achieved for all Queensland children and families.”

“If mistakes have been made or shortfalls identified in the ways in which Child Safety, or indeed any government or non-government organisation has delivered their services, then of course they must be fixed and fixed quickly – the well-being of our children is precious to us all,” says Natalie Lewis. “In the process of doing so however, none of our organisations wish to see a de-railing of the progress being achieved in reforming the child protection system.

“Both sides of politics have acknowledged that the grossly disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within statutory child protection systems across Australia is unacceptable. To address this intractable issue, a sustained and focussed commitment is needed and I am deeply concerned that in the process of politicising tragic events, there is a significant risk that reactive, risk averse policy responses will emerge that undermine the intent of the Carmody recommendations, sabotage any chance of positive systemic change and detract from our goal of eliminating the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander within a generation”, says Natalie Lewis.

“The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry recognised that the out-of-home care system was struggling to cope with the rising numbers of children living their lives in care; a shift was needed to ensure that the system is able to provide appropriate support to those children for whom there is no other option,” says Lucas Moore. “To ensure better outcomes for children and young people in care we need the recommendations of this Inquiry to be fully implemented; we need thorough follow through on our promise to vulnerable young people.”

“This is a time for scrutinising very carefully the accuracy and credibility of the information being put forward as public commentary,” says Lindsay Wegener. “And it is a time for well-informed and well-considered responses.”

“Of enormous concern to our organisations is the recently released data that suggests that families who are encountering the child protection system are now, more than

ever, experiencing a greater complexity and multiplicity of issues impacting on their capacity to parent their children safely and well,” says Bryan Smith. “This was also flagged by Tim Carmody in the foreword to the Inquiry report when he described the spread of social disadvantage due to stressors such as poverty, substance use and addiction, mental illness, social isolation and exclusion as seriously concerning.

“Tim Carmody was right – it is seriously concerning – and it will require a massive collaborative effort within and across all levels of government, the community services sector and the public as a whole if we are ever, as a society, truly going to value and protect children in the ways that we should.”

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