

**Opening Statement
The Honourable Judy Spence, MP, Minister for Families**

Crime and Misconduct Commission

12.30 for 1.00 pm - Monday, 13 October 2003

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address you today.

I want to make it clear at the outset that the Government welcomes this inquiry.

It comes at a time when our child protection system generally, and the foster care system specifically, is under unprecedented scrutiny.

I believe that this inquiry, and the recommendations that flow from it, will play a constructive role in the continuing reform of the child protection system.

The outcome that we all want from this - is to protect Queensland's children.

One of the hardest issues for the community generally to come to grips with is that ultimately, and sadly, there are always going to be children in our community who do not have the benefit of a warm, loving and safe family environment.

There are children who suffer the consequences of exposure to prolonged periods of domestic violence; substance and alcohol abuse; neglect and from simply being unloved. For many of us – that is unimaginable.

For too many children– that is the reality.

Resolving how we can best help these children and give them an equitable opportunity to reach their potential - despite the circumstances they were born into - has to be our priority.

I have always been personally committed to this goal. That is why I welcome this inquiry.

I want to make it clear that this Government is committed to making the whole system more transparent and accountable so there is a high degree of scrutiny.

Where improvements can be made to strengthen accountability, the Government will do so.

I have already announced audit and review teams to allow closer scrutiny of child protection workers' decisions, making child protection workers more aware of the latest risk assessment practices and deploying child record improvement teams in our offices.

This will ensure that those who have responsibilities for children, be they foster carers, the Department of Families, or other agencies, fulfil their obligations and that children achieve better outcomes.

In terms of child death reviews the new Coroners Act specifically empowers the coroner to examine deaths of children in care.

In the past five years this Government has undertaken one of the most far-reaching reforms this State and this Department has seen. It has been a very painful and difficult journey and it is far from finished.

It is a matter of record that successive past Queensland Government's did not invest enough in the social infrastructure and resources to leave today's Queenslanders properly equipped to deal with the increasing rate of notifications.

But I believe that the situation in Queensland should be seen in context.

No child protection system in this country, including those with resourcing levels above Queensland, has managed the increase in suspected child abuse and neglect that we have witnessed in the past ten years without problems.

In the past five years, the Beattie Government has delivered unprecedented budgetary increases to the Department of Families – taking it from \$196.5 million in 1997 /98 to \$404 million.

In five years - an increase of 103 per cent.

Our spending on child protection and out of home care has gone from 76.8 million in 1998 /99 to \$171million and that's an accumulative investment of \$574.9 million.

The number of front line child protection workers has almost doubled.

But while our investments in both resources and staffing have increased dramatically, it is also clear that the notification rates – across Australia – have significantly increased.

The drivers behind the notification rates have changed significantly from being largely economic from 30 years ago to a far more complex web of factors including increasing substance abuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, family mobility, expanded definitions of what constitutes child protection issues; a dramatic increase in community awareness and expectations and a greater willingness to report suspected child abuse and neglect.

Many other jurisdictions, both domestic and international, have undertaken major reviews of legislation and child protection infrastructure because, like Queensland they face the combination of high staff turn over; increasing demand for services; increasing complexity of cases; and lack of foster carers.

Since 1998, we have introduced a comprehensive set of legislative changes and policies aimed at improving the entire system. These are outlined in the government submission and I would refer you to page 13.

This government is committed to improving the outcomes for Queensland's children – and I would refer you to page 18 of our submission for a complete outline of those commitments.

But achieving transformational change is a long-term strategy and takes time. It is not simply about resourcing.

It is also about changing the way we work, shifting the organisational culture away from its basis of church/charity/welfare to a highly professional career of choice, helping staff to improve their professional standards and practice, providing better information and technology so they can more accurately track and manage the well being of children and removing some of the historic blockages to the sharing of information. It's slow and hard work. I am committed to that.

Staffing

Firstly, I want to place on the public record my personal recognition of the immense commitment and dedication shown by those who work to protect children from harm.

They deal with the consequences and trauma that are linked with neglect and abuse and they deal with situations that are simply beyond the experiences or imagination of most of us here today. Their work is complex and stressful.

The recruitment and retention of a skilled and professional workforce is a major challenge. That is true not just of Queensland but also in other jurisdictions.

We have significantly increased the number of child protection workers. But 28 per cent of those workers have been employed by the Department of Families for less than 12 months with 60 per cent having served three years or less.

Our workforce suffers from a significant staff turn over – the separation rate for Family Services Officers is 15.8 per cent – anecdotally we know that is similar to other states.

The media exposure they receive is generally negative; they are viewed as someone to be feared because, their work involves dealing with angry and often traumatised families.

Generally, they have an ill-defined career path. We are addressing these issues in terms of their training and professional practice. Reforms within the workforce lead to better results for children; better decisions and more effective interventions.

The Government has already introduced the Quality Performance Statement and Collaborative Area Office Reviews; additional funding has been allocated to staff training and development requirements.

The Government is also progressing the appointment of additional Senior Practitioners to Regional Offices. These expert staff will work with child protection staff to improve the skill base.

This is important because it improves our capacity to make sure that the initial decisions are the best decisions. For the first time, each region will have a Senior Practitioner. In addition, the Department of Families is trialling new service delivery approaches within Area Offices to strengthen specialist advice and support to staff.

I recently announced an additional one million dollar training and reform package as part of a series of on going reforms.

The additional training will also help child protection workers build a career path, stay in their jobs longer, and apply their experience to child protection. The Government will also strengthen partnerships with universities, guaranteeing that undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications are more relevant to future child protection workers.

It comes on top of the \$3.8 million set aside for staff training this financial year.

Quality assurance and improvement

Effective quality improvement processes within the Department of Families are a priority and much work has been done to support consistency and transparency of professional practice.

This year, the Department developed a Quality Performance Statement and implemented a program of Area Office reviews to ensure consistency and transparency across the State.

These are teams who will visit area offices – sometimes once a year if the office is performing well, and more frequently if not. They will randomly examine files, notifications, assessments, talk to foster carers, talk with children in foster care to make sure that the best decision possible is being made at the front end.

If we can ensure we are making good consistent decisions early, then the support and services needed to help children are better identified and appropriate.

Coupled with other initiatives, this provides the Department with a greater capacity to monitor and compare office performance across the State.

This year the Department has improved the collection of performance data from all Area Offices and bolstered its capacity for review and evaluation of case management decisions.

Foster Carers and Alternative Care

It has been generally accepted that family based care is the best thing for children.

It seeks to maintain a sense of connection and normalcy through the protection of the family unit.

This is especially important for children who have already suffered a great deal and who may be suffering the trauma of having been removed from their family environment. For many children this has worked.

The foster carers I have met are good, decent, hardworking people who take on an amazing workload.

As I have said consistently, they are the ultimate community volunteers who form the backbone of the child protection system.

And it clearly needs to be understood that they are dealing with some highly traumatised children and young people whose life experience, even at an early age, are outside what most of us can imagine.

Approximately 56 per cent of children in alternative care have moderate needs – that is counselling, remedial tuition and regular meetings with a caseworker. 26 per cent have high needs requiring additional specialist help for serious emotional, medical or behavioural problems; 13 per cent have complex needs – usually health conditions or disabilities and or challenging behaviours which have an impact on the child or young person's daily life and 4 per cent have extremely complex needs requiring a constant level of supervision and care.

This usually involves multiple potentially life threatening health or disability conditions and extreme challenging behaviours.

Currently, there are 168 children and young people across this state who cannot be placed with foster carers. They are maintained by funding packages tailored to meet specific needs – and the cost this year to maintain those will be more than \$16 million. These models of care include a 24 hour rostered model with teams of youth workers providing support to ensure the young person is not self harming or exposing others to harm. The average cost of this model is around \$200,000 a year.

Some young people with significant disabilities and extreme challenging behaviours are cared for in a variety of accommodation types provided by community organisations. The cost for these ranges from \$80,000 a year to the most extreme case of \$500,000.

As in every other jurisdiction, there are difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster carers. As I have outlined in the submission (page 18), the Government will review recruitment strategies, payment and support structures offered to foster carers and we are also investigating alternative placement models of care for children whose needs cannot be met in foster care.

Last year three important initiatives started.

Thirty one alternative care workers were allocated across the state with the aim of significantly strengthening the department's capacity to recruit and support foster carers and relative carers.

Five agencies were funded to trial new models of residence to meet the needs of young people aged between 12 to 18 years; and

For the first time there were trials of short term respite for foster carers aimed at providing planned time out for them and help preserve relationships and placements.

The foster care system, as we know it, was developed from a volunteer/welfare model. It can be traced back to the Orphanages Act 1879 which made provision for paid foster mothers an option to institutional care.

The fact that we do not pay foster carers – but provide an allowance – reinforces the volunteer aspect. Frankly, the level of complexity and demand for specialist services means that the foster care system, as we know it, is not the best choice for some young people.

There is a nationwide trend towards the professionalisation of foster care, including the development of therapeutic or treatment foster care to deal with children and young people with complex support needs.

We have conducted an extensive recruitment campaign to increase the pool of available carers but being a foster carer is an extremely difficult and demanding job.

Last year we recruited 863 carers while 558 carers exited the system.

The survey by the Australian Foster Care Association indicated that the majority (60 per cent) of foster carers are aged between 40 and 60 years of age.

We are seeing an increasing use of relatives and limited approval carers who meet the needs of specific children but are not part of the general pool of carers.

Anecdotally we know there are an increasing number of grandparents out there who are taking on the parenting role for the second time.

They are facing great pressure because if they do not have formal guardianship of the child through the family court or the child is not under a child protection order, then they do not qualify for either federal or state assistance.

The pressure on the foster care system is compounded by Queensland's low levels of residential services and the over reliance on home based care.

Domestic and international research says that stability in care is a significant influence on improving outcomes for children in care.

It is critical that there is a philosophical move away from the idea that ultimately, the child's best interests are served by reunifying the family.

If a child has a safe and stable placement with a relative carer or foster carer; if they are more comfortable remaining with those carers, then we should provide the necessary options for that to happen.

Stopping the Drift, a discussion paper I released for public consultation this year examines a range of options that will provide avenues to improve these young people's lives by addressing the very damaging drift many of our young people suffer. I want to encourage the use of long-term guardianship for children when it's appropriate; I do not accept – as I have made clear before – that reunification is invariably the goal of the child protection system.

The goal of the child protection system is – and must always be – the safety of the child.

That principle should and must override any belief in the “least intrusive” option or any belief – no matter how well intended – that reunification of a family should be the primary aim.

In terms of the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies and the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system

There are several inter-related issues here that need to be examined.

Firstly, 25 per cent of children and young people in the alternative care system are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. But indigenous children and young people represent just 5.7 per cent of their age range.

Approximately 69 per cent of those in care have been placed in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

Essentially the purpose of this was to preserve the sense of identity by maintaining their own family, community and culture. This is done in consultation with a recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency – usually an AICCA.

This has become problematic.

Firstly there are a range of problems with the AICCA's involving lapses in quality of service delivery; an inability to respond to requests for service; an inability to comply with reasonable levels of administrative probity, including evidence of mismanagement of funds.

The failure of some Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies is a serious issue – and I have released an options paper to examine ways of improving their effectiveness. It is not just a concern for Queensland. The federal Government also recently announced a national review of the AICCA's following their failure in other states and territories.

Secondly, there is the increased reliance on relative care. We recognise that this is an issue for both indigenous and non-indigenous communities with approximately 36 per cent of children and young people being placed with relative carers as at June 30 this year. But the key question remains – will this placement achieve the goal of protecting this child from harm – and keeping the child safe?

As well, there is also shortage of indigenous foster carers – with the end result that to comply with this principle, too few indigenous foster carers are looking after too many children.

Information sharing

Effective case management also requires good sharing of information between agencies in contact with children in care or at risk.

Good outcomes for children involve considering educational, health, stability and security. One can not be considered in isolation from the others.

Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect teams (SCAN) provide multidisciplinary responses to instances of serious harm to a child.

These teams operate in major regional centres in Queensland, with core membership comprising officers from the Department of Families, the Queensland Police Service and a Queensland Health appointed medical practitioner.

Other representatives, including non-government agencies, are co-opted to the team when additional information or expertise is required.

New protocols for information sharing between key government departments are being trialled.

Advocacy and Accountability

I acknowledge we have not always listened well enough to the views of children about their care.

It may be difficult to get children and young people to participate in reviewing and determining their care – but it is evident that children in foster care need to have more of a say in decisions about their lives.

The CREATE Foundation is currently funded to provide systems advocacy for children and young people in care.

The government's submission to the inquiry proposes to expand this role through increased funding.

Information Systems

Fundamental to improving the care of children is the need for accurate and accessible information – about their health, about their history, their education and their family.

I have recently announced that Client Record Improvement teams will be going to area offices to ensure their filing systems and record keeping are overhauled and maintained at a high standard. We need to make sure that all client files are completed and it's easier to record and retrieve that information. That also means staff will be trained in how to manage records so that information sharing can be improved.

There are mechanisms in place to track which Initial Assessments and Notifications are outstanding, but there are no similar mechanisms to monitor whether placement agreements, case discussion meetings or family meetings are being held regularly.

As part of the Future Directions commitment last year, \$12 million was allocated to the development of a new Integrated Client Management System (ICMS) to respond to the inadequacies of the existing system in terms of recording and accessing relevant data to support decision-making.

The anticipated benefits of the new system will be evidenced through greater efficiency, consistency and quality of service.

These funds will also be used to trial new technologies aimed at speeding up data entry and information management into the system:

- Accelerating a risk assessment decision support system, in conjunction with the ICMS;
- Continuing work on data integrity in Area Offices; and
- Instituting consistent record keeping.

While I am ultimately accountable as Minister, the Director-General is the accountable officer for the day-to-day operations of the department.

In terms of public administration, this has always been the case.

I have a global strategic view of where the department should be going, and key input into the overall policy and legislative direction of the department.

I can give you detailed answers about government policy and direction.

However when it comes to the day to day operations of a regional office– detailed information is the province of the Director-General, to whom regional directors report. Senior Departmental Officers are available for questions.