

Gippsland foster care shortage 'at crisis point'

By Stephanie Anderson

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A child welfare group in Gippsland, Victoria, says the sector is in crisis because there are not enough foster carers to meet demand.

There has been an increase of more than 25 per cent in the number of child protection cases in Gippsland in the past year.

The area has been identified as having the highest rate of children in care in the state of Victoria.

The regional director of child welfare group Berry Street, Trish McCluskey, says a generation of foster carers is retiring and no-one is stepping in to take their place.

"We've seen people ageing out of care and retiring from having done it for a long time, and new people [are not] taking on that role," Ms McCluskey said.

"Unless we can recruit and retain foster carers, I think the whole sector is going to face an enormous crisis."

Ms McCluskey says foster parents should be recognised as professionals and paid a wage that is in line with full-time work.

She says if numbers of carers continue to fall, the consequences will be dire.

"What is already starting to be a crisis will be a catastrophe if we don't do something," she said.

Naomi Dessent, who has been a carer for more than a decade, says being a foster carer is "like being a parent" and is rewarding despite its challenges.

"You make a difference every day," Ms Dessent said.

"Sometimes that difference might be that they get food in their lunchbox.

"Sometimes that difference might be that that person has a very strong connection with you and will remain part of your life forever."

Ms McCluskey says there is a push towards kinship care where another family member takes care of a child, but it needs to be properly resourced.



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