



# Who'll care for the kids?

As an increasing number of children enter foster care, more carers are leaving the system, saying it is in chaos and near collapse. By **Rachel Kleinman.**

**F**ive times a day, every day, Robyn Reynolds feeds Ethan through a tube in his stomach. She changes his nappies, manages his medication and more or less attends to his every need.

Ethan is severely disabled, born with a condition called hydranencephaly, which means parts of his brain are missing, those parts being replaced by fluid. He is a beautiful child, with clear skin and big, brown eyes. He will never speak, crawl or walk, he is legally blind and needs constant care. At six years of age, he is regarded as a long-term survivor of his condition.

The bond between Robyn and Ethan is remarkable. She always sits close to him, stroking his cheek when his breathing becomes congested, lifting him in and out of his wheelchair, speaking words of love and encouragement.

The bond is even more remarkable given that Robyn didn't meet Ethan until he was nearly one year old. Now he lives under her family's roof and is an integral part of their lives.

Robyn and her husband Derek are foster carers. They first took Ethan in December 2008 and became his permanent carers in December 2013. They have three adult children and a comfortable lifestyle in Glen Iris. Robyn is a former nurse who cares for Ethan and another foster child full-time, while Derek is a property

developer.

"When Ethan first came to us, I got a phone call saying, 'We've got this little boy, and he will die in your care, possibly soon,'" Robyn says. "They brought him around and I said yes on the spot... he was absolutely gorgeous.

My kids fell in love with him straight away."

While Robyn, 48, glows when she talks about the joy and satisfaction caring for Ethan brings, many carers fear the system is on the verge of collapse.

In 2012, 453 Victorian families quit being foster carers. Overall, more than 1500 families are registered, with about 1200 fostering in any one year. But each year the number of people entering the system is smaller than those who leave it.

Meanwhile, in the decade between 2002 and 2012, Victoria experienced a 58 per cent increase in the number of children in out-of-home care (foster care, residential care, kinship care, permanent care), with numbers rising from 3918 to 6207. And the over-representation of Aboriginal children within this system has increased rapidly in that time.

The scarcity of foster places is fueling concerns that increasing numbers of vulnerable children will remain at risk in their family homes.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria, is the state's peak body for foster care and operates a support hotline for carers. It says foster care will disappear within the next three years unless

changes are made.

The association wants better reimbursement and support for carers and will target the Coalition government leading into this year's state election, including Community Services Minister Mary Wooldridge and Premier Denis Napthine, who has been a foster carer.

At present, carers are forced to top up the money needed from their own pockets because reimbursements fall well short of covering the true cost of care. And Victoria provides lower payments to foster carers than anywhere else in Australia.

On any one night in Victoria, up to 1500 kids are looked after by foster carers - dubbed by Anglicare chief executive Paul McDonald as "quiet heroes". But for all their heroism, many are sick of the system.

Jen Borrelli, 45, describes foster care as her passion. She has three children of her own aged 20, 19 and 15. Since starting eight years ago, Jen and husband Mark, 46, have looked after 26 children. Many of them have been newborn babies of drug-addicted parents. Mark is a mechanic, while Jen stays at home in Craigieburn and dedicates her life to caring for kids.

One child, Daniel, 6, has been in their care since he was three days old. They are now his permanent carers. But she fears she may have to give up her passion and return to the workplace. "Our house is falling down around us and we can't afford to fix it," she says. "You get a child coming into





care and they walk in your front door with absolutely nothing other than what they're wearing.

"The basic allowance is \$279 a fortnight. You think about a baby that needs nappies, formula, bottles, medical expenses, petrol to drive them around and clothes. Everything has to come from us. It's why we're losing carers."

Borrelli says they will do their best to get through the year, but she may have to find a job outside the home. "Which is going to be horrible because I'll be just another one who has to give it up and I'm good at this - my family is good at this."

She is angry that foster carers are often not consulted or informed about issues relating to children in their care. She tells of one recent example where a six-year-old girl was in her family's care. "There was a day when she was at school and she was taken out of school to visit her mum without my knowledge. When I picked her up

that afternoon, her first words were: 'You didn't tell me they were coming today'.

"It broke my heart, I felt like I let her down." Borrelli says this experience is frustrating after spending months gaining a child's trust.

Some problems stem from the complexity of a system that includes the state's child protection services, foster care agencies, the carers themselves, the family of origin and the courts.

There is little cohesion and planning within the sector. Some workers are so disparaging of it they refuse to call it a system. "The problem is there is no system," one says. And, according to others, a lack of political will is getting in the way of change.

Horror stories abound of children being moved on from placement to placement with no sense of security or stability. One child was in foster care for only four weeks but stayed with four different families in that time.

Foster care agency Berry Street is

calling for the sector to be professionalised, which would mean better training and support for carers, more adequate remuneration, superannuation and tax breaks. At present, carers cannot get super if they opt out of the workforce to look after other people's vulnerable children.

Berry Street public policy director Julian Pocock says Victoria's reimbursement lags well behind other states. For example, a Victorian family receives \$165 a week for a 10-year-old child in foster care, the lowest assistance in Australia. "This is \$67 below the NSW allowance of \$232 a week," Pocock says.

Berry Street wants a fee or wage for foster carers, similar to a system already operating in Britain and parts of the US.

Anglicare is Victoria's biggest foster care provider. McDonald wrote to federal Social Services Minister Kevin





Andrews in December, advocating for tax breaks on carer payments. The Victorian government supports this measure, but the Commonwealth has so far ignored these calls.

The minister's office told *The Age* the federal government already offered financial support through family assistance and childcare payments. "[However] the Australian government recognises the challenges faced in maintaining effective and sustainable out-of-home care systems," a statement said.

As more children enter the system, kinship care has increased significantly. In some circumstances this works but agencies argue that sometimes this isn't the best option because extended family members aren't subjected to the same checks and balances as foster carers.

The state government defends its record on out-of-home care. In a statement, Wooldridge says \$3 million has been committed to examine the case plan of every child under 10 who has been in care for an extended period. This review will determine if family reunification is achievable and, if it is not, help find a permanent solution.

The government also funds the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to recruit foster carers and it has earmarked \$91 million from this year's budget to expand out-of-home care. While agencies applaud the state government and Wooldridge for establishing the 2010 Protecting Vulnerable Children Inquiry and the subsequent Cummins report, they say it needs to do more.

One Cummins report recommendation was a five-year out-of-home care plan, which the state government is due to release this month. Wooldridge says this plan aims to improve outcomes for children in out-of-home care, help to slow growth in the num-

bers of children in such care, and create a more sustainable, efficient and effective system.

But the sector is not hopeful of a desperately needed fillip.

"Is this going to be a plan about a plan, or a plan of action?" McDonald says.

The system also suffers gaps in monitoring and information-gathering. The Department of Human Services was unable to provide statistics such as the average length of time a child stays in foster care, the percentage of children entering care who eventually go back to their birth parents, and the average cost of keeping a child in foster care.

Critics say this is symptomatic of a system in chaos.

Many carers and agencies say legislative reform is needed to move kids more quickly from foster care into permanent arrangements. NSW has implemented legal changes designed to tighten timeframes and reduce uncertainty for children. There are rumours that Victoria may follow suit in the coming months.

"The system is too weighted towards the parents," Borrelli says. "This comes at the expense of the kids. [The birth parents] get chance after chance [to get their children back], showing no signs of change. Meanwhile, the children don't know where they stand."

One carer told Fairfax Media she would never foster again after the stress of waiting years to gain permanent care of a child.

Katie Hooper, chief executive of the Foster Care Association of Victoria and a foster carer herself, says legislation lets children "drift in the system for extended periods".

"One example is a family that is fostering a little boy now seven. They took him into care at eight months old and he's still on a custody order. We really

need to look at that and ask what is in the best interests of the child," Hooper says.

Jeremy Sammut, a research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies, says a radical overhaul of the system is needed. Rather than professionalised foster care, he wants to see early adoption.

"I support the idea that for children under one year old, decisions about permanency need to be made within six months - realistic decisions about whether parents are able to get their act together and, for kids older than one, a year would be a reasonable timeframe," he says.

Many fear that, if the foster care system does collapse, there will be a return to institutionalised care for children. The number of children in residential care rose by 9 per cent to 496 between 2010 and 2011 (the most recent available figures).

Residential care is known to produce poorer outcomes for children and is expensive. The Foster Care Association estimates keeping one child in residential care costs the Victorian taxpayer more than \$380,000 a year, a massive amount compared to the average of \$9000-\$10,000 foster carers receive each year per child.

Despite the fear and uncertainty that loom over foster care in Victoria, Robyn and Derek Reynolds remain committed and positive about the future. "Foster care gives meaning and purpose to our life. When we go to our graves we want to know we have helped these kids and made their lives better," Derek says.

Rachel Kleinman is a Melbourne journalist.

Twitter: rachelekleinman  
The Victorian Foster Care Line  
1800 013088







**'Foster care gives meaning and purpose to our life. When we go to our graves we want to know we have helped these kids and made their lives better.'**

Jen Borrelli with her children (from left) Ben, 15, Dan, 20 and Daniel, 6, who has been in her care since he was three days old. Bottom left: Robyn Reynolds with her foster child Ethan, 6.

Photos: Wayne Taylor