

## Saving Victoria's foster care system

For the past 100 years, foster care has been the main way the Victorian community has cared for children removed from their families for reasons of abuse, neglect or family violence. However, foster care in Victoria is in rapid decline leaving more children at risk of not receiving the care they need. Over the past five years in Victoria many more households and families have left the foster care system than have volunteered to become carers. Financial stress on carers has continued to grow and carers are reporting feeling disrespected by a system that fails to recognise their knowledge and expertise and fails to fully support them in their role.

For the care of a ten-year old child in foster or kinship care Victoria provides the lowest and most inadequate assistance to volunteer carers of only \$165 per week. This is \$100 per week below the independently assessed benchmark of what is required to care for a child of this age - \$265 per week<sup>1</sup>. It is \$67 per week below the allowance NSW provides of \$232 per week.

Victoria needs a simple and adequate carer payment system that meets children's needs.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) and Berry Street are working together in the lead up to the 2014 State election to secure a better support for foster and kinship carers. This should include an immediate increase in the financial and other supports provided to all carers in Victoria.

Berry Street and FCAV are calling for the next Victorian Government to

1. Increase foster and kinship carer reimbursements to meet the day-to-day costs of caring for children commencing with an immediate \$5 per day increase for all carers
2. Ensure that all of a child's education, medical and recreational expenses are met by the Department of Human Services in a timely fashion
3. Implement and fund a coordinated, state-wide carer recruitment and retention program
4. Improve access to training, support and respite for all carers
5. Advocate to the Commonwealth that they remove income tests from carers' access to benefits for children in foster and kinship care

## Supporting carers to care for children

Like every State and Territory, Victoria provides some financial assistance to carers for costs incurred in the day to day care of foster children. However, Victoria's reimbursement of carers has fallen drastically behind the actual cost of providing care and is now the lowest in Australia. The gap between the foster care allowance provided by the Victorian Department of Human Services and the actual cost of providing for a child is now as much as \$5,356 per year.

Sector research indicates that financial stress on foster carers to meet the basic needs of the children in their care has become so severe that many carers are unable to continue fostering children. Further, it

highlights that the financial cost to carers of fostering children is deterring as many as 60% of those people enquiring about volunteering to become foster carers from doing so.

The decline in available foster carers for children who are removed from their families for their own protection means children are more likely to be placed in residential care units and be cared for by community workers. While residential care is a good option for some children and young people, it is often not the best long-term option, especially for young children.

### **What we have been doing**

Berry Street , FCAV and other foster care agencies are responding to the pressures on carers and the foster care system in a number of ways:

1. Doing all we can with the support of our donors and philanthropic partners to provide additional support to carers and the children and young people they care for and support.
2. Berry Street have developed a solution for government to consider - a detailed and independently costed enhanced foster care model that would ensure all children in care receive the therapeutic support they need to reach their full potential. Our model was developed in partnership with the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre and has been presented to the Victorian Government and State Opposition for consideration.
3. We have launched the **Save Foster Care** Campaign in the lead up to the 2014 State Election so carers and all members of the community can express their support for foster care
4. We have written to all members of the Victorian Parliament seeking their support for an immediate increase in financial support for foster and kinship carers and the children in their care.

### **What you can do to support the Save Foster Care Campaign**

To ensure Victoria is able to provide quality foster and kinship care for children and young people unable to live at home, we need to improve support for carers, retain existing carers and recruit new volunteers.

We ask you to:

1. Use the **Save Foster Care** website to contact your local members of State Parliament and candidates in the State election and ask them to increase support to foster and kinship carers
2. Promote the **Save Foster Care** website through social media such as facebook and twitter

### **More Information**

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# Background Statistics on Victoria's Child Protection System and Out-of-Home Care (OOHC)<sup>2</sup>

## Victoria compares poorly to other States and Territories

### Victorian Carer payments – lowest in Australia and most complex eligibility criteria

- Victoria's foster care system is arguably in the most depleted state with the most inadequate yet most complex system for carer allowances and payments and a rapidly shrinking number of carers. No State or Territory currently meets 100% of cost incurred by foster carers looking after children on behalf of the state<sup>3</sup>.
- In 2011 the actual cost of caring for a ten-year old child in foster care was independently estimated by the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre to be \$265 per week<sup>4</sup>. These costs include food, clothing, educational and health costs and are based on the needs of a ten-year old child with the most basic level of need.
- NSW provides the most adequate payment of \$232 per week for the care of a ten-year old child in foster care whilst Victoria provides the lowest and most inadequate carer payment of \$165 per week.
- For a traumatised and neglected child to have their basic material needs met in a foster care home in Victoria their carers will need to find another \$5000 per year to meet all the costs of caring for that child.
- A foster care family in Victoria who volunteer to care for a child from birth to age 15 and reimbursed at the general carer rate would receive approximately \$54,400 less than a carer family in NSW.

### Expenditure on all aspects of child protection (early intervention, family support, investigations and OOHC) – investment is comparatively low

- Victoria spends 28% less per child on child protection than NSW; \$689 for every Victorian child aged 0-15 compared to \$950 per child in NSW. After accounting for Victoria's lower population this still equates to \$265M per year less investment in Victoria in child protection and family services than in NSW<sup>5</sup>.

### Number of child protection notifications – have escalated in the past decade

- The number of Victorian children reported to child protection authorities for suspected abuse, neglect, maltreatment or family violence has risen from 28,754 in 2001-02 to 52,115 in 2012-13, an increase of 81% in the past decade<sup>6</sup>
- In Victoria Aboriginal children are approximately ten times more likely to be the subject of a substantiated notification than a non-Aboriginal child. In 2010-11 the number of substantiated rate for Aboriginal children was rate was 62.5 cases per 1000 compared to 6.4 cases per 1,000 children for non-Aboriginal children

### Number of available foster carers – has declined while more carers are needed

- In 2013 in Victoria 616 families (households) stopped providing foster care and left the foster care system – fewer households than this (442) volunteered in 2013 in Victoria to become foster carers.
- The decline in available foster carers escalates pressure on the remaining carers, sends more kids into residential care homes and pushes the foster care system closer to the tipping point of irreversible decline.

## Number of Victorian children who need care – has escalated in the past decade

- On any given day there are approximately 6300 Victorian children in OOHC - living away from their parents or family as a result of family violence, child abuse, neglect and maltreatment
- The number of Victorian children placed in Out of Home Care (OOHC) has risen every year in Victoria over the last 10 years. As of June 2013 (the most recently available data) there were 6,542 Victorian children living in the OOHC system up from 3918 in 2002, an increase of 66% in the past decade

## Aboriginal children who need care – number has doubled in the past decade

- In Victoria as of June 30th 2004 there were 531 Aboriginal children in care or 41.4 per 1000 children; by June 2012 this figure had almost doubled to 1,028 Aboriginal children in care or 66.4 per 1000.

## Aboriginal Cultural Support Plans, Stability Plans and Case Plans – legal requirements not met

- Under Part 4.3 of the Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act the Secretary of the Department of Human Services must prepare certain plans for the proper care of Aboriginal children in OOHC. These include a case plan (section 166), a stability plan (section 170) and a cultural support plan (section 176). In 2013 Of 367 Aboriginal children subject to these provisions 309 or 84% did not have a cultural support plan, 100 or 40% did not have a stability plan and 54 Aboriginal children or 15% had no case plan.

## OOHC Placement Stability - situation is getting worse (particularly for Aboriginal children)

- Since 2004-05 the proportion of Victorian children experiencing 3 or more OOHC placements has increased steadily. For Aboriginal children the proportion rose from 26.8 % in 2004-05 to 46.5% in 2008-09. For non-Aboriginal children it rose from 26.3% per cent to 38.9% per cent in 2008-09 (DHS, unpublished data, 2009).
- Placement changes, when children are moved to different carers or to and from family, can exacerbate the trauma already experienced by children as they move between households, have increased difficulties in forming stable relationships, may be required to change schools and may become further disconnected from siblings, family and friends.

### Data Sources:

1. Foster Care Estimates (FCE) of the actual costs of providing care were developed by the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre in a research study, *Costs of Caring* (McHugh 2002). The method used was based on the budget standards approach, sometimes referred to as the 'basket of goods' approach. The costs of care are calculated to provide a modest but adequate standard of care and provide for the costs, (per child) of housing, energy, food, clothing, household goods, schooling, health, transport, leisure and personal care). The FCE have been updated each year since 2002 by applying the Consumer Price Index, the figure of \$265 per week is for 2011. In 2006 the NSW State Government formally recognised the FCE rates as the appropriate benchmark for carer allowances.

2. Main data source for all child protection and OOHC data: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Child Protection Australia Reports, Child Welfare Series. AIHW Canberra.

3. Figures based on a comparison of the base rate of foster carer payments for NSW and Victoria, see table 2.1 in McHugh, M and Valentine, K *Financial and Non-Financial Support to Formal and Informal Out-of-Home Carer - Final report for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs*. UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, Sydney, September 2010. McHugh (2002) *op cit*

4. McHugh (2002) *op cit*.

5. Figures based on a comparison between the NSW and Victorian State Budget papers; see NSW Budget 2011/12 Budget Paper No. 3, Family & Community Services Cluster, Budget Estimates 2011-12 pages 4 - 14 to 4 - 16. Victorian Budget 2001/12 Service Delivery, Budget Paper No. 3 Department of Human Services, Page 217 Table 3.10 Output Summary Child Protection and Family Services.

6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Child Protection Australia 2011-12. Child Welfare Series No. 55 Cat No CWS 43. Canberra: AIHW.