



RE: Senate Standing Committee - Out of Home Care public hearing 17th April 2015
Closing Statement - Key Assets – Rob Ryan

As discussed due to linking by telephone I had some difficulty in hearing questions during the evidence on Friday 17th April. Unfortunately due to the connection and time limitations I was unable to provide a final statement. Please find attached a written summary of what I would have presented if time had permitted for consideration by the Committee at the Out of Home Care (OOHC) public hearing. If you have any questions about this I can be contacted on the number below.

Closing Statement

In Out of Home Care across Australia foster and kinship carers are without a doubt the central agents of change. They are the people who live and breathe support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year. So when the Government staff and Non-Government services finish work it is carers left supporting some of the most vulnerable and complex children and young people in our community. As such any system needs to be built around the needs of carers and children at the centre. Carers at times are treated like quasi-clients of the child protection system and to achieve change we need a model that has carers as the key partners in decision making, support and planning with children and young people equally present at the table. Wrapped around the carers and to support the best possible outcomes we need strong supportive and well-resourced agencies to provide models that can ensure the best outcomes for children and young people. The following recommendations are proposed that (based on evidence and practice wisdom) could enhance the OOHC system in Australia.

- 1) **Wrap around support models** - All carers need support. The best models are wrap around supports (similar to the Team Parenting model operated by Key Assets). This support needs to have the ability to step up and down based on the needs of the child/young person and carer. This support should be available until a child is at least 18 (regardless of order) but ideally the support should be available until a child is 25. This would fit the experiences of children who are not in care who often live at home until this age and have the ability to be supported by family beyond turning 18 during an ongoing period of transition to adulthood.
- 2) **Carer allowances** need to have a component that includes carer's time. Many of the systems are built around what a carer spends on resources (e.g. events, medication etc). However the real impact of caring is the time a carer spends and this should be considered in the context of allowance. Many carers report this time is what eats into time with own children, partners and leisure experiences and as such it has the greatest impact. Carer allowances also need to have a component that acknowledges successful outcomes. Many of the systems are built around a reduction in allowances as children stabilise. Essentially this model is akin to someone being punished for doing a good job. As carers will say "we know we are volunteers, however if any paid employee worked all year and did a great job and at the end of the year was told their wage would be cut they wouldn't stay. The Department does this to carers every day when allowances reduce on successful outcomes".
- 3) **Regional Boundaries**. In many Australian States regional boundaries are problematic. Regions are pressured to reduce non-grant funded placements and so the boundaries can act as a wall that prevents children being placed in the most appropriate and best matched

placement. We see evidence of children ending up in residential facilities in one Region due to no carers when a vacant foster placement may exist in the next Region less than 10 km away but the Region will buffer the placements to preserve local options.

- 4) **Outcome measures and tools for standardisation.** Australia needs a set of National standards or measures for successful outcomes for children and young people. The Key Developmental Assets is one example of a tool that already exists and can be completed by carers very easily and measured against “assets” that are benchmarked as a key to successful outcomes for children in a looked after population.
- 5) **Social Impact Bonds.** These are starting to be used in Australia and have some preliminary success through Newpins and the Benevolent Society. Further work needs to occur to extend the options for Social Impact Bonds to build new models that are evidence based. Learning from overseas in this area is critical.
- 6) **Good news stories and media.** The desire to protect children and carers from negative press has resulted in the vast majority of media on OOHC being negative and sharing only the stories when things go wrong. Opportunity needs to exist in legislation for children, young people and carers to tell positive stories and for media, carers and agencies to be protected from prosecution when the intent of the story is to share positive and successful outcomes so that balance can occur in the public discourse. Television crews never hesitate to show a picture of a baby in the Hospital getting a great service from the Clown Doctors. The same opportunities should exist for children and carers in the OOHC area. Clearly this needs to be done in a sensitive way but should be explored in more detail.
- 7) **Use of International Research.** Centres like the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education have been established through Oxford University (funded by our parent group Core Assets) and are available to anyone across the world. One of the biggest failures of successive reviews and commissions across Australia has been not looking beyond our country (sometimes not looking beyond the local jurisdiction) for evidence on what works, what doesn't work and to build on existing evidence and research. This is particularly critical in the area of out of home care. The opportunity to “connect the dots” across the world will reduce duplication and enhance how resources are used. It will also ensure we learn from mistakes elsewhere and develop programs that have an evidence base in practice.
- 8) **Licencing and National consistency.** Currently across Australia each State and Territory operates under different legislation, different policy and procedures and different licencing and audit requirements. Opportunities to increase consistency in models will ensure better cross state interface and for many agencies who work across borders this will reduce the administrative burden of working in different systems.

Despite the challenges in the OOHC area there are great stories of carers, staff and agencies making positive and lasting differences on a daily basis. There is so much evidence now on what works and there is an economic benefit to early resources achieving the best possible outcomes for children, young people, families, carers and our society. The key to this success is greater consistency across jurisdictions, better sharing of innovation and best practice.

Thanks for the opportunity to present to the Committee. I welcome any further questions.

Rob Ryan
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