



FCAV
Carer Information & Support Service
Annual Results
2013 - 2014

INTRODUCTION:

This 2013 /2014 Annual Results report analyses the CISS data collated throughout the past year, identifying the core issues arising for carers and others within the Out of Home Care sector. Please read on for the specific issues, analysis and commentary; and see below for FCAV's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Worker Training:

That DHS and Foster Care agencies ensure their staff receive appropriate professional development re the roles and responsibilities of foster carers, particularly during induction / orientation of new staff. However, it is important to maintain ongoing training that includes:

- Effective Care Team practice.
- Understanding of the daily challenges confronting carers.
- Contemporaneous knowledge of Departmental and agency policies and procedures affecting foster carers.
- Effective communication with carers, including "hard conversations".

2. Carer Support and Management:

That carers receive appropriate support from their agencies and DHS through the following:

- The opportunity to establish carer support, and information sharing, groups (where not currently existing) within agencies and /or local networks.
- Effective investment in carer training and professional development on both a group and individual basis (targeted on meeting the needs of the children and young people for whom they are caring at the time)
- Carer reimbursement levels and other financial supports required for the needs of children and young people are clearly established prior to, or as soon as practicable after, the commencement of placements.
- Ensuring that carers are aware of their rights to raise concerns, the processes for these and the commitment of their agency or DHS to resolve such concerns. Carers should also be assured of their right to bring their concerns to FCAV if they believe this is warranted.
- DHS to establish, as a priority, a clear policy / practice document that articulates reimbursement guidelines, clarification regarding payment of client expenses and placement support grant guidelines.

3. Quality of Care Matters:

That DHS and agencies ensure carers are fully cognisant of their rights during and after Quality of Care investigations and are treated respectfully throughout these processes:

- DHS and agencies should again undertake staff training in relation to Quality of Care processes, requirements and practice.
- Agencies to ensure carers are informed both verbally and in writing of the allegations being investigated, the process of investigation and timeframes.

- Agencies to ensure that carers receive the Carers Guide, their rights to external support and their right to counselling services when advised of the investigation.
- Agencies to ensure that counselling is also available to carers following the conclusion of investigations.
- Agencies to ensure they meet their responsibility to provide a liaison worker to maintain regular and effective communication with carers.

DATA INFORMATION:

There were 609 overall contacts received by the FCAV/PPSS Carer Information and Support Service (CISS) for the period July 2013 to June 2014, an increase of 18% from 2012/13. CISS identified 1,052 issues of concern requiring clarification at the time of contact or further support and advocacy on behalf of callers, an increase of 31% from 2012/13.

Of these contacts, those inquiries related to foster care comprised 508 contacts or 84% of all inquiries - a 23% increase from 2012/13. CISS identified 792 issues of concern regarding foster care, constituting 75% of all issues raised by contacts to the service - a 34% increase from 2012/13.

FOSTER CARE CONTACTS:

Caller/ Inquirer Type	Number of Contacts	2013/14 % of foster care contacts	2012/13 % of foster care contacts
Foster Carer / Prospective Carer	381	75%	63.4
Foster/Perm Conversion Carer	36	7%	5.6
Workers	65	13%	8.8
Other	26	5%	n/a
Total	508		

There were 417 contacts received from foster carers, prospective carers, foster carers transitioning to permanent care, and 65 calls from workers. These contacts identified 792 issues during the year as specified in the category table below:

FOSTER CARE ISSUES:

Categories	Number of Issues	% of Categories
Agencies - Issues	176	22%
DHS - Issues	154	19%
DHS Financial	91	11%
Quality of Care	81	10%
Permanent Care	50	6%
Centrelink Financial	32	5%
Education/Health/Mental Health	23	3%
Legal	25	3%
Access	23	3%
Placement Support Needs	14	2%
FCAV - General Enquiries	123	16%
Total	792	

ANALYSIS OF KEY CATEGORIES:

CATEGORY: ISSUES WITH AGENCIES

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Relationship with agency - not supportive	62	35%
Relationship with worker - not supportive	30	18%
Access to information re child /young person	28	16%
Participation in LAC and care team meetings	18	11%
Respite care	14	8%
Accreditation	9	5%
Training	6	3%
Access to minutes of meetings	3	2%
De-registration as a carer	4	2%
Disclosure of private details	1	0%
Carer reviews	1	0%
Other (please specify)	0	0%
Total	176	

176 issues raised - 22% of foster care contacts reported concerns/ queries in this category at a significantly higher rate than any other category.

Issues regarding carers' relationships with their agencies (35%) dominated this category. When combined with carer concerns about their relationships with their workers (18%), the year's data shows 53% of foster carers contacting FCAV sought assistance to address relationship issues.

In all reports, these issues did not occur in isolation but were accompanied by concerns regarding carer participation in LAC and Care Team Meetings, and access to information regarding the child or young person being cared for. Complaints regarding a lack of adequate respite care comprised 8% of reports across this category- these inquiries also encompassed carer reports of lack of support by either their agency and/or agency worker.

CISS received repeated examples of a lack of effective and timely communication, failure to consult with carers re plans / appointments for children in their care (e.g. access arrangements); failure to consider or include carers' insights re children in their care when undertaking care planning; and a failure to provide support to alleviate carer stress.

Some carers contacted FCAV to clarify policies and practice issues because of a lack of confidence in worker advice; others continue to express concern that they believed their agency was too closely aligned to, or intimidated by, DHS and would not "stand up" to the Department on their behalf. These concerns arose principally in relation to case plan disagreements, access arrangements and transport. A majority of these carers believed that their agencies did not advocate strongly enough on their behalf and allowed them to be excluded from decision making processes.

As stated in last year's CISS Report, carers should be respected and included as core participants in a child's care team, it is essential that agencies and their staff establish clear communication with carers through regular home visits, phone calls, care team meetings; effective processes to resolve any differences of opinion; honesty and a willingness to have the 'hard conversations' when issues arise; supportive approaches to addressing carer development and knowledge.

Carer Story: *New carers whose first placement was an adolescent experiencing mental health issues. Carer's agency worker kept arranging appointments without consulting carer re the suitability of proposed dates. Carer received no reimbursement for travel when the young person was hospitalised and was not aware that this could be requested due to distances travelled. Despite the agency's undertaking, no referrals had been made to Take 2 so that carers could be supported to manage the placement successfully. No regular communication arranged by agency nor any Care Team Meetings.*

CATEGORY: DHS ISSUES

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Dissatisfaction / Appeal of case plan	27	17%
Disagree with removal of child to other placement	25	16%
Clarification of DHS communications required	19	12%
DHS /worker not supportive	18	11%
Access to information re child / young person	16	10%
Unreasonable expectations of carer	14	9%
Relationship with DHS worker	11	7%
Passport / birth certificate required	9	6%
Case planning	7	5%
Inappropriate return home	5	4%
Disclosure of private details	3	3%
Total	154	

154 issues raised - 19% of foster care contacts reported concerns/ queries in this category with a clear majority (17%) in disagreement with case planning decisions, a concern strongly aligned with disagreement to remove children from the carer to another placement. (16%).

Examples of these issues included DHS decisions to not return children to the carer following completion of unsubstantiated Quality of Care investigations; removal of children during Quality of Care investigations; removal of children due to placement breakdowns without pre-emptive support and counselling being provided.

Carers also expressed concerns regarding proposed reunification of children to their families; permanent care planning decisions placing children with other carers / refusing to consider current foster carer for permanent care; and access changes not supported by the carer.

Communication between carers and DHS workers continues to underpin carers' perceptions that they are not supported by DHS staff, citing such issues as changes to access arrangements without consultation; failure to provide carers with advice regarding Children's Court proceedings and copies of current Court Orders; poor communication with, or exclusion of, carers regarding case plan processes and decisions; failure to provide appropriate information regarding children commencing and/or during placement.

Carers reported a lack of understanding of carers' roles by DHS staff –unrealistic expectations of the roles and responsibilities of carers, poor communication with carers and agency staff, staff turnover and arbitrary changes to previously agreed decisions when new DHS staff took on cases.

Carer Story: *A Carer household received several emergency placements where children have required medical attention either upon arrival or during their short stay yet no advice provided by DHS staff of the children's health status or needs.*

Carers were not provided with Medicare details nor with any Healthcare cards. Carers were not in a position to pay full medical costs for GP visit and were not advised of financial support if children required medical treatment. Carers were presented with incomplete / out of date medication for some children. When carers and their agency requested assistance with these matters, the DHS response was extremely slow and required extensive follow up.

CATEGORY: FINANCIAL - DHS

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Caregiver Payments - access to	15	17%
Caregiver Payments: rates information	14	15%
Reimbursement for carer expenses	12	13%
Carer Insurance	10	11%
Placement support grants	6	7%
Caregiver Reimbursements - Back Pay / Delays	6	7%
Medical/educational payments	4	5%
Caregiver Payments - miscalculation	3	3%
Education expense payment	3	3%
Gap Payments Childcare	3	3%
Caregiver reimbursement to end of secondary school	1	1%
Carer Card	1	1%
Other	13	14%
Total	91	

91 issues raised - 19% of foster care contacts reported concerns in this category with carers primarily seeking access to Intensive or Complex level payments (17%) and information regarding payment rates (15%). Concerns related to reimbursement of carer expenses accounted for 13% of contacts.

Carers (and agency workers) remain unclear of the criteria, processes, and reasoning involved in the determination of reimbursement rates, particularly when children present with high needs and / or challenging / at risk behaviours; expressed concerns that Departmental budgetary restraints are restricting children's access to specialised counselling and therapy services; reimbursement of carers' expenditure on children's needs is not timely; and inadequate funds are provided for items such as clothing, school uniforms, sporting activities. Carers also continue to report that they are incurring personal costs to ensure children can participate fully in school and social activities.

Carer Story: Carer concerned that DHS expects her to pay for all school expenses for young person from her reimbursement after exhausting Education Assistance Initiative and Education and Medical Expense monies. Carer estimated that approximately \$2000 is required for uniforms, books, info technology, excursions and camps.

CATEGORY: QUALITY OF CARE

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Investigation has commenced/process query	26	33%
Quality of Care experience	23	28%
Suitability Panel	11	14%
Timeframes	10	12%
Appeal of Quality of Care outcome	9	11%

Appeal of Quality of Care appeal	0	0%
Delay in Outcome Sign Off	1	1%
VCAT Appeal	1	1%
Total	81	

81 issues raised - 10% of foster care contacts reported concerns in this category with 33% seeking advice and / or support during investigations. Of these carers, concerns raised included a lack of support and advice from their agency; required procedures not being adhered to by DHS; agencies not providing the Carers' Guide; removal of children from carers' placement during the investigation.

For some carers, the role of their agency in QoC matters is confusing due to perceptions that agency workers appeared too closely aligned with DHS during these processes and failing to support their needs and rights in an investigation. FCAV continues to identify situations in which agency staff have failed to ensure carers are well informed through the provision of the Carers Guide, counselling advice and referral and maintenance of regular, supportive contact through an allocated liaison worker.

Both carers and agency workers have raised concerns that DHS staff conducting investigations do so with a view that carers are 'guilty until proven innocent'. Few carers express any faith in the review process, believing that internal reviews by DHS do not constitute what they would consider to be an objective process. This perception has been borne out by several Quality of Care matters that have proceeded to the Suitability Panel which has subsequently found allegations to not be proven.

Approaches to DHS, following positive Suitability Panel outcomes, have found the Department unwilling to reconsider the Quality of Care outcomes despite the Suitability Panel's findings and the rigor applied through Panel hearings to test allegations. FCAV finds this situation anomalous and extremely confusing for carers.

Whilst FCAV strongly acknowledges the need to ensure the safety and wellbeing children in care, carers continue to report that interactions with both DHS and agency staff investigating concerns are highly distressing, untimely and underpinned by poor communication. There is a significant need for workers involved in these matters to ensure their practice is in accordance with the Guiding Principles for investigations and that carers' rights are fully respected.

While Quality of Care contacts comprised just 10% of all inquiries by foster carers, the time spent on assisting these carers was 268 hours or 40% of the total hours (657) through the year. This appears primarily attributable to carers requiring independent advice but also raises concerns that agencies and DHS are not ensuring carers' rights to support and information are met.

Carer Story: Carer left toddler foster child in her husband's care while attending to her own child in hospital. Child fell and hit his face, resulting in a black eye. Husband notified agency worker the next day who noted this but did not advise him re need for medical examination. The injury was reported to DHS by child's family and the child did not return to placement. Carers not formally advised that a Quality of Care investigation was commenced. Carer was not provided with the Guide for Carers nor advised of their rights prior to the investigation.

Carer Story: Initial Quality of Care investigation substantiated alleged physical abuse of child by carer. Both DHS reviews of this outcome upheld the original findings. Following a full day hearing, the Suitability Panel found the allegations to not be proven. Carer then sought to have access with child who had been moved to another placement. DHS delayed any decision re this request, citing the Quality of Care outcomes, for almost 6 months until a complaint was made to the Client Outcomes and Service Improvement unit. Carers now have regular, positive access with their former foster child.

CATEGORY: PERMANENT CARE

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Becoming a permanent carer	14	28%
Lack of support services	5	10%
Access with birth family	5	10%
Engagement of support services required	4	8%
Financial assistance required	4	8%
Placement breakdown (potential/actual)	4	8%
Concerns re financial entitlements post orders	4	8%
Accreditation/assessment	3	6%
Being pressed to take on permanent care	2	4%
Concerns around condition of perm care orders	2	4%
Birth family contesting orders	1	2%
Lack of information provided by DHS/Agency	1	2%
Adoption issues - Local / Inter-country	1	2%
Total	50	

50 issues raised - 6% of foster care contacts came from foster carers in the process of transitioning to the permanent care of their foster child. 14% of contacts consisted of inquiries from existing foster carers wishing to undertake permanent care of the child / young person for whom they were caring.

Financial concerns were reported by 8% of carers, particularly where these carers had identified re future costs of high needs children but perceived DHS as unsupportive in providing support for these costs. Carers also cited concerns regarding a lack of support services (9%) being available for the child in their care post legalisation.

10% expressed concerns regarding children's future access with their birth families. These included the rights of children to refuse to attend access; a perceived insistence by DHS that children develop relationships with unknown relatives; excessive access arrangements. Carers also expressed considerable anxiety regarding DHS insistence that carers establish reasonable relationships with birth families, despite ongoing parental hostility, parents seeking to contest applications and /or applying to vary or revoke existing orders.

Carer Story: Carer experiencing difficulties arranging court ordered access with birth parent, following a Permanent Care Order in late 2013. She attempted 17 phone calls to the DHS worker, with whom she had worked prior to the Permanent Care application, for advice. This worker eventually returned her calls to advise carer that the case was not her responsibility and to contact a different Area office. Carer did this 10 days previous to her FCAV call and had heard nothing. Carer contacted Client Outcomes and Service Improvement unit to formally complain and resolve her concerns.

CATEGORY: GENERAL INQUIRIES

Sub Category	Number of Inquiries	% of Category Inquiries
Becoming a foster/ respite carer	52	42%
Agency details required	13	11%
Natural family issues	13	11%

Research Inquiry	5	4%
Phone number required	4	3%
Donation of goods	3	2%
Becoming a kinship carer	1	1%
FCAV Membership	1	1%
Complaint re: FCAV	0	0%
Changing Agencies	2	1%
Other (please specify)	29	24%
Total	123	

123 inquiries - Becoming a Foster Carer accounted for 42% of this category's inquiries. Notably, calls from children's relatives (natural families) accounted for 13% of inquiries. These included parents wishing to place a child in care, relatives seeking contact with a child already in care and parents / other relatives concerned about the standard of care provided to a child in foster care.

WORKER ISSUES:

Of the 65 worker contacts received by CISS, advice was sought regarding the following: support for carers during Quality of Care investigations; training resources for carers; Centrelink means testing of carers; carer insurance; carer access to Panel documentation re deregistration; passport processes; specialised support for carers; support for children of foster carers; DHS financial entitlements; educational costs of children in care; requests for Information Sheets; identifying services and resources for carers. All of these inquiries were made by workers on behalf of their carers.

That the majority of these inquiries relate to DHS policy/ practice raises the question why workers and their agencies are not seeking or receiving clarification from relevant DHS management. Discussion with some agencies about this issue has identified that relationships between agencies and DHS still require enhancement through more effective liaison and the provision of correct Departmental information.

INFORMATION SHEETS:

Ninety eight Information Sheets were provided by email or post during the 2013/14 year. Analysis of the FCAV Website indicates that Information Sheets were viewed on 4,951 occasions during this past year. Visits to other website resources are contained in the table below.

Page	Website Views	% of Website Page Views
Information Sheets	4951	26%
Carer Rates	8438	45%
Becoming a Carer	2578	14%
Carer Resources Indigenous	277	2%
Helpline	1891	10%
Carer Card	510	2%
Working with Children Check	113	1%

All Information Sheets were reviewed and updated through the year to ensure information remains contemporary. New Information Sheets developed through the year include About Care Teams, Centrelink Supplement, Police Checks, Social Media and Photos, Best Practice Carer Support and Management.

INITIAL CLOSURES - FOSTER CARE

221 inquiries (44%); were ongoing beyond the initial contact while 288 (56%)inquiries were resolved within the timeframe of the initial call and discussion.

ISSUE MANAGEMENT BY CATEGORY (ROUNDED TO THE NEAREST HOUR):

Category	Total Time - All Inquiries	%
Quality of Care	381	27%
DHS Issues	366	26%
Agency Issues	305	22%
DHS Financial	136	9%
Perm Care and Adoption	71	5%
FCAV General Inquiries	40	3%
Access	30	2%
Kinship Care	22	2%
Education/ Health/ Mental Health	12	1%
Legal Issues	20	1%
Centrelink Financial	18	1%
Challenging Behaviours	8	1%
Total Service Hours	1409	

CONCLUSION

The categories considered in this report highlight the primary concerns expressed by carers to FCAV over the past year. At the core of these concerns lie issues regarding communication, knowledge, information sharing and effective support between carers and their agencies / workers and DHS / workers. These concerns apply across all these key categories and are underpinned by carers' perspectives that they are entitled to respect and inclusion as key members of care teams.

FCAV continuously provides support and advice to carers and, where required, to their agencies/ DHS so concerns can be resolved and carers' rights upheld. The analysis in this report indicates that more work can be done to address systemic problems across the sector.

In light of this, outreach by FCAV to carer groups, agencies and DHS will be a continuing focus in the coming year. This will enable FCAV to continue to strengthen the sector's understanding of carer roles and expectations; and enhance carers' contribution to the well being of the children and young people for whom they care.

This is the last CISS Report which is completed within our partnership with PCA Families - whom we would like to thank for their contributions to the development and ongoing support of the CISS Programme over the past years.

Leigh Hillman, CISS Coordinator - July 2014