

## **The Foster Care Association of Victoria – About Us**

The FCAV was established by a small group of foster carers with the idea of offering support to strengthen foster care families.

Through their passion and with the support of many in the sector, FCAV was incorporated in May 1992. Enhanced Victorian Government funding was secured for the organisation in 2004 with some additional philanthropic support.

July 2011 saw further funds flow from the Victorian Government to allow the carer support service to be extended into rural and regional Victoria. This resulted in FCAV prioritising regional information sharing as a core part of our work and also enabled a larger team of staff to move from Northcote to a new office space in Collingwood in July 2012

The FCAV is the peak body for foster carers in Victoria, with over 4,000 members covering the vast majority of carers across the state. Our vision is to see better outcomes for foster carers and the children in their care, while we value empowerment, respect, innovation and accountability.

We have three core goals:

- i) Shape the system
  - Set the agenda and say what needs to be said
  - Lead sector thinking and advocate for system improvements
  - Support and empower individual carers
  - Raise awareness and build respect for carers and children in care
- ii) Grow our capacity
  - Make membership of the FCAV a ‘must have’
  - Diversify our funding streams
  - Strengthen relationships
  - Develop new partnerships
- iii) Share knowledge, inspire action
  - Create, build and share research and knowledge
  - Provide responsive, flexible and accessible information
  - Use technology to engage and empower
  - Be the ‘go-to’ authority for foster care issues

### **Number of foster carers in Victoria**

The FCAV undertakes an annual audit of foster care households which, this year, showed a dramatic increase in numbers of ‘non-active’ carers and a reduction in the number of potential carers undertaking accreditation.

2014	Active Carers	Non-Active Carers	In Accreditation
Total carer households	1702	428	281

The key challenge for Victoria is retaining those carers who are already within the system. Improving conditions for those already active foster carers is vital to grow a sustainable pool of households that

are able to meet the needs of children requiring care, however it is clear that many households are ceasing to be active and eventually leaving the system altogether.

### **FCAV's work in carer development**

During 2013-14 the Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) worked to engage carers across the state. Hundreds of carers and workers attended our training workshops in Geelong, Horsham, Bendigo, Shepparton and Melbourne's northern and southern suburbs.

Additionally, our staff attended numerous events, carer consultations and meetings with local members of parliament across Gippsland, the Mornington Peninsula and the Mallee, as well as Warrnambool, Mildura and Ballarat. We have become familiar with local challenges and inconsistent practices across the different regions, which are impacting carers and the wider system. This knowledge is relayed back to DHS head office, politicians and other sector leaders, and incorporated into the FCAV's advocacy.

During the year ahead we will host carer development sessions in 12 locations across the state. Three sessions will be staged in the Melbourne metropolitan areas, and 8 sessions will be held regionally in Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham, Mildura, Morwell, Shepparton, Warrnambool, and Wodonga.

### **Carer information and support**

With a growing membership and mounting challenges, it was no surprise that calls to the Foster Care Association of Victoria's (FCAV) Carer Information and Support Service (CISS) grew throughout 2013-14. The total number of requests for support and information increased by 18%, while the team addressed 31% more individual issues than in the preceding year. This included 23% more inquiries from foster carers alongside an increase of 32% in numbers of questions from case workers.

This growth is in-line with broader trends of increases in the number of children and young people in foster care across Victoria, but may also indicate increased challenges being faced by foster carers and case workers across the State.

### **The voice of carers**

Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) members regularly express frustration that their voices aren't heard clearly by those that make decisions impacting the children in their care. We believe that their expertise should be heard by agencies, politicians and DHS staff, so this year the Association set out to promote it in a range of new ways.

At our last Annual General Meeting, carers were invited to leave suggestions for system improvements on the 'Voice of Carers' tree. These suggestions were then compiled into the 'Voice of Carers' report, which has been shared with representatives from all sides of politics, agencies, DHS staff and other carers. At FCAV training events, carers were asked to share the core elements of their 'dream' placement. These included heartbreakingly simple reforms, like 'telling children in an age-appropriate way why they are not at home with their parents'. These ideas formed the 'Perfect Placement' report, which has been passed onto agencies, DHS staff and used to start many conversations with other carers.

These reports are available at:

<http://www.fcav.org.au> or from (03) 9416 4292.

### **Advocacy**

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) has ramped up advocacy efforts over the past year in response to growing concerns amongst Victorian foster carers. As well as participating in a range of working groups and advisory committees, we have formed a coalition of foster care agencies to campaign for specific improvements. Through extensive consultations with our membership, it has become clear that financial pressures on carers are greater than ever. This, combined with diminishing respect, recognition and support, were the primary factors driving carers away from the system, while discouraging new volunteers.

While we will continue to advocate for a wide range of reforms, our focus for the 2014 state election will be on five core issues. We are asking for a commitment from all political parties and parliamentarians to:

1. Increase foster care reimbursements to meet the true costs of caring for children.
2. Ensure the education, medical, allied health and recreational expenses for children in foster care are met by the state not the carer.
3. Implement and fund a coordinated, state-wide foster care recruitment and retention program.
4. Improve state-wide access to ongoing training, practical support and regular respite for carers.
5. Support calls for the Commonwealth to remove income tests from carers' access to benefits for children in foster care.