

Submission for Senate Inquiry 2014.

## SUBMISSION

I am a grandparent carer of the eldest of my three grandsons, I am also a member of GRGWA(INC) Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA. I am aware that GRGWA are going to be making a larger submission on behalf of the members of the group and will advocate very proficiently too on behalf of GRGWA . However I also feel strongly enough to also put in my own separate submission detailing my unique story and circumstances plus the ongoing difficulties I have faced over the years. I am now 43 years old divorced and renting a home after losing my own home and managerial position following this situation. I do not qualify any more for home loans and classed as too much of a liability as a single parent and grandparent on a part-time income, with many gaps in employment the last 5 years in particular. My own children are now aged 26 and 19 years old and we still deal with the effects on a daily basis of how the life we had has been totally ruined predominantly by a substandard mental health system within WA then the sheer lack of care or responsibility taken by other agencies who subsequently became involved. Mainly due to being inundated and over whelmed by cases agencies such as DCP, CSA, Centrelink and Family Court W.A.

An example : Last Thursday I flew to Uk also with my grandson now aged 7, it was an emergency trip I had to make overseas to locate my 19 year old son who went missing and stopped contacting any of his family. My ex husband his father had flown him overseas 25th October 2013, on a one way ticket without any plan or income and without informing anybody he had agreed for our son to stay with a young relative of mine I have no contact with. He also advised her he would pay her a weekly amount for our son, he did not . Our son lived with his father after we divorced and I was forced to pay child support for his negligent parenting whilst I was continually in and out of family court and still am fighting for the safety of my grandson. So becoming a grandparent carer has had serious consequences for my own son whom is very emotionally mixed up and fortunately was located and I was able to fly him back home to WA, all at my expense too, again I had to withdraw funds from my own superannuation to do this.

His sister my eldest child had her first baby at aged 19 years old in 2006, she lived in our family home with her then partner the father of my grandson. Her partner also 19 just turning 20 was very young, immature and totally irresponsible which caused a lot of family tensions. They moved out into one of her partners parents properties, but in this period from moving away from home my daughter became seriously depressed. Post natal depression within the first 2 years ( and in particular with a first baby) is one of the most serious forms of depression anyone can ever experience. Women have been having babies for many years, and post natal depression has been prevalent for many years. Yet WA did not have the resources or facilities to treat such conditions and at the time just

one 3 bedded mother and baby unit in the foreboding grounds of a psychiatric hospital which was in the midst of closing down while a newer mother and baby unit in a the local womens' hospital was to open .

Unfortunately my daughters condition became very serious culminating in quite a rare illness known as post-partum psychosis , which left her very vulnerable, very much at risk of harm to herself and also to her young baby. I quite naturally as her mother wished to obtain care and treatment for her, I was then introduced to the shambles of the WA public mental health system which at best my description would be appalling. I was then left with a failing marriage, a seriously unwell daughter and her new baby and my attentions from parenting my own young teenaged son somewhat diverted in my quest to find adequate treatment for my daughter. I was unable to work at my current position a manager of a local clinic and have considerable amounts of time off work unpaid while we attempted to deal with the `bomb that had detonated in our lifes`.

I was a fierce advocate for my daughter and also for her rights as a new Mum to have access to a mother and baby unit too which resulted in several complaints eventually I lost faith in the public system totally. I was told repeatedly my daughter was a drug addict, I had lost my daughter she was on this drug that drug etc etc, I was unable to get people to listen to me or to obtain my daughter proper help. If I had been listened to and there had been adequate resources then I may not be fervently typing making this submission now. As my own mother suffered a post partum psychosis and was left with lifelong mental health issues following this . I am her youngest child and she received better care than any my daughter ever had here in W.A.. My mothers first psychosis occurred over 50 years ago in Malaysia when my late father was still in the U.K. RAF . Following the nightmare we were living we then had crisis after crisis occur in the home, and attempts to obtain hospital admissions for my daughter were not easy. We became labelled as having family conflict by DCP workers, when we were dealing with a first episode psychosis of a teenaged mother. A DCP worker visited our home after yet another crisis situation, they advised we myself and my then husband go to family court one visit there only obtain some court orders for safety of the grandson and all would be ok we should not have to go back to court after that.

We listened but in hindsight I so wish I had not attended family court as we were granted court orders but ex parte due to the serious situation . The result my daughter in her then very confused mental state thought I wanted to steal her child and so she then viewed me her own mother as what I can only describe as `the devil incarnate` from then on. This court trip was in 2007, it is now 2014, there are still no final orders in relation to my grandson. I later fought to obtain my daughter a bed at a private clinic mistakenly believing her care may be better there. It wasn't she was discharged without my knowledge to her current partner where there have been many DV incidents documented.. At the time I was listed as her next of kin and also paying her \$1000.00 a week gap bed fees and she was residing at my address. I am unable to pursue any negligence claims as the board of health practitioners refused to look into this case until FCWA matter resolved, and from our experience now it may be my grandson turns 18 years of age before the court orders are final.

At the time the family court matter began as we owned a home and had a double income we also occurred astronomical legal fees, when my daughter has always had a lawyer appointed by legal aid. As well as the huge emotional stress we had been faced with, then

came the added financial burdens, which eventually broke down my already crumbling 18 year marriage. I then as well as the family court situation with my grandson was faced with a very acrimonious divorce a very bitter ex husband who stopped at nothing to attack me and use our son as an emotional weapon to make things as hard as they possibly could be for me. My ex husband no longer has contact with my daughter ( his step daughter) or any of her children and as stated prior his behaviour when he flew our son overseas one way last October was reckless and quite abhorrent. But as my son was our legal child, and following our divorce the order stated our son was in his full legal care. He used the family court to his best advantages I was the one forced to pay him child support basically for neglect of my own son. I had to prioritize the safety of a very at risk young child over my teenage son, and this has had devastating consequences all around. My ex husband remained on the family court orders in relation to my grandson and would disagree with any reasonable request I made if he turned up for any court hearings so FCWA then saw a fight and family breakdown between myself and my ex husband which complicated an already complex matter involving my grandson. An ICL (independent childrens lawyer )was then appointed for my grandson in 2009 and the matter has been dragged out ever since. My grandson was seriously hurt and hospitalised in this period when I was over ruled in family court and refused to sign court orders allowing my daughter have overnight access to him, there was also a no contact order in place in relation to her partner which has been very difficult to prove had been breached.

My ex husband served a notice of discontinuance after my daughter again incarcerated in a psychiatric facility as an involuntary patient. We now have had 3 special expert witness reports written, and I have been bullied by lawyers to comply with things I totally disagree with .I will fervently continue to protect my grandson from going to live in an environment where there is domestic violence and abuse, yet as the grandparent I may have orders at this stage which say my grandson lives with me , I still have no legal rights to him. I am unable to put him on my private health insurance cover, cannot just plan a weekend away or trip as I have to seek agreement from all parties first. His parents still hold legal rights to him. The decision regards the long term future of my grandson is in the hands of the overworked law courts, outdated legal system and people who have not and never will meet him too. I object strongly to this and in hindsight I would never ever have set foot in family court or listened to DCP. ( Department for Child Protection)

So in the tumultuous time which I write about I have lost a considerable amount, my own son, home, job, marriage, thousands of dollars and have experienced constant stress likened to a `living grief`. I have at time been ordered to pay supervision costs for my daughter to have access to her child, I have been ridiculed and attacked in court by lawyers, and been constantly messed around and had to re-organise my life and work around this difficult situation, so what has occurred to the parents of my grandson now? My daughter whom I love very much is complying now with her treatment regimes after many years of non compliance and battles in which family court involvement has made a bad situation even worse. She has two younger sons aged 3 and 2 in her care with monitoring from a mental health service community team as DCP say their involvement stresses her too much. I have been judged in reports for not fighting for the other 2 children, to remove the grandsons from my daughters care is not the answer here , nor is

attending family court when someone has severe mental health issues. The only people who benefit here are lawyers and their bank balances.

My daughter is now working a part time job and her younger 2 in full time day care. Her mental health can still be fragile as can be our relationship too. The father of my 7 year old grandson he has now grown up considerably. He no longer requires supervision by his mother for access to his child, he takes care of my grandson his child every 2nd weekend has done for many years. He has a full time job and huge income as a FIFO worker. He is building his 1st home and relies on me to take full day to day responsibility of his child, that is getting him to school before after school care vacation care. Taking him to appointments, parties, feeding him, clothing him providing his full care and a stable loving safe home for him, everything a parent would do. His father now pays me child support direct from his wages and when I instigated this I was questioned by his mother as to how his maintenance for his own child would affect my grandparent benefit. As I am sure anyone involved with the senate inquiry is aware now there is no such thing as grandparent benefit and we certainly deserve the \$400 per year we have just been granted but as Jeff Trudgian alludes to in his separate submission, it is a paltry sum and it should be matched with payments foster carers receive yet we are not classed as carers within the system.

I am the one whose income is means tested, I am the one who has to report my income fortnightly, I am the one who lived on less than \$25,000 one year and was under severe financial hardship. I am the one who has been penalised whilst the parents seem to have avoided taking any normal responsibility a parent naturally would take. It seems at times with the assistance of family court and Centrelink too. I am the one who cannot get a house loan or a credit card limit increase now and I am the one throwing good money away on fortnightly rent and unable to re-establish any assets within property. I am the one whose career has been interrupted and I am the one whose relationships has been affected deeply too, in particular the one I have with my own son. In June 2013 my son spent 3 days in intensive care in a drug induced coma following taking synthetic metamphetamines he had developed an addiction to cannabis and other drugs when in the legal 'care' of his father whilst I dealt with all of the above. I flew my son home this week ( he had ended up living rough on the streets of Manchester) .My son has been bringing himself up since his early teens, he has not spent one night at home yet, he has just texted me to say he will talk with me tomorrow and he is going to be moving in with some of his friends.

I was going to put in a short bullet point submission however my depth of feeling to his awful situation we found ourselves in has left me free writing from experience and emotion and I would never be able to keep this matter free of emotion as there has not been one single area of my lives or my childrens that this situation has not impacted on. My grandson is well happy and amazingly well adjusted considering his very unstable start in this world, and I love him dearly as I would my own child, yet we still live in 'limbo'.

I will continue to strongly advocate as a grandparent with relevant experience who has travelled this journey that senate now listens to this growing group.

I am 43 I am a younger grandparent and still have a lot of working life ahead of me to bump up my very dwindled superannuation again. This should never have been allowed

to occur and it is very wrong grandparents through no fault of their own are left with these challenges later on in life.

So in summary I would be pressing that

Grandparents are not in any way subjected to the emotional ordeal of family court. It is draining stressful and the family court lawyers have enough work with divorces without this group too. I would advocate a separate mediation centre altogether for grandparents and as already asked for automatic legal aid regardless of assets.

I would advocate very strongly as a daughter of someone with mental health issues, as a mother with someone with mental health issues and as a registered nurse with care experience of people with mental health issues that any court whether it be family or criminal is NOT where anyone with mental health issues should be.

There should be a mother and baby unit in every tertiary hospital in each state and access to adequate mental health care too .

I would wish to see a fair system recognizing grandparent carers as just that CARERS.

With non means tested allowances granted without this constant fight we endure on a continual daily basis.

I thank Senator Dean Smith for championing this cause and bringing about this inquiry it is many years overdue . I wish also to acknowledge the tireless unpaid work GRGWA (INC) continually do and without other wonderful support organisations like Wanslea, ARAFMI my life, and that of my children and grandsons I fear would be very different now.