



'every child deserves a childhood'

Date: **March 2015** | Address: **87 Orrong Crescent, Caulfield North, Victoria 3161** | Postal: **PO Box 1320, St Kilda South, Victoria 3182** | T: **03 9527 9422** | M: **0414 596 320** | E: **mirabel@mirabelfoundation.org.au** | W: **www.mirabelfoundation.org.au** | CEO & Founder: **Jane Rowe** | Year of Incorporation: **1999** | Legal Status: **Tax Deductible Charitable Organisation** | ABN: **22 926 759 458** | DGR: **900 475 670** | ARBN: **104 185 971**

## Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs

# Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services

The Mirabel Foundation (Mirabel) was established in Victoria in 1998 to assist children who have been orphaned or abandoned due to their parents' drug use and are living with extended family (kinship care). Mirabel is currently supporting more than 1400 disadvantaged children living throughout Victoria and New South Wales. Mirabel's activities are all inspired by a vision that every child deserves a childhood and its mission to break the negative cycle of addiction and disadvantage.

We welcome this inquiry and are pleased to have the opportunity to put forward the views of the Mirabel Foundation. We have chosen to limit our comments to the terms of reference that have the greatest impact on our services for the community and our future as a non-profit organisation. In our submission we draw on more than 16 years' experience working closely with FaCS, FaHCSIA and DSS to deliver essential services for vulnerable and disadvantaged families in Victoria.

### **A) The extent of consultation with service providers concerning the size, scope and nature of services tendered, determination of outcomes and other elements of service and contract design**

The design of the new Child and Parenting Support Program failed to recognise the importance of state wide service providers. The program has a clear preference for small 'priority service areas' or those with a 'national footprint'. State wide providers that propose services based on family disadvantage or vulnerability, regardless of a family's geographic location, appear to have been at a distinct disadvantage in the tendering process.

For the past 16 years, the Mirabel Foundation has been the only organisation in Australia working specifically with children living in kinship care who have been orphaned or abandoned due to their parents' drug use. During this time we have been able to use our accumulated knowledge and expertise to help inform government on the unique issues facing the target group. Mirabel's state wide approach to service delivery has been tried, tested, refined and evaluated. It has been independently assessed and shown to be



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a highly effective way to improve outcomes for some of our society's most disadvantaged families. Reducing the program to target families living only in specific geographic locations or diluting service delivery to enable national delivery is not in the best interests of the children and families being supported or the future of Mirabel as a leading and successful non-profit organisation.

### **C) The evidence base and analysis underlying program design**

The question must be raised if all information has been considered when developing an evidence base for the delivery of the Children and Parenting Program.

In 2014, Mirabel provided evidence at the Senate Inquiry into Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren. This lengthy and detailed inquiry made many recommendations for the implementation essential services to meet the unique needs of these families. Mirabel has a long and effective history of delivering the very services recommended by the inquiry. It is concerning that service provision that was considered essential by such a recent senate inquiry would be overlooked by the newly developed Children and Parenting Support Program.

During Question Time in the Lower House of Federal Parliament on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2015, Minister Scott Morrison suggested that new services providers had been selected to support programs in the areas delivered by Mirabel. Over the past 16 years, Mirabel has undertaken and commissioned research, developed specialist resources and refined service delivery methodologies to meet the specific needs of this unique group of children and families. There is no organisation in Australia better placed to continue to meet the needs of these families.

Over the years, several independent evaluations have been undertaken to analysis the effectiveness of Mirabel's programs for vulnerable families. The evaluations found that Mirabel's programs: improved levels of connectedness for children and their carers; provided a solidly evidenced-based style of service that is well-received by its clients; facilitates trusted relationships for children with their peers and family; are good value for money (Success Works 2011); and stops the negative cycle of disadvantage experienced by these children (Melbourne University 2008). The evaluations also found that Mirabel achieved excellence in cross-sectoral case management, program flexibility and community involvement (Turning Point 2004). Importantly, Success Works' evaluation stated that, "For some of their clients, Mirabel's intervention has been life-changing" (evaluations available upon request).

### **G) Analysis of the types, size and structures of organisations which were successful and unsuccessful under this process**

Like many other community service organisations, Mirabel was both shocked and disappointed to receive the email just before Christmas to let us know we were unsuccessful in our application for a Children and Parenting Support Grant. Mirabel has grown immensely since we first received federal funding under the



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childcare broadband some 16 years ago. We have had small but continual funding from DSS since this time, which has paid for the essential intake and assessment of all Victorian grandparent and kinship families as well as kinship peer support groups.

For Mirabel this amounts to a funding loss of \$234,000, which is all of our federal funding and 11% of our total income. For some, this figure might not sound like much, but to us it is vital. This critical funding was not only recognition of the important service we provide for our community but it also acted as a gateway to the vast suite of services that Mirabel provides for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families in our community. Mirabel's referrals have now grown to 9 new children each week who have been sadly orphaned or abandoned due to their parents' drug use. A high percentage of referrals to Mirabel come directly from Centrelink and community relationship services.

Mirabel requires \$2 million a year to continue the same level of support that the community has come to depend on. We work tirelessly to fundraise and access every bit of philanthropic funding that is available to meet the shortfall between government funding and our program expenses. When the new financial year begins, Mirabel will face a future without the critical federal funding that we have come to depend upon.

## **1) The potential and likely impacts on service users concerning service delivery, continuity, quality and reliability**

Mirabel's key point of difference lies in its long-term commitment to these children and their kinship families, remaining a constant source of support and guidance until a child reaches 18. Independent evaluations of Mirabel's programs have repeatedly found that Mirabel is the one constant for families in an often turbulent life. Many families feel so connected that they affectionately refer to Mirabel as family. The absence of Mirabel's support in the lives of these families would create an immense void that will not be readily filled by the introduction of new service providers. These children have been orphaned or abandoned by their parents. They have already suffered immeasurable grief and trauma. They cannot be abandoned by the very organisation established to support them. They cannot be abandoned by the Government committed to improving their life outcomes. Both the Federal Government and Mirabel have a responsibility to these children and families that cannot be ignored. With the emerging prevalence of methamphetamine abuse, the need for these services has never been greater.

The following quotes were recently made by young adults who have previously benefited from Mirabel's support. They are now mature, capable adults who are successfully completing university. It is essential for the future of our community that all Mirabel children have the opportunity to experience the same level of success.

*I left my Mum, who was addicted to heroin, when I was 12 years old. For me, Mirabel is about belonging somewhere and having a support network. A place where all the people are in similar situations that you can talk to and relate to and they won't judge you for*



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*things that are out of your control. My sense of self would not be as strong as it is today without Mirabel. Ashlee (20)*

*I wanted to say thank you for everything that you have done for not only me but my grandparents, Ron and Mary. Without Mirabel, I am afraid that I may have continued on a destructive path. The groups, camps and outings gave me a lot to think about every time I got home. Whether it was about my situation and making the best of it or just knowing that you being there as a support net if I felt that I needed it. I know that without Mirabel I would not be anywhere near the person I am today and I also know my grandparents would be struggling immensely. Christina (18)*

*Mirabel was a fantastic resource for my grandmother a few years after my brother and I entered her care. The support networks were invaluable to her and my little brother (eight years younger) had a fantastic time on camps that alleviated a lot of the social problems that he was experiencing at school. I felt a bit old at that point to participate myself (what 16 year old doesn't think they're too old for everything) but I saw the benefits first hand in our home and I am extremely grateful for the impact that Mirabel had on us all. It's for this reason that I would be honoured to find a way to contribute. As a 21 year old university student I don't have the resources to contribute financially (the contribution that as I understand is the most required) but would love to find a way to help children and families who live in a situation that was so familiar to me and to give to back to an organisation that contributed so much to my own family. Ben (21)*

## **K) The information provided to tenderers about how decisions are made, feedback mechanisms for unsuccessful tender applicants, and the participation of independent experts in tender review processes to ensure fairness and transparency**

The process for feedback is long and would be more helpful if delivered earlier in the process. Mirabel is still waiting to receive feedback on our unsuccessful submission via the official channels. The introduction of transitional funding, while welcomed, is not a solution for the long term issues created by the cessation of Mirabel's Federal funding. The 16 years of learning and experience that Mirabel brings to these families cannot be simply transitioned to another service provider. Our programs are as unique as the children and families that we service.

**“Mirabel is a beacon of hope for children and their families. From its inception it has inspired me with the compassion, the sensitivity and the optimism it offers. A child is not seen as a ‘client’ of a service but as a precious individual belonging to a family and a community. All of the research on resilience, self-efficacy and intervening early in the life of children supports what Mirabel does.”**

**Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott OAM Australian Centre for Child Protection**