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TO:
Shelley McInnis
Inquiry Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Along with the five headings offered for discussion I would wish to suggest one more. What purpose does YACS, DOCS etc., serve in the battle against illicit drug use?. In our experience, the answer would have to be pathetically little.

We have three daughters the youngest an 18 year old drug addict. She has a child, now three and a half years old and currently in full time care of my husband and myself. We are currently running that awful gauntlet of the Family Court System, in an attempt to ensure the safety and well being of our little grand-daughter.

PURPOSE OF WELFARE SERVICES

From time to time over a period of seven years, we have had dealings with these people in relation to problems our daughter was both experiencing and causing us. I can't honestly recall any one occasion in which they have been of any assistance.

At one time in the beginning, when our daughter was in her first year of High School, truanting two or three days a week, was smoking cigarettes and pot, was sexually active, prone to leaving her bed in the middle of the night, was almost impossible to deal with at home, she set a fire on our property at the height of drought. When I contacted Family Services the next day in complete desperation, I was told, quote "We are too busy with important matters."

All too often we see head-lines in papers and magazines telling us of cases that have not been handled appropriately and a child is dead because of it.

More recently (July 1999), I was told by an employee of Family Services that, quote "We have lots of heroin addicts on our books and they make very good Mums". Compared to what? We are not living in a third world country, we live in Australia. Have our standards fallen so low that this sort of attitude is now acceptable? If this is the case, we have lost the war against illicit drug-use.

Accepted, they won't solve the many problems of drug supply/use, but could certainly go much further towards cleaning up the mess caused to human life, drugs leave in their wake.

We will do whatever it takes to make sure our grand daughter is NOT one of their statistics.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

As mentioned earlier, we have three daughters. Our eldest daughter, (29 years old) has chosen to remove herself from any involvement with us, as she does not agree with our action to get interim Residence for our grand daughter, Emma. A whole lot of other factors are involved, none of which are relevant here. Suffice to say it has split our family, hopefully only temporarily. It is hurtful, all the same, as our eldest daughter has always been a great friend to me and her five year old daughter is missing out on grand parents and her little cousin.

Needless to say, we don't have a positive relationship with our youngest one either. She sees us "the enemy who have stolen her child". Mostly she is either under the influence of drugs or defensive and often not pleasant when she come to visit her child.

A year ago the pain of it all almost ended our marriage of twenty nine years. My husband and I separated for a short time when I went interstate to spend "time out" with my family. Happily, those issues between us have been resolved and we are strengthened in our commitment to each other.

A major point I'd like to make here is to bring to notice the growing epidemic of grand parents who are finding themselves landed with young grand children. We are possibly a little better off than some, as we are both still under 50 years old (just!). We are not however financially set up to accommodate another child. My husband is a low income earner and I have had to resign from my job to care for Emma full time. I'm entitled to and am paid a limited amount of money from Centrelink, but it doesn't go anywhere near the costs we have incurred since taking this child into our home.

People in our situation – through no fault of their own – but rather through a sense of needing to do the right thing, and of course love for their little ones, are desperate to be supported considerably better than we are. Remove custodial grand parents from the picture and what do you have? A frightening number of children at risk from their own parents or dumped into Welfare system at huge cost. Or dead.

We don't want medals or accolades, we need acknowledgement and support.

CRIME, VIOLENCE, LAW ENFORCEMENT.

Our little country town was relatively free of crime when we came here ten years ago. Sadly, as in too many other places, over the past 5 to 7 years drug use has escalated enormously. The expanded Police numbers in town hasn't seemed to make much headway, partly because they are rather like toothless tigers, limited substantially in what they can do.

Crime, in relation to drugs, is big business. I smile at the notion that Australia is under threat from multi-nationals. No, we are under much more threat from the "big business" of drug manufacture/marketing.

Along with these activities comes violence, by it's very nature. It is then exacerbated by users who will do whatever they need to do to get the stuff – theft, assault, home invasions, on and on.

Can you imagine a society free of illicit drugs and the scum of the earth who involve themselves in the manufacture and supply of it?

Crime would dramatically reduce. Jails would no longer be over-crowded. We could safely go out at night, and feel safe enough to leave our homes and goods un-attended even in daylight hours.

Places such as Family Courts would find themselves pretty much not required. Security companies (home and business) would find themselves looking for other options.

Family Services, etc. would find, hopefully, that they could actually help people, as their workload would be considerably less. Children could take off their shoes to play in their local park, without of injury from a used syringe. Hospital beds would be freed up considerably.

Psychiatric units/hospitals would be available for more mentally ill patients, those who have not made themselves so by their drug abuse.

Our society would be a safer, kinder place to exist in and bring a new generation in to with confidence and hope, instead of the quagmire of greed and crime it is now.

We would have a complete generation of young people who have a place in our society and who have a future they could look forward to. And so the list goes on.....

LAW ENFORCEMENT

To make enforcement most effective the court procedure needs to be made more effective. We must have truth in sentencing. When a criminal is sentenced to a set number of years, but can be a good chap and only serve part of those years, he has not effectively been punished for his crime, there is no deterrent for would-be-criminals. Judges and Police are made a mockery of, and victims of their crimes are left wondering "What the hell for?".

If the cost of keeping these people in jail (at, I believe, \$102,000 each per annum) is too much, cut costs. Simple.

As for enforcing the law at the coal face, so to speak, here-in lie huge difficulties. There is, I believe some substance to the perception that some Police are in the business of drug trafficking. A conflict of interest, surely and a real dilemma for those who are not, especially if they are in a junior position at their particular station. Even officers who are willing and able to help are stopped in their tracks by Civil Libertarians.

We have actual experience of this. Last year our daughter (then 17 years old and a minor) was the target of a drug raid. After questioning at the Police station, along with her child, she and the little one were allowed to leave. They went to the nearest transit centre, and for the next three months we didn't know where they were, or if they were dead or alive. We were told by the police officers involved that they could not detain either of them for fear of retribution from civil liberties.

ROAD TRAUMA

Thankfully, again we have no personal issues we have had to deal with here. However, it has long been our concern that "drug-driving" is just as much an issue as "drink-driving". Has there ever been a comprehensive study done on this? Results of some may well be surprising.

WORKPLACE SAFETY AND PRODUCTIVITY

The stress of the last several years of seeing our delightful "model child" develop into a drug dependent 18 year old has certainly taken its' toll on my husband. His work attitude is now very different in that he readily admits he does not work hard any more. I do not feel his work place safety is compromised at all.

I have zero workplace productivity now, as three months ago I had to resign from my job to care full time for Emma.

Safety and productivity are not an issue with our daughter or any of her associates that we know. None of them work.

HEALTH CARE COSTS

How we'd love to add to the cost of Health Care, by being provided with a H.C.C. for young Emma! She has developed Asthma after twelve months of neglect and abuse from her young mother. Now, we have to cover the cost of it and at times the pharmacy costs are quite substantial.

The cost to the public health system of looking after addicts must be inestimable. Far too many beds are filled by "victims" of over-dose and followed up with psychiatric treatment. These people often repeat this pattern (as long as they survive their overdose) adding repeatedly to their cost to society. These people use up resources much needed by other people, due to their self indulgent choice of life style.

The whole of society pays the cost one way or another. Even members of society who are fortunate enough not to be directly touched by drug abuse (in all it's forms) are paying.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is our opinion that "throwing money at the problem" is of little benefit. When our daughter was 14 ½ years old, and gave birth to her child, she was automatically paid the full sole-parents benefit for her promiscuity. This only provided her with funds to get started on the path to drug addiction. The giving of this payment needs to be monitored more carefully, especially when recipients are so young.
2. We must have truth in sentencing. The Judges, courts and policing must all be given back some credibility.
3. Take another genuine look at police involvement in the drug trade. Public perception on this is very poor.
4. Investigate ways of diminishing the powers of Civil Liberties, thereby enhancing those of the police.
5. Review the structure of YACS, DOCS Family Services. Look at the qualifications, experience and attitudes of people who staff them. Better inter-office communication is vital, so the left hand knows what the right hand is doing
6. Seek out ways in which to make addicts (who are what they are by their own choices and actions) accountable and responsible. A tough stand taken will maybe make them think about their options. Life is easy when the government pays you money, it is spent largely on illicit drugs, you get into trouble, you go to jail (eventually) and are looked after very well, with no responsibilities. You come out, and the cycle

starts again. Get tough. Stop the money. When crimes are then committed to fund their habit make sentences tougher. NO parole, NO good behaviour. If an addict shows a genuine desire to come off the drugs, then apply the softly-softly approach to encourage them all the way back to earning their place in society.

Even if this is destined to end up in the waste-paper basket somewhere, I thank the parties responsible for the opportunity to speak out about the issues surrounding drug abuse.

Our daughter is probably lost to us, due to circumstances out of our control. We, and the growing army of grand parents who are in the same position, need and deserve much more help than we are currently receiving, to secure a decent future for the progeny of our "lost generation".

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