

Ms Annette Ellis
Chair
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
House of Representatives
Parliament House,
Canberra

Dear Ms Ellis,

Marymead Child and Family Centre, Canberra, would like to make a submission to the
Inquiry into Better Support for Carers.

Marymead has contact with families who care for others in a number of different ways:

- Children and young people who care for adult or siblings in the family
- Parents and carers of children, young people and young adults with various disabilities
- Foster carers and respite carers
- Grandparents caring for their grandchildren.

This submission focuses on grandparents who are raising or have a significant role in raising their grandchildren.

Marymead has been supporting Grandparents since 2003. We currently have funding (\$18,000 pa) from the ACT Government to provide a Grandparents Support Network. There are monthly meetings, occasional social events for families and a newsletter. There is a very limited capacity to provide individual family support, advocacy, and referral to other service providers and our own programs. There are often guest speakers at the monthly meetings. Guest speakers cover a range of issues of interest including legal matters, health and well-being, child behaviour management and aspects of ageing.

In 2003, grandparents attending our support groups identified the following needs:

Support:

- Social networking with other grandparents in similar situations
- Respite, home help and after school care
- Advice and counselling – grief and conflict issues, planning for the future, addressing their concerns about their capacity to continue in their caring role
- Counselling and support for the grandchildren – grief and trauma and behavioural issues
- Case management for grandparents working with multiple organisations when grandchildren have ‘special needs’
- Services for grandparents and grandchildren who are healthy (i.e. do not have trauma, disability or mental issues)

Financial

Most grandparents were financially adversely affected by taking on the care of their grandchildren. Many were

- Unsure of financial entitlements
- Compromising their own financial needs and health spending their life savings on legal fees, extending or buying houses to meet changed needs etc
- Putting of retirement plans and continuing to work as a financial necessity
- Aware that foster carers were receiving more financial benefits than they were.



Information/education

To date grandparents have identified their information and education needs as:

- An information pack (for grandparents 'left holding the grandchildren'),
- A telephone information and support service
- Education on drug and alcohol and mental health issues
- Legal support – custody, guardianship, Family Law issues,
- Balancing roles – what happens when we die? When do the wishes of the grandchildren count? How do we care for ourselves?
- Parenting skills – grandparents talk about a “generation gap”

Advocacy

Grandparents identified their need for advocacy in the following domains:

- Recognition from the community, employers and government organisations,
- Financial support and information.
- Program funding for drug and alcohol, mental health and grandchildren with disabilities and behavioural issues, and
- Cross-border agreements for health and education services.

There have been some developments over the last five years:

- The Australian Government commissioned Council on the Ageing to survey and write a report, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*, which was published early in 2004.
- The Family Law Report *Every Picture Tells a Story* resulted in some changes to the Family Law Act which gave more recognition to grandparents.

However, five years after starting our group, grandparents are identifying much the same sorts of issues. We are currently surveying the 100 grandparents on our mailing list group and have some limited early data available from 16 responses to date.

In 2008 Grandparents indicate they want support in the following areas:

- Home help – a strong need
- Babysitting/ Respite / time for themselves – a strong need
- Behaviour management, including raising adolescents
- Free legal aid
- Help in understanding their entitlements
- Access to counselling for the grandchildren
- Access to tutoring for the grandchildren
- Financial support (similar to the financial support offered to foster carers)



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These requests for support are modest from a group of people who are

- Ageing
- Often retired, or
- Back in the workforce
- Often not in the best of health
- Experiencing the normal limitations of ageing (e.g not able to engage in the rough and tumble of everyday life in the way they could with their own children; less energetic etc)
- In some cases have their caring role thrust on them abruptly
- Have had to move house to accommodate the children, after they had “down-sized”
- In debt after taking matters to the Family Court
- Facing increased expenses when they have limited earning capacity or are living on pensions or superannuation
- Not able to enjoy the same social activities as their peers; more expenses so can't take the holidays planned, go out with friends to meals as babysitting will be needed; can't commit to regular activities or respond to spontaneous invitations; cannot take children to social activities; cut off from peers who do not have the same commitments
- Sometimes having to deal with drug and alcohol, mental health issues or the criminality of their own children
- Sometimes fearful of their own child or their child's partner
- Mourning the death of their own child
- Caring for children who may have experienced neglect, abuse or trauma
- Often dealing with complex family dynamics as a result of their caring role: have less time to be a grandparent or parent to the other members of the family; have to be a parent, not a grandparent to the children in their care; have feelings of guilt, resentment or sadness
- Experiencing the “generation gap”. Parenting has changed; the world in which they are raising their grandchildren is very different from the world they brought their own children into
- Fearful of what will happen to the children if they become ill or die

The grandparents offer the children in their care a chance to have a safe, caring, stable childhood and youth, which in turn means they are likely to have better educational outcomes, better employment prospects, better mental health and the ability to form positive relationships with others. In addition, in many cases their intervention means that children do not need to go into state care.



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Individual families are caring for a significant number of children, as indicated by data collected from 35 families in late 2007:

- 1 family with 6 grand-children in shared care
- 2 families with 4 grand-children in their full time care
- 1 family with 4 grand-children in shared care
- 2 families with 3 grand-children in full time care
- 2 families with 3 grand-children in shared care
- 11 families with 2 grand-children in full time care
- 16 families with 1 grand-child in full time care

16 of those 35 families have some involvement with State or Territory statutory child protection authorities. The other families would either have a Family Court order or an informal arrangement, meaning they have no legal basis for caring for their grandchildren.

Some of the identified needs could be provided by a family support program which provided a combination of home visiting, advocacy and referral. Easier access to Healthcare Cards, subsidised home help, respite (in various forms) and services like counselling would make a substantial difference to most grandparents. More flexibility in allowing access to some benefits would be advantageous. As grandparents age and the grandchildren grow into adolescence needs change and intensify.

Good collection of data from Centrelink, Family Court orders and State Care and Protection orders will allow the Australian Government to track the trends in grandparents caring for their grandchildren and may lead to the establishment of more specialised support services for them.

We hope this information is of some use to the Committee.

Yours sincerely,
Shelley Atkins
Acting Chief Executive Officer

3rd July 2008.