

## SUBMISSION

### to the Senate Community Affairs Committee – Inquiry into Mental Health

The **Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA)** wholeheartedly endorses and supports the Senate Community Affairs Committee's Inquiry into Mental Health. AFA represents the adult survivors of the childhood institutional care system, which was the standard form of out-of-home-care in Australia until the 1970s.

#### **The Forgotten Australians**

Survivors of the childhood institutional care system are nowadays referred to as Forgotten Australians, a term derived from the Senate Affairs References Committee report, *Forgotten Australians – a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004). Included in this group are people described and categorised in the past as 'wards of state', 'foster children', 'orphans', 'care leavers' and 'child migrants'. It also includes many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; many were part of the "Stolen Generation", removed because of their race, while many others in care because of parents' inability or perceived inability to care for them.

#### **Impacts of Childhood Experiences**

In the case of Forgotten Australians, counsellors who work with this group have identified a correlation between childhood sexual abuse, trauma and neglect and the development in some individuals of mental illness. This is recognised in the conclusion of the Senate report *Forgotten Australians* (2004); referring to the lasting impact on some individuals of institutionalisation, separation from birth family and deprivation of love, support and attention, the report states:

*the outcomes for those who have left care have, in the main, often been significantly negative and destructive.* (page 145)

These lasting effects include:

- a lack of trust and security;
- a lack of social skills;
- risk-taking behaviours;
- inability to form and maintain loving relationships; and
- inability to parent effectively
- mental illness, including:
  - depression;
  - anxiety;
  - post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
  - psychosomatic illness;
  - dissociation; and
  - personality disorders.

### **Government Actions That Need To Be Taken To Support Forgotten Australians**

The report of the Senate Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians – a report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004) made a total of 39 recommendations. Following the tabling of this report, very few of the recommendations were addressed by the Coalition Government, and the Labor Opposition at the time made no response as a parliamentary party.

The two key recommendations in the Senate report (2004) that relate to this Inquiry are numbers 25 and 31.

#### Recommendation 25:

*10.133 The Commonwealth and State Governments in providing funding for health care and in the development of health prevention programs, especially mental health, depression, suicide prevention and drug and alcohol prevention programs, recognise and care for the health needs and requirements of care leavers.*

Proper assessment, followed by specific and targeted treatment for this group, is urgently needed.

Recommendation 31:

*10.159 That the Commonwealth, in conjunction with the States, develop procedures for the collection of data on people who have been in care on forms that are already used to elicit client information such as Medicare and Centrelink forms and admission forms to prisons, mental health care facilities and aged care facilities.*

Organisations working to support Forgotten Australians are well aware of the lack of data that exists. As a consequence, there is at present no way of determining what services Forgotten Australians are using and whether the usage is meeting specific needs and improving quality of life. Their perceptions are that this group is highly over-represented in the criminal justice system (including in prisons), among recipients of welfare payments and in mental health facilities.

**Survey Material**

The Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN) is a national support organisation for Forgotten Australians. A CLAN survey of its members, conducted in 2006 and published in 2007, elicited responses from 291 former institutional children - a large majority of whom are now over 50 years of age. Of the respondents, 160 were females and 131 were males. Just fewer than 50% were former state wards, and just over 50% were 'voluntary' placements.

Among these 291 respondents, some 18 distinct illnesses/conditions/syndromes were reported (noting that there were some multiple reports). The most frequent reports were:

- 186 depression;
- 170 low self-esteem;
- 162 sleep disorders;
- 126 panic attacks;
- 124 fear of being locked in;
- 124 nightmares about experiences in 'care';
- 102 problems with alcohol (53) and drugs (49);
- 92 severe social anxiety.

The section on suicide was even more compelling. Of the 291 respondents, 192 were having or had had suicidal thoughts, 109 had attempted suicide, and 120 knew of other 'care' leavers who have committed or attempted suicide.

The survey showed a very high correlation between sexual abuse while in 'care' and poor mental health, including attempted suicide.

When reporting on their feelings about the outcomes of a childhood in care, the most common descriptors were:

- 192 'not as good as others';
- 158 'forgotten by society and governments';
- 136 'anger';
- 134 'loss';
- 133 'loneliness';
- 130 'abandoned'.

The report demonstrates the often-heard claim that 'care' leavers have a high level of representation in the criminal justice system. Of the 291 respondents, just over a third (99) reported that they had been 'in trouble with the law' (not traffic or parking offences), and of these, 55 had been in gaol. Of those who are parents, 23 reported that one or more of their children had been in gaol. Some 51 parents reported they had one or more children with drug problems, and 48 reported having a child with alcohol problems.

More than 1 in 5 (67 people) had lived on the streets at some point in their adult lives.

The report is published electronically at:

[http://www.clan.org.au/pages/CLAN\\_Survey\\_results\\_in\\_brief.pdf](http://www.clan.org.au/pages/CLAN_Survey_results_in_brief.pdf)

### **Ageing and Service Provision**

Though concerns about old age were not canvassed in the CLAN survey, there is also anecdotal data indicating that many people who grew up in institutions have a dread of being institutionalised in their old age. They see it as a long-feared return to the condition of their unhappy childhood. It is possible that this is an important factor in the reported high suicide rate. As this group ages and looks to the future, there is growing

concern about what will happen to them when they become unable to live safely in their own homes.

We urge better education of those providing health, welfare, justice and ageing services and the collection of adequate data to inform service design and delivery. In addition, there needs to be support for the creation of specific, targeted programs to help this group deal with the trauma they have carried all their lives.

### **What Specific Mental Health Services and Programs Are Already Provided by the Commonwealth Government?**

At the present time, there are no specific mental health services or programs being provided for Forgotten Australians. People in this category do have access to the expanded services that are now being provided under the COAG Mental Health Initiative. This includes access to extended GP consultation and psychological counselling. However, it is probable that there is a significant number of Forgotten Australian who suffer from more complex disorders such as PTSD and Personality Disorders. Often these are not being diagnosed or treated.

AFA is aware of specific PTSD treatment and support programs that have been set up by the Commonwealth Government as part of its war veterans' programs. AFA considers that recognition of the needs of that group sets a useful precedent for designing specific programs for Forgotten Australians.

AFA is also aware of the Spectrum Clinic (and programs) operating in Victoria, specifically to improve the understanding, treatment and support of persons with complex personality disorders. We believe that the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing should examine and report upon the service that operates in Victoria, and that federal funds should be made available to enable a similar service to be set up in each State and Territory.

While there has been some Parliamentary recognition of the needs of this very vulnerable group of people, much more needs to be done. It is this organisation's hope that the holding of this Senate Inquiry will lead to recommendations that can be

implemented by the Rudd Government, and that this will result in some real improvements to the lives of many Forgotten Australians.

A recently published booklet, *Forgotten Australians: Supporting survivors of childhood institutional care in Australia*, will be forwarded separately to the Committee Secretary. The booklet has been developed by the Alliance for Forgotten Australians to inform and assist doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, dentists, social workers, counsellors and welfare workers. It aims to provide these health and welfare professionals with the background information to recognise, relate to and assist people who are experiencing long term trauma because of a childhood spent in institutions. AFA believes that the work of educating professionals about the specific experiences and needs of this group of survivors could and should be taken much further.

Representatives from *The Alliance for Forgotten Australians* would be happy to meet with you to discuss these issues further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Caroline Carroll".

Caroline Carroll  
Chair  
Alliance for Forgotten Australians