

100 children a night in temporary digs really is an emergency

The AGE

- **Carol Nader**
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ON ANY night in Victoria, about 100 children and teenagers sleep in emergency accommodation while waiting for foster care or other long-term care.

On the night of June 30, 105 children were in these temporary placements, according to State Government figures, with an average of 99 a night last financial year. On one night at the end of April, it was as high as 127.

While the Government could not say whether the numbers were higher than in previous years, experts say they have seen a significant rise in the past year, partly due to the difficulty in retaining foster carers and finding suitable homes for children with more complex needs.

In most cases, children needing emergency care - which the Government calls "contingency care" - will stay in houses or units owned or rented by the Government, fully staffed and set up specifically to temporarily accommodate children until a long-term place is found.

This arrangement can last for a night or two or a few weeks.

But the Government has admitted that there have been cases in the past year in which, as a last resort, children have been housed in hotels for short periods. Some workers say that, in rare cases, children have stayed in caravan parks.

Sometimes children are difficult to place because of their behaviour or circumstances.

Or a large number of siblings will be removed from their parents and authorities are reluctant to separate them.

Experts say there has also been a rise in the number of children in out-of-home care in Victoria, including foster care, residential care and the care of relatives. There are more than 5000 children in out-of-home care in Victoria.

Anglicare Victoria's Mariela Diaz, general manager of placement and support, said the pool of foster carers had dwindled significantly. As a way of avoiding a situation whereby children needed emergency care, greater pressure was placed on foster carers to take on more children, even for a few nights, until longer-term arrangements were made.

"The need for out-of-home care has increased over the past 12 months far more than the Government expected it to," Ms Diaz said. "Being removed out of home is very traumatic, and being placed in a contingency arrangement causes a great deal of instability."

She said sometimes an agency would get a phone call at 3pm on a Friday to place a child, but there was nothing available.

"Ultimately, those kids need to go somewhere," she said.

"They can't hang around in an office until 9 or 10 o'clock waiting for a placement."

A spokesman for Community Services Minister Lisa Neville said the Government was conducting a review of the way children were placed and the best way to meet the demand.

"We are aware of the growth in demand for out-of-home care services and endeavour to place all children in a suitable foster, kinship or residential care placement as quickly as possible," he said.

Welfare agency Berry Street chief executive Sandie de Wolf said because of the demand, the organisation had rented extra houses. "The system is struggling. It's never been like this."

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare chief executive Coleen Clare said arrangements made in a crisis situation were not in children's best interests. "We need to make it an urgent matter for resolution."