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CARE LEAVERS OF AUSTRALIA NETWORK

SUBMISSION TO

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH

CLAN

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CLAN welcomes this inquiry into mental health and the opportunity to contribute to it. Thank you for the extension of time for this submission.

CLAN – Care Leavers of Australia Network – is the only national support and advocacy organisation for older care leavers. We speak for the tens of thousands of Australians who grew up in orphanages and Children’s Homes and other forms of institutional ‘care’. This was the standard form of ‘care’ in Australia for most of the 20th century for children whose families were unable to care for them, and was only finally phased out by the end of the 1970s. CLAN’s oldest member is 93 but the average age of members would be late 50s or 60s.

The mental health problems of the older care leavers whom CLAN represents stem directly from two related facts. As children, they suffered the profound and long-reaching trauma of separation from their birth parents; and having been separated from them, they then grew up in an institutional environment. Such an environment is not conducive to healthy psychological growth, even where it is well-managed. *Forgotten Australians*, the 2004 report of the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutionalised Care, demonstrates conclusively that Children’s Homes and institutions of the 20th century were not only *not* well managed but were inadequately resourced and staffed and were far too frequently a harbour for adults without goodwill towards children, including sadists and paedophiles. They can best be described as an example of ‘systems abuse’: environments which harmed the very people they were intended to care for – the most vulnerable children in the population.

Adults who have survived such childhood conditions require dedicated mental health services. There is little research to make this as obvious to government as it is to us who are care leavers and who work with care leavers: this fact is pertinent to term *n*, the adequacy of mental health research which would identify and then

target the special needs of care leavers. Once again, this very numerous group of Australians has been forgotten in research initiatives, as in other ways.

We urge this committee to read *Forgotten Australians*. This report records both the experiences and the mental health consequences for all of us who grew up without our parents, and in institutional care. The issues are also clearly spelled out in the submission to this inquiry by Leonie Sheedy, who is the client support worker for CLAN and the first point of contact for the legions of care leavers who contact the organisation.

Forgotten Australians in Chapter 6 noted that (I am quoting directly):

- 6.3 It is imperative to recognise and acknowledge the magnitude of contemporary social problems which are the long term effects stemming from the past experiences of fear, intimidation, humiliation and abuse endured by the care leaver as a child.
- Submissions refer frequently to a range of legacies including low self-esteem, lack of confidence, depression, fear and distrust, anger, shame, guilt, obsessiveness, social anxieties, phobias, recurring nightmares, tension, migraines and speech difficulties. Many who suffered in institutions could not cope with life in the 'real' world and have had life-long alcohol and drug problems or ended in the mental health or prison systems. Many have difficulties forming and maintaining trust in relationships, or have remained loners and never married. Some care leavers with emotional problems have contemplated or taken the ultimate step of suicide. Others have survived.

The committee also noted that:

- The health status of many care leavers is especially disturbing. Evidence was received of general physical, psychological and dental health problems

through to severe mental health issues of depression and post traumatic stress disorder.

And that

- 6.22 Mental health issues, depression and post traumatic stress disorder are commonly experienced by care leavers. These issues can manifest themselves in a variety of behaviours and actions that affect their everyday life. The ultimate expression of this problem referred to in many submissions is post traumatic stress disorder. Many care leavers who have suffered PTSD have required psychiatric care.

One conclusion of the report was that:

6.53 The cost to many individuals, families and society of the impact of time spent in institutional care is profound.....the harm done to children while in care has resulted in harmed adults. As adults, care leavers face relationship problems; drug and alcohol abuse; loss of educational and work opportunities; long-term physical and mental health problems; and antisocial and criminal behaviour. This is a significant cost to the individual and a massive long-term social and economic cost for society which may be compounded when badly harmed adults in turn create another generation of harmed children.

We would add to this last sentence that these 'harmed children' will, in their turn, require, as adults, specialised mental health services.

Leonie Sheedy and I started CLAN in 2000 because our history and experiences as care leavers were not known, let alone acknowledged, and because there were (and still are) no services dedicated to our needs. The title of the Senate report, *Forgotten Australians*, was an accurate reflection of our status within Australian society. Even the terms of this current inquiry into mental health still fail to recognise that care leavers constitute one of the most marginalised, as well as the

most numerous, of all disadvantaged social groups. The terms state that 'particular reference will be made to

the special needs of groups such as children, adolescents, the aged, Indigenous Australians, the socially and geographically isolated and of people with complex and co-morbid conditions and drug and alcohol dependence;'

This list should include care leavers. The omission of care leavers as a specific category with special needs, shows that even after the release of *Forgotten Australians* we are still not given the recognition we are entitled to, that the traumatic effects of our experiences have not been understood. The Inquiry into Children in Institutionalised Care established beyond any debate that care leavers cannot help but constitute a group with special needs – and a very large group, since in the 20th century there were half a million of us. It also established that those needs are largely unprovided for, and therefore unmet. This point is relevant to terms (e), (j), (k), (m), (n) and (o) of this inquiry.

Thank you again for this opportunity to outline some of our concerns as care leavers. We hope that the recommendations of this inquiry can intersect with some from the Inquiry into Children in Institutionalised Care, and begin the process of recognising, and providing for, all of us 'forgotten Australians'.

CLAN would like to request the opportunity to appear at a public hearing in Sydney, to speak further about these important issues.

Dr Joanna Penglase
President, CLAN.