

4. FINDINGS

4.1 THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Foster care in Australia is the responsibility of State Government jurisdictions. Prior to the most recent change of Commonwealth Government the Commonwealth had very limited involvement in foster care issues. Since the Rudd Government was elected the Commonwealth has led the development of a National Child Protection Framework⁸ and now provides opportunities for National approaches to foster care and other associated issues.

Recruitment of foster carers is an issue of national concern with most agencies across Australia experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining foster carers. The reasons include, but are not exclusive to:

- Increase of women in the workforce
- Increased need for double incomes in families
- Inadequacy of reimbursements to carers
- Increased complexity of children requiring care - challenging behaviours and specific needs
- Inadequate support for carers; a perceived lack of respect for carers' skills, and knowledge and recognition of the difficulty of the caring role
- Fear of the unknown amongst prospective carers in the community - often impacted on by negative media coverage of children who require care
- Fear of potential or actual false allegations of abuse
- Increased complexity of the system which surrounds out-of-home care - resulting in higher workloads and less time for workers to support placements.

The decrease of interest in becoming a carer has resulted in more carers leaving the system than new carers entering the system, at around 7% per year in Victoria alone. There was more than a 40% decline of carers from 97/98 to 01/02 in Victoria.⁹ Concurrently, the carer cohort is ageing, with the average age of carers increasing from 24 - 45 in 1986; to 35 - 54 in 2004. In addition to this, the number of children in care continues to rise annually with a 56% increase in Victoria alone from 1996 - 2004.¹⁰

This change in carer availability has put the foster care system into crisis and resulted in: an increase in multiple placements; an inability to ideally 'match' children with carers leading to an increase in the number of placement breakdowns; carer burnout; and dissatisfaction with the service/system. This is occurring at the same time the latest research into early brain development, trauma and attachment has highlighted the need for stability and consistency in placements. This is increasingly concerning for the potential quality of care options available to some of our most vulnerable children.

⁸ National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

⁹ Strengthening the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Victoria, *Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare*.

¹⁰ Foster Care Communication and Recruitment Strategy, May 2008. *Successworks*.

However, a gradual change in practice to respond to research has recognised children are staying in care longer¹¹ and more timely permanent decisions are being made for children. This has produced a catch 22 situation because this positive change in practice is having a converse effect on placement options as carers become less available to provide new placements due to the lengthier stays of children already in their care.

The profile of foster carers has changed over the last decade with the increase of women in the full time labour force having the major impact. Recruitment campaigns are now often targeted toward particular demographic sections of the community who, over the last decade have shown more interest in becoming a carer. Some of the significant changes in the profile include, but are not exclusive to:

- Single females who are mostly in their middle years
- Professional couples in paid work
- Same sex couples.

This change in carer profile will necessitate a change in how we provide support to carers. Single carers, families where the single parent or both parents work, and the increasing incidence of multiple placements all mean that additional support will be required to sustain these placements and carers and prevent early burnout and placement breakdowns.

The provision of on-going training and professional development for carers may occur in a range of ways. Currently training is primarily provided via traditional methods of face to face training in groups. In contrast, electronic learning, networking and support between foster carers is very common overseas. These forms are also gathering interest in Australia, but are largely unresourced at present.

Foster carers in Australia are volunteers and receive a reimbursement or subsidy to partially cover the costs of caring for a child. The reimbursement or subsidy is set to cover general living expenses for the child but does not include a payment to carers for the skilled work they do in providing a specialist service to the child in their care. Thus, it is not an attractive incentive for someone who may be interested in making foster caring a career. Reimbursements are not consistent across Australia with large variations across the States and Territories¹².

Provision of pre-service training and on-going professional development for carers is also varied across the nation. Across and within the states the standard of pre-service training ranges from informal 1:1 training through to nationally accredited competency based training. On-going training and development is determined by the agencies and in some states the peak bodies.

¹¹ *'Getting the big picture': A synopsis and critique of Australian out-of-home care research, 2007.* Bromfield, L; Osborn, A. Australian government, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹² Australian Foster Care Association. 2008. Comparison of state and territory foster care payments 2000-2008.