

Moving out from the state parental home

A comparison of leaving care policies in Victoria and New South Wales

Philip Mendes and Badal Moslehuddin

Young people leaving care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Compared to most young people, they face numerous barriers to accessing educational, employment and other developmental and transitional opportunities.

Using information from interviews and a range of documents, this study compares the leaving care supports currently available in two Australian states, Victoria and New South Wales. Attention is drawn to the history of the leaving care debate in both states, the nature of the existing legislative and program supports for care leavers in each state, the key political and policy actors that have either helped or hindered the development of leaving care policies and services in each state, and the principal unmet needs of care leavers in each state.

The findings suggest that NSW leads the way in terms of providing effective legislative and program supports to care leavers. The differences between Victoria and NSW are attributed to a number of factors including particularly the different relationships between the respective government bureaucracies and non-government child welfare sectors.

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Our interviewees:

Cath Brennan, Association of Children's Welfare Agencies; Geoff De Cruz, Berry Street Victoria; Peter Green, Department of Human Services; Leonie Hewitt, Care Leavers Australia Network; Lisa Johnson & Maureen O'Hearn, WAIVS, Centacare Newcastle; Sarah Ludowici & Priya Singh, Create Foundation NSW; Barry Neale, Foster Care Association of Victoria; Bron Parker, ALIVE

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Approximately 1700 young Australians aged 15-17 years are discharged from out-of-home care each year. Some of these young people return to the family home, whilst others exit care into independent living (AIHW, 2004:41). They are a relatively small group, yet research consistently depicts care leavers as being particularly disadvantaged and having significantly reduced life chances. Some of the specific concerns identified include homelessness, substance abuse, mental health problems, poor educational and employment outcomes, disproportionate involvement in juvenile crime and prostitution, poor social supports, and early parenthood.

A common theme emanating from the research literature is that a range of supports and services are needed to ensure improved outcomes for care leavers. They include the provision of stable and supportive placements with a positive attitude to education, maintenance of links with either family members or community supports, a flexible and functional process for graduating from independence to interdependence, the active involvement of young people in the leaving care planning and decision-making process, the availability of a range of accommodation options, and ongoing support as required. The state needs not only to provide the care expected of a good parent, but also to actively compensate abused and neglected children for the disadvantages produced by their traumatic pre-care experiences (Spence, 1994:38-45; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996:158-177; Green & Jones, 1999:17-22; Maunder et al, 1999:51-68; Yates, Mendel & Moslehuddin, 2003:41).

A number of Western countries have introduced specific legislation and programs providing for the on-going support of care leavers. For example, the United Kingdom introduced a new Leaving Care Act in October 2001 which obliges local authorities to continue to provide advice and support for young care leavers up to the age of 21, and even

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to 24 years if still in education and training (DOH, 2001; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004). Similarly, the USA introduced the Foster Care Independence Act in December 1999 which expands assistance including room and board for care leavers aged 18-21 years, expands access to Medicaid for care leavers, and increases state accountability for outcomes for care leavers (NFCAP, 2000).

In contrast, Australian States have generally not provided specific leaving care programs, although some individual agencies have provided assistance on an ad hoc and often unfunded basis. New South Wales remains the only state to have developed both a legislative and program response for young people leaving care (Mendes, 2002a:5).

This study aims to investigate and compare the leaving care supports currently available in two Australian states, Victoria and NSW. In particular, the study aims to document the existing legislative and program supports for care leavers, the major supports required by care leavers beyond existing services, and the role played by political actors in either highlighting leaving care needs, or alternatively frustrating the development of leaving care programs. But firstly we examine the national leaving care policies and standards which influence the policy context within which the States operate.

THE NATIONAL LEAVING CARE DEBATE POLICIES AND STANDARDS

Concerns about the well-being of care leavers were expressed as early as the mid-1980s (SSCSW, 1985:77; Ainsworth, 1987). But the public debate only really commenced in 1989 when the Burdekin Report on Homeless Children found a large number of homeless young people came from state care backgrounds (Burdekin & Carter, 1989:112-117). Similarly, a Salvation Army study of 200 young homeless people aged 12 to 25 in inner urban Melbourne discovered a high number of current or former state wards amongst the homeless population. The study recommended the creation of a discrete transition support program for statutory young people (Hirst, 1989:65 & 170-171).

A follow-up report by the Brotherhood of St Laurence found that care leavers continued to be prone to unemployment, homelessness, and social isolation. The report called on all State governments to establish support programs for children leaving guardianship orders (Taylor, 1990). Further studies by a number of non-government charities and semi-independent government authorities confirmed these concerns (Shaver & Paxman, 1992; HRSCCA, 1995; Goldman, 1996:20-22; ALRC & HREOC, 1997:455-457). One detailed research study investigated leaving care provisions in all States and Territories, and suggested a model for effective leaving care program supports, and policy and legislative change (Mauders et al, 1999).

National progress on leaving care appears to have been hindered by the federal model of child welfare provision whereby the States and Territories retain responsibility for child protection legislation, policies and practices. Consequently, the Commonwealth Government has been reluctant to introduce uniform national leaving care legislation. To be sure, the 1995 Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators endorsed out-of-home care standards which included an obligation to develop exit plans for each young person leaving care (SCCSISA, 1995). However, in practice, many of the States have failed to implement these standards (Mauders et al, 1999:viii; Owen et al, 2000:122-123; Bonnice, 2002:15). Child welfare advocates have consistently argued with little success that the Commonwealth Government should impose minimum leaving care standards on the States and Territories (CAFWAA, 2002:7 & 13-14; Families Australia, 2003:19-20).

The state needs not only to provide the care expected of a good parent, but also to actively compensate abused and neglected children for the disadvantages produced by their traumatic pre-care experiences.

Nevertheless, there is some indication that the Commonwealth Government is beginning to recognize its responsibilities in this area. Following concerns expressed by a number of reports on youth homelessness (CACH, 2001:53; YPAPT, 2001), the Department of Family and Community Services introduced a Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA) which provides financial assistance up to \$1000 for particularly disadvantaged care leavers (ie, those who have been in care for an extended period of time, and who are judged to be at greatest risk of failing to make a successful transition to independent living). The money is only available as a one-off payment, and is typically used to purchase household items such as furniture or bedding, to help with access to housing, or to assist with educational expenses. Although the Commonwealth continues to deny any legislative responsibility for care leavers, the introduction of TILA has been justified on the grounds that early intervention and support programs will help to prevent later demands by care leavers on the welfare system (CDFACS, 2003).

Anecdotal evidence so far suggests that TILA is providing some badly needed assistance to care leavers. However, the money is provided without any administrative component to

assist the non-government agencies that are distributing the fund. This is proving to be a burden for some services. In addition, the restriction of TILA to one single payment means that the scheme is likely to be of limited utility in contributing to the ongoing assistance that many care leavers require.

THE NSW LEAVING CARE DEBATE

Approximately 280 young people aged 15-18 years leave care in NSW each year (CSC, 2000b:43). NSW is the only state to have introduced specific legislation providing for the on-going support of care leavers. The earlier 1987 Children (Care and Protection) Act made no specific provision for assistance to young people exiting the care system, although support could be provided on a discretionary basis (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996:2 & 168-169). However, Sections 165 and 166 of the 1998 Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act passed in December 1998 make provision for after care services for young people aged 15-25 years. This provision includes assistance with accommodation, education and training, legal and health matters, and counselling (CSC, 2000b:44). The after care components of the Act were proclaimed earlier this year.

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The NSW leaving care debate commenced in 1990 when the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) – the peak non-government child welfare body in NSW – formed a Leaving Care Working Party. Convened initially by Roberta Freedman and more recently by Cath Brennan, the Working Party engaged in ongoing advocacy to promote the introduction of leaving care and after care services and legislation. Activities included preparation of a Leaving Care Kit and associated computer game; production of discussion papers; liaison with government departments including particularly Juvenile Justice; organizing consumer participation culminating in the establishment of the NSW Create Foundation (the consumer group for young people in or who have left care); promoting leaving care and after care concerns in political forums; suggesting appropriate service models; the provision of information to the Cashmore and Paxman study and representation on the Steering Committee for the research; and the drafting of a Charter of Rights for Young People in Care and After Care (ACWA, 1991; ACWA, 1992; Freedman & Robinson, 1992; Cunningham &

Freedman, 1993; ACWA, 1996; Wardley & Mackiewicz, 1998:118). Following the introduction of after care services in 1997, the ACWA Leaving Care Working Party has continued to meet and advocate for improved and expanded services.

A number of other factors also influenced the NSW debate (Wardley & Mackiewicz, 1998:118-119; DoCS, 2002:41-42). One was the longitudinal study of care leavers commissioned by the Department of Community Services (DoCS), and undertaken by Judy Cashmore and Marina Paxman under the auspices of the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre. The study, which commenced in 1992, followed a group of care leavers over a 12 month period, and compared them with two other groups of young people living at home and in refuges. The report found that care leavers were less likely than other young people to complete their secondary education and gain employment, and were at greater risk of homelessness, poverty, mental health problems, substance abuse, involvement in crime, and teenage parenthood. This disadvantage was attributed to a number of factors, including particularly the lack of support provided to young people once they had left care (Cashmore & Paxman, 1994; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996).

The timing of the report was fortuitous in that its release coincided with the review of the 1987 Children Act by a Department of Community Services Committee which included Judy Cashmore as Deputy Chair. Cashmore recalls that the Department 'accepted the report without defensiveness, and published it without editorial constraint'. In addition, a number of DoCS bureaucrats assisted the campaign for leaving care services (Cashmore, 2003:14). Cashmore was then appointed to the Department Working Party which developed the model for leaving care services in NSW.

A further factor was the recommendations of the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service which identified specific concerns around paedophilia and the sexual abuse of young people in care. The Commission recommended that greater support be given to care leavers moving into independent living (Wood, 1997:1179-1180).

In April 1996, the NSW Government announced a set of funding initiatives which included \$1.2 million for the establishment of leaving care services. They introduced a statewide After Care Resource Centre (ARC) which acts as a resource and advocacy service for young people leaving care or who have left care. The Centre helps care leavers to access housing options, and other financial, health, legal, education/employment and support needs. Specialist services are also provided to young people and adults who have had negative experiences in care. In addition, NSW contracted three leaving care services for metropolitan and surrounding areas, and introduced a statewide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service. Subsequently, additional

funding of \$1.5 million was provided to establish services in all regions of NSW.

Current NSW after care services include the ARC operated by Relationships Australia, Adolescents Living Independently Via Empowerment (ALIVE) operated by Centacare Sydney, ACE After Care operated by Uniting Care Burnside, Centacare Newcastle, the Marungbai statewide Aboriginal service, and the Rural Specialist Team Services provided by the Department of Community Services. All NSW care leavers aged 15-25 are able to access these services. Priority for casework support is given to those young people judged to be most at risk due to homelessness, poor networks and supports, or limited access to other services. Care leavers are also entitled to establishment costs of up to \$1400 for the purchase of household goods (DoCS, 2001). In addition, there is a helpline for people aged 25 years and above who have been in care that assists with accessing files, referral to legal services, and counselling.

Lisa Johnson from WAIVS (Centacare Newcastle) states that she typically meets with about 16 young people aged 17-20 years per week. Priority issues include living skills, health issues, personal and family identity, and particularly financial issues:

Most of the young people I work with are only entitled to the independent rate of youth allowance which is about three hundred and thirteen dollars for the whole fortnight. It is very difficult for those young people to live independently on that type of money. They don't have families to go home to, and the system is designed under the assumption that young people have a certain amount of money, that they have support behind them, and these young people don't. Look at rent. That's half your money gone.

Accommodation is also a major issue:

You've got young people who don't have a rental history, or if they do there's some that are blacklisted on that rental history, or they've lived in refuges and don't have the living skills to cope with a rental so they're just not given the private rentals. There's no room left in community housing, and the Department of Housing tends to have huge waiting lists. These young people have nothing. They don't have any family, and most of them don't even have many friends that they can talk to or can call on.

Another concern is that:

... most of the young people that leave care do not have an allocated case worker. They leave care with a letter, and most of them don't have a leaving care plan because they don't have a worker to do it (Johnson, 2003).

Similarly, ALIVE, which covers metropolitan Sydney, takes a holistic approach to supporting care leavers. According to Bron Parker:

What is expected of young people is enormous. Being homeless or having a miserable life tends to become their identity. If you try to get out of your situation, there is often an unsympathetic, unrealistic expectation from the community and some agencies, particularly if you are in your late teens or early twenties. There is an attitude that despite what has happened to you, you're supposed to behave, stop scavenging to survive, have no real emotions about anything, or only emotions that are manageable, that you're just supposed to get over it and get on with it, you are not really meant to complain, you just need to accept (Parker, 1998).

ALIVE tries to help young people deal with 'their baggage, their past, the present and the future' (Parker, 1998). Services provided include assistance with accommodation, clothing, household goods, pregnancy/baby material, driving lessons, health needs, family reconnection, education/employment training, victims compensation, debt, drug and alcohol addiction, counselling, and criminal matters. Parker estimates that sixty per cent of these young people have virtually nothing – no money and no accommodation. Whilst the \$1400 provided by the Department tends to cover basic items such as accommodation and furniture, the service would like ideally to provide assistance with further needs such as career training, computers, purchase of cars, and provision of decent holidays.

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Considerable attention is paid to personal/family history including:

... getting basic birth certificates, getting proof of age cards and looking at passports. Also discussion of siblings and previous good foster carers. Sometimes just visiting grave sites ... We have a lot of young men that disclose to us about sexual abuse, and they've never told anybody before so you've got police involved and possible legal issues (Parker, 2003).

Other practical supports provided by ALIVE include birthday cards and other letters of support, crisis contact, accepting reverse charge calls from young people, supplying telephone cards, and weekly travel tickets (Parker, 1998).

Some of the leaving care services have also been able to facilitate the participation of young people in service and

policy development processes. For example, ACE have established a Youth Reference Group consisting of past and present clients of their After Care Service. One of the Group members participated in the agency's presentation to the Senate Poverty Inquiry in Canberra (Brennan, 2003).

CONTINUING DEFICITS IN NSW

To date, no official evaluation of the efficacy of these services has been completed. DoCS did complete an earlier in-house evaluation in 2000, but the results were never published (Brennan, 2003). More recently, Judy Cashmore and the Create Foundation have submitted a proposal to DoCS to jointly undertake an evaluation based on consultations with service providers and young people, but no decision has yet been made. Nevertheless, reports provided by Create Foundation NSW and the Community Services Commission suggest that the services are contributing to improved outcomes for care leavers (CSC, 2000b:45; Create Foundation NSW, 2002).

However, a number of service gaps remain. For example, concern has been expressed that a number of groups are not eligible for after care support, including young people who were placed in relative or kinship care, and older care leavers whose care experience had occurred in other states. A further concern is that the legislation does not effectively address the particular after care needs of young people with serious mental health problems or disabilities or drug and alcohol addiction. Other issues raised include the lack of training for workers, especially DoCS workers, on preparing young people for leaving care; the continued absence of organized leaving care plans; the lack of consistent service provision across the state; and inadequate funding for the statewide Aboriginal service (CSC, 2000a:4 & 54). CSC, 2000b:45-46; Create Foundation NSW, 2000; Create Foundation NSW, 2002; Brennan, 2003; Hewitt, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Ludowici, 2003).

Questions have also been raised about the lack of specialist after care services in rural NSW. The existing service is provided by DoCS, and there appears to be a lack of separation between leaving care and general substitute care provision, with the latter often being given priority (Create Foundation NSW, 2000:14 & 40).

THE VICTORIAN LEAVING CARE DEBATE

Approximately 390 young people aged 14-18 years leave care in Victoria each year (ALP, 2002:9). Sections 119-124 of the 1989 Children and Young Persons Act (which is currently under review) provide no entitlement to leaving care or after care supports other than stipulating that appropriate discharge procedures be followed. These procedures include a limited post-placement support period of up to three months (Green & Jones, 1999:4 & 31; Maunders et al, 1999:30-31). To be sure, the Department of

Human Services (DHS) generally provides support for care leavers who have turned 18 years to complete their final year of schooling (Glare et al, 2003:27).

From the mid-1980s onwards there has been concern in Victoria about poor outcomes for care leavers including evidence of homelessness and involvement in prostitution (Hancock, 1985:40-47; Neave, 1985:76 & 102; Hirst, 1989; VCOSS, 1990:73-79; Green, 1993; Fredman & Green, 1994:41-43). However, leaving care only reached the public political agenda in 1996 when a report by the Victorian Auditor General demanded action from the government. The report noted the demonstrated connection between leaving care and homelessness, and criticized DHS for failing to provide any specific post-care programs. The report suggested the establishment of an advice or advocacy service for care leavers focused on accommodation, education, employment, financial, drug and alcohol, and personal support issues. A specific recommendation was made for research to be undertaken by DHS in order to examine the demand for and type of after care arrangements and support required (Auditor General, 1996: 270-272).

Subsequent research reports from the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (based on consultations with all Victorian child welfare service providers) and the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (based on interviews with 43 care leavers including six Victorians) confirmed these concerns (Green & Jones, 1999; Maunders et al, 1999).

Following the Auditor General's report, the Victorian Government announced funding for leaving care services in the 1997 Budget. However, progress was very slow due to political and funding difficulties associated with the broader redevelopment of Victorian youth and family services (Green, 2001). In April 1998, the Department of Human Services announced the formation of a Leaving Care Service Model Project. A Project Officer from the Protection and Care Unit was appointed, and proposed a research tender brief that would result in recommendations for an effective Victorian leaving care model. The Project Report was intended to be completed by August 1998 (DHS, 1998).

However, following considerable contention around the outcome of the tender process, the researchers – a team from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University – were not actually appointed till May 1999. Moreover, the terms of reference were limited to looking at improving support during the three month post-discharge period, and did not envisage extending support beyond this time period (Green & Jones, 1999:25-26).

A Reference Group was established in June 1999 to guide the project and research consultants' work. This group included representatives from various DHS departments including juvenile justice and housing, non-government agencies, social work academics, the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, and the Create Foundation. In the authors' view, there

was persistent tension within this group between government representatives and most non-government representatives. In general, the former group seemed to be focused solely on improvements to existing services, rather than the planning of new services. The latter group argued correctly that the purpose of the group was to design and advocate for entirely new transitional and after care services, rather than to spend time on in-care service issues.

A public consultative forum was held in August 1999 to present the initial findings of the consultants' research, and various initiatives for discussion with key stakeholders. This was followed by a change in Project Officer, with the role being taken up by the Salvation Army representative on the Reference Group. Further delay in the Project was caused by the change of Victorian Government from Liberal to ALP in late 1999 (Mendes, 2002b:53-57).

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The La Trobe University report prepared by Owen et al was completed in May 2000. The report made reference to the need for changes to policy and legislation, improved case planning practices, improved access to services, and the value of introducing an after care service (Owen et al, 2000). However, the report was limited in its detail of a service model, and was 'largely unsuccessful' in gaining input from young people who are in care, or who have left care (DHS, 2000a).

Subsequently, the Create Foundation was engaged to convene and facilitate a series of focus groups for young people in and ex care across the nine DHS regions. Seventy-eight young people were involved in the Create consultations. The focus groups were designed to canvass young people's experiences in leaving care, and views about the supports they would find helpful. The final report from Create offered recommendations that covered timing, preparation, information, practical and financial support, peer support, and ongoing involvement in the Leaving Care Project (Create Foundation Victoria, 2000).

Utilising the findings of the La Trobe University and Create reports plus the earlier research reports by Green & Jones

(1999) and Maunders et al (1999), DHS prepared an Options Paper in September 2000. This paper proposed a preferred Leaving Care Planning Framework for action over a two to three year time frame (DHS, 2000b). In addition, an independently facilitated consultation forum was convened in October. This forum identified key priorities regarding preparation and transition, an after care resource service, and management issues (Success Works, 2000). At the forum, Jenny McAuley, the Assistant Director of the Community Care section of DHS, promised that leaving care proposals would be prioritised in the Department's forthcoming budget submission. She was confident the proposals would enjoy the support of the Minister for Community Services.

Support for leaving care initiatives was also offered by both the Department's New Partnerships in Community Care Paper (2000c) and the Carter Community Care Review (2000). The Community Care paper promised cooperation with the Create Foundation to develop new strategies that would improve services and outcomes for care leavers (DHS, 2000c:23-24). The Carter Review argued that the three months post-placement support currently offered was 'grossly inadequate'. The Review recommended the provision of at least one year's post placement support, and the funding of Create to train mentors for young people leaving care (Carter, 2000:139-140). A further Department report emphasized that leaving care services were particularly needed to support young people with extreme behavioural disturbance (Morton, Clark & Pead, 1999:xvi).

However after four years of research and discussion, no funding was provided for leaving care programs in the 2001 Budget. This outcome was strongly criticized by the Create Foundation, the Victorian Council of Social Service, the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, and also the Victorian Parliament Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (Clare 2001; Griffin, 2001; PAEC, 2001:141-148). The Government provided no public explanation for this decision. However, child welfare providers were told informally that after care services would not be provided unless the sector could demonstrate through economic analysis that downstream savings will be made in terms of addressing potential longer-term costs pertaining to homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, and early pregnancy, and associated child protection interventions (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2003:41; Yates et al, 2003:40). The CWAV is currently undertaking a longitudinal study of care leavers in an attempt to provide such economic data.

THE VICTORIAN DEBATE RESUMES

Leaving care returned to the Victorian policy agenda as a result of two factors. Firstly, the Victorian Homelessness Strategy released in February 2002 provided further evidence of links between leaving care and homelessness, and the need for a wider range of housing options for care

leavers (DHS, 2002a; DHS, 2002b; Mallett et al, 2003; Walker, 2003).

As a result of these concerns, the Victorian Government allocated \$4.8 million over four years to the development of independent living skills programs for young people at risk of homelessness (especially young people leaving care). In particular, the Department of Human Services established two trial housing and support projects in the Gippsland and Southern Metropolitan regions. The projects, auspiced by Quantum Support Services and Salvation Army Peninsula Youth and Family Services respectively, aim to reduce the incidence of homelessness amongst care leavers by strengthening their independent living skills, providing access to housing options, and promoting links to education and training (Hibbins, 2003; Milne, 2003; Quantum Support Services, 2003; Salvation Army Peninsula Youth and Family Services, 2003).

At the time of writing, the government has extended funding for both these programs till June 2004 in order to enable a brief evaluation to be undertaken. Given a positive outcome, DHS has indicated that there is likely to be a further extension of funding for these projects. DHS also announced tenders for leaving care pilot projects in all other regions in November 2003. These projects will run for three years and five months (DHS, 2003a). However, there is currently no confirmation as to when these projects will commence. In addition, the government has introduced a mentoring program to assist 75 young people in the transition from residential care to independent living. The program is intended to 'increase the life skills, self-confidence and self-esteem of the young person leaving care' (DHS, 2003b).

Critics of the government argue that these new programs are fragmented and limited in scope. For example, the existing housing and support projects are only intended to assist 6-8 young people who are able to successfully transfer to sustainable independent living within the 12 months timeline of the project. The projects are not intended to assist those care leavers who have complex needs (eg, intellectual disability, mental health, substance abuse), and who will require ongoing support (Clare, 2003; Glare et al, 2003:31). Admittedly, the proposed additional pilot projects will include young people with 'some degree of complexity', but only if these care leavers 'have the potential to move into sustainable independent living within the three and a half years of the project' (DHS, 2003a). Similarly, concern has been expressed at the limited funding of the mentoring project which will only assist a small proportion of care leavers (Atkins, 2003:12).

In general, DHS appears to acknowledge that there is a need for increased assistance to care leavers around finances, accommodation, and emotional support. However, it is also apparent that the major focus of the Victorian Government is

on early prevention programs and the in-care experience, rather than leaving and post-care (Green, 2003).

The other key factor in returning leaving care to the policy agenda has been renewed advocacy from the non-government sector. For example, the CWAV Telstra study is examining the lives of 60 young people who have left care – 30 of whom have positive outcomes in terms of maintaining social connections, and 30 of whom have negative outcomes in terms of becoming disconnected from social supports. The study hypothesizes that the first group will be more likely to have experienced those factors (positive in-care experiences and ongoing after care support) demonstrated via empirical research to lead to positive outcomes, whilst the second group are more likely to have had negative in-care experiences, and to have lacked ongoing social support. The aim of the study is to demonstrate via macro-economic data that preventive leaving care and after care supports produce cost-effective outcomes (CWAV, 2003; DeLorenza, 2003; Raman, 2003).

In addition, a number of non-government agencies have introduced independently funded leaving care projects. For example, St Luke's Youth Services in Bendigo have established a Leaving Care and After Care Support Service funded by the Colonial Trust. The service targets care leavers aged 16-18 years with a particular focus on those who require housing assistance. The service aims to teach young people independent living skills, to strengthen links with family, to provide access to secure and ongoing housing, and to assist with educational and employment opportunities (Bonnice, 2002; Bonnice & Turner, 2003).

Similarly, MacKillop Family Services have initiated a major leaving care project. The project involves detailed interviews with 10 recent care leavers, and the development of a policy and set of procedures designed to prepare young people for leaving care, and to support them post-care. The procedures include the development of a comprehensive leaving care transition plan based on a living skills assessment tool and transition checklist, an individualized resource book for care leavers, and provision of post-care support for up to 12 months focused particularly on finances and training/employment issues (London, 2003).

Another agency, Berry Street Victoria, has developed a leaving care program which includes a manual for care leavers, independent skills programs, and provision of post-care support up to 13 weeks including transitional housing and household furniture. The aim of the program is to improve housing, health, and financial outcomes for care leavers (De Cruz, 2003).

In addition, all Victorian leaving care providers now meet regularly under the auspices of the CWAV to collaboratively exchange views and experiences, to raise awareness of leaving care needs, and to advocate for expanded leaving care supports and legislation in Victoria. These concerns are

also supported by the Victorian Council of Social Service, the peak non-government welfare body (VCOSS, 2004:36).

DISCUSSION

This comparison of the NSW and Victorian leaving care debates suggests significant differences, but also commonalities between the two states.

The key similarity is that in both states the major push for leaving care services came from non-government service providers and consumers. In NSW, leaving care practice, policy and research initiatives were driven primarily by the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies and associated service providers, and later by the Create Foundation. Similarly in Victoria, the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria and affiliated agencies, and the Create Foundation have provided the major impetus for policy reform.

The major difference, however, is that NSW has specific programs and legislation providing for the on-going support of care leavers, whereas Victoria has only limited programs, and no guarantee of after care support. The principal explanation for this difference appears to be the role of the respective bureaucracies.

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The NSW Department of Community Services took an activist role in commissioning the Cashmore & Paxman study, openly publishing its findings, and introducing the recommended practice and policy reforms. To be sure, continuing tensions exist between the bureaucracy and the non-government child welfare sector in NSW (Melville & Perkins, 2003:59 & 105), and certain political dynamics and events such as the Wood Royal Commission also played an important part. However, the DoCS bureaucracy was clearly willing to engage in an implicit alliance with non-state actors to influence and pressure government from the inside (Sawer & Jupp, 1996:86).

In contrast, the Victorian bureaucracy appears to have had a conservatising influence on the leaving care debate. The

policy bureaucrats within DHS had been heavily demoralized during the years of the Kennett Liberal Government (1992-99) by a climate of constant change, downsizing, and overt suppression of alternative or dissenting views. Many professionals with long years of experience in and knowledge of child protection issues, including specific leaving care concerns, had left the Department. Others stayed, but were fearful of being seen to advocate for client or sector interests. The Kennett Government aimed to marginalize peak lobby groups such as the CWAV, and to limit the role of service providers in any policy or decision making processes (Mendes, 2001:8-9).

Although Victoria now has an ALP Government which is committed in principle to consultation with service providers and users, the DHS bureaucracy appears to retain in practice a distant and tense relationship with the non-government child welfare sector (Melville & Perkins, 2003:62-65). Certainly there is little evidence of any activism within the bureaucracy to advocate for and promote leaving care reforms.

Another significant finding is the remarkable lack of sharing of information between the two states on leaving care. Apart from a brief report by DHS back in early 1999 (McGuckin, 1999), there is little evidence that the Victorian Government or DHS has made any attempt to incorporate lessons from the NSW leaving care experience. No study has been made of either the merits or deficits of the NSW initiatives.

As to outcomes, it can reasonably be surmised that care leavers are doing better in NSW than in Victoria. They are able to utilize a statewide leaving care and after care system, including financial assistance, and have a legislative guarantee of post-care support. To be sure, it is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of particular services given the absence of an official evaluation, and feedback from service providers and users suggests that a number of significant problems including under-resourcing of services remain. Nevertheless, NSW seems to be on the right track to delivering greater opportunities for care leavers.

In contrast, Victoria lacks either statewide leaving care services, or a legislative guarantee of support. The current housing and mentoring pilot projects may contribute to better outcomes for care leavers provided they are given adequate funding and resources, and transformed into uniform ongoing programs. Equally, it is to be hoped that the current review of the Children and Young Persons Act will lead to serious legislative provision for after care support. At present, the Victorian State parent is failing to meet its ongoing parental responsibility to those leaving the family home. □

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