

It is with pleasure that *Children Australia* welcomes Dr Philip Mendes and Dr Catherine Forbes as Guest Editors of this 2006 Special Edition. Philip and Catherine have brought together the most recent research, practice and commentary on the issue of young people leaving care — an area which has been largely neglected in Australia in spite of the efforts of practitioners and carers alike. The disadvantages faced by young people leaving care are seldom given high regard by either politicians or the public. However, with the expert compilation of this Special Edition, it is hoped we can raise awareness and highlight this important issue.

Jennifer Lehmann, Editor

Editorial

Young people leaving state care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. Compared to most young people, they face particular difficulties in accessing educational, employment, housing and other developmental and transitional opportunities. The poor outcomes for many care leavers reflect a number of factors including ongoing emotional trauma resulting from experiences of abuse and neglect prior to care, inadequate support while in care, accelerated transitions to adulthood and lack of guaranteed ongoing financial and other assistance to help facilitate this transition.

Conversely, the leaving care literature shows that a range of supports and services can lead to better 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 dependence 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 to provide not only 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 (Bromfield et al. 2005; Mendes & Moslehuddin 2006).

Strangely, the literature provides little, if any, analysis or explanation as to why governments have failed to provide sufficient resources and assistance to care leavers. There appear to be significant political, economic and practice-based barriers to the introduction of effective leaving care services including the following:

- a) Most child welfare systems are crisis driven, and prioritise the rescuing of children and young people from abuse and neglect, rather than the provision of holistic support to those already in substitute care and/or those transitioning from care.
- b) Many policy makers either don't understand or alternatively prefer to ignore that leaving care is an integral part of the child welfare continuum, and that the state as substitute parent has a legal and moral responsibility to provide ongoing support to care leavers.
- c) Many child welfare workers still hold the well-intentioned but arguably ill-informed view that young

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people are entitled on civil liberty grounds to attain absolute independence from their substitute carers once their statutory child protection order ends.

- d) Some of the literature emphasises promoting the individual resilience of care leavers which gives governments a convenient excuse to avoid their responsibility for addressing the collective structural disadvantages faced by all care leavers.
- e) Governments everywhere are driven by economic rationalist agendas, and are reluctant to commit funding to expensive new initiatives even when the affected group is so obviously deserving of assistance. This seems to be particularly the case in child welfare where substitute care is still often constructed as a semi-voluntary rather than a professional undertaking.
- f) Care leavers are a numerically small group in most Western countries, and hence they and their supporters hold little political or electoral influence (see Mendes 2002 for further discussion).

On the other hand, there are increasingly strong political and economic arguments for investing in leaving and after care services including the following:

- a) Leaving care services build on and complement in-care supports. The billions of dollars spent on child protection systems are potentially wasted if opportunities are not provided for the survivors of child abuse and neglect to participate in mainstream society. To use an obvious sporting analogy, a team would not play three-quarters of the grand final of a football match, but fail to play the last quarter which actually decides the outcome.
- b) As the recent report from the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare has shown (Raman, Inder & Forbes 2005), leaving care supports are cost effective in terms of reducing later demands on government health and welfare supports and programs.
- c) Providing adequate supports for care leavers in most Western countries is relatively cheap given the small number of care leavers in any one year.

Many of these issues were extensively debated at the *Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care* conference, held in Melbourne in November 2005, which was hosted by the Monash University Department of

Econometrics and Business Statistics in conjunction with the Monash University Department of Social Work and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The conference featured three keynote presentations – by John Pinkerton from Belfast, Northern Ireland, Judy Cashmore from New South Wales, and Mike Clare from Western Australia. A number of other papers were also presented.

Here we publish a selection of papers from the conference. The three keynote speakers respectively addressed leaving care as a global, national and state issue. Pinkerton argues that leaving care crosses national boundaries, and recommends the development of cross-national research and policy networks to explore similarities and differences in policy and practice. Clare discusses the introduction of a leaving care project in Western Australia, and argues the case for a national leaving care agenda, whilst Cashmore and Paxman present the findings of the fourth interview of their longitudinal study of care leavers in NSW, and discuss the implications for in-care, leaving care and after care policy and practice.

The four other papers present reports from leaving care research in Victoria. Forbes, Inder and Raman summarise the findings from their recent Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare report, and argue that the introduction of extensive after care supports would lead to large cost savings down the track. Frederick and Goddard present some of the findings from a larger study examining the experiences of people seeking emergency relief, and argue that experiences of child abuse coupled with inadequate supports for care leavers can lead to poverty and disadvantage in adult life. London and Halfpenny present the results of a recent set of interviews undertaken by MacKillop Family Services, and suggest the importance of continued relationships for care leavers with human service workers. And Moslehuddin and Mendes present the findings of a recent pilot study based on interviews with 10 Victorian care leavers, and emphasise the significant role played by leaving care and after care supports in facilitating positive outcomes.

We are very grateful to the 14 reviewers who provided detailed appraisals of these seven papers at very short notice.

In addition, we publish two non-academic reports which document current leaving care debates and services. Low provides a summary of the discussions conducted at the August 2005 FACE TO FACE National Forum around leaving

care experiences, and recommendations for policy reform. And Griffin presents a brief overview of the local Whitleion mentoring program for care leavers.

We hope that this wealth of information will be read not only by academics and researchers, but also particularly by government and non-government policy makers and practitioners who are responsible for designing and introducing badly needed reforms. As discussed at the recent National Out-of-Home Care Research Forum held in Brisbane (May 2006), there is an urgent need for new state and national initiatives to support care leavers.

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GUEST EDITORS

Dr Philip Mendes, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Monash University

For the past 7 years, Philip has been involved in ongoing research on leaving care policy and practice. The research has included a comparison of the leaving care supports available in Australian states (particularly Victoria and New South Wales), and also a comparison of Australia with the USA, UK and New Zealand. This research has arguably contributed to leaving care becoming a source of national policy and political debate.

Dr Catherine Forbes, Senior Lecturer, Department of Econometrics and Business Statistics, Monash University

Although most often engaged in the modelling of business and financial market data, Catherine became involved in the leaving care debate when serving on the steering committee for the Telstra Leaving Care project at the Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

OUR GRATEFUL THANKS TO ANDREW MUIR, XL COLOUR PRINTING FOR KINDLY DONATING THE COST OF PRINTING THE ADDITIONAL PAGES REQUIRED TO INCLUDE ALL THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE OF *CHILDREN AUSTRALIA*, AND THUS MAKING THIS SPECIAL EDITION POSSIBLE.

Children Australia is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, we now include a symbol at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article