

Forum ...

⌘ *In response to the special edition of Children Australia on young people leaving state care (Vol 31 No 3), the following letter was received from The Hon John Cobb MP who, at that time, was the Federal Minister for Community Services.*

Dear Dr Lehmann

Thank you for your letter of 12 October 2006 ...

In your letter you expressed concern about young people leaving care and the importance to redress childhood disadvantage. Although the Australian Government provides services to assist young people transitioning from care, the main responsibility for the care and protection needs of young people lies with state and territory governments.

The Australian Government initiatives and programmes to improve outcomes for children and young people in, and leaving, out-of-home care are primarily provided through my portfolio and that of the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP.

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) funds a number of programmes that can assist young people leaving state care. These include the Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA), Reconnect and Mentor Marketplace programmes.

The Australian Government recognises the risks and financial difficulties that can be faced by young people exiting state and territory child protection systems and provides additional financial assistance to assist in addressing these difficulties.

The TILA is a one-off financial support to the value of \$1,000 for young people aged 15 to 25 years who are about to, or who have already exited, formal state based care and/or informal care such as juvenile justice, out-of-home care and Indigenous kinship care arrangements.

Transition to Independent Living Allowance is designed to be provided in conjunction with a care plan and other support services to help young people alleviate the financial strain associated with accessing accommodation, education and/or employment, and assist them to transition to independent living. It does this by complementing other funding and assistance provided by the Australian Government, and state and territory governments, to support children and young people leaving care, e.g. Youth

Allowance; Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme (SAAP), funded youth services that assist young people who are at risk of becoming homeless; Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) Programme; and state and territory government funded after care services designed to assist young people leaving care.

The Australian Government recognises that many young people leaving state child protection systems may wish to re-establish or re-negotiate their relationships with their biological family. Reconnect provides early intervention support for young people aged between 12 and 18 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and their families. The programme is delivered by non-government providers offering services such as counselling, mediation, and practical support to both the young person and their family.

Reconnect improves the level of engagement of the young person with family, work, education, training and the community.

The Australian Government recognises the importance of young people having at least one stable and supportive adult in their life (this is supported by the article by Cashmore and Paxman in the *Children Australia* journal accompanying your letter). The Mentor Marketplace programme was established based on research that found that all young people (12 to 25 years) need at least one stable adult who they can trust and turn to for support, information, guidance and care. Access to mentoring is provided for a wide range of young people including, but not restricted to, those in foster care, young carers, young people with disabilities, Indigenous young people, and those from disadvantaged groups and localities.

More information on these programmes and other youth programmes and initiatives to enable all young Australians to reach their full potential can be found on the FaCSIA website at: www.facsia.gov.au and following the links to youth.

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) website also has information on a number of programmes and initiatives which support young people transitioning to independence. Information can be found on the DEST website at: www.dest.gov.au and following links to the programmes menu.

Currently a full range of Australian Government benefits and payments support the wellbeing of children and young people in out-of-home care. These benefits and payments

include Youth Allowance, Family Tax Benefit and Child Care Benefit.

The Australian Government also recently commissioned a study on 'Transition from care: Avoidable costs to governments of alternative pathways of young people exiting the formal child protection care system in Australia'. The key purpose of the study is to inform Ministers, governments and non-government organisations about the current alternate pathways young people, who have left formal care, are believed to follow and what the use of these pathways cost governments over time.

The report will be released following its consideration by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC).

Once again, thank you for writing. I hope my comments are of assistance.

Yours sincerely
John Cobb

⌘ In response to the article by Patricia Hansen and Frank Ainsworth, 'Adoption in Australia: Review and reflection', which was published in *Children Australia* (Vol 31 No 4), we received the following letter from Lynne Moggach, Principal Officer, Adoption, Barnardos Australia, Sydney.

Dear Dr Lehmann

As the Principal Officer, Adoption of Barnardos Australia, I was extremely interested to read the above article in the current edition of *Children Australia*. While I agree with the sentiments expressed by the authors, I believe that some of the statistics quoted from AIHW are misleading.

Under the heading 'Known and local adoptions', the authors state that 'A further 65 (11.1%) adoptions were local adoptions ... These 65 children plus the 29 from foster carers and the 5 adopted by kin other than step-parents are those most likely to have been adopted from the 'care' system, although this is not made entirely clear in the AIHW 2005 report.' It is my understanding that these 65 children have never been in the care system; rather they have been adopted because their parents have given consent for their adoption and the children were then placed with their adoptive families. Certainly, the 29 children adopted by their foster carers would most certainly have been from the care system. The inclusion of the 65 local adoptions in this figure gives an inaccurate impression of the total number of children adopted from the care system.

This also has implications for the statement made under the heading 'Where to from here?' that '... of the 65 local adoptions, there was only 1 where a dispensation from consent was made by a Court.' This is a reflection of the circumstances leading to the placement and adoption of these children. The AIHW does not collect information about consents or dispensation of consent for 'known' child adoptions; therefore there is no information as to the number of consent dispense applications made in these adoptions.

Thank you for the inclusion of this article and the opportunity for the generation of discussion about this issue.

Yours sincerely
Lynne Moggach

⌘ Patricia Hansen and Frank Ainsworth reply to Ms Moggach's concerns in the following letter:

Dear Dr. Lehmann,

It is good to have received Ms Moggach's letter in response to our article 'Adoption in Australia: Review and reflection' published in the last edition of *Children Australia* (Vol. 31, No. 4).

Extracting data from national databases is complex. In our article we wrote 'These 65 children plus the 29 from foster carers and the 5 adopted by kin other than step-parents are those most likely to have been adopted from the care system'. However, in her letter Ms Moggach says that this statement is misleading. If this is the case we welcome the clarification. But Ms Moggach's proposition: 'It is my understanding that these 65 children have never been in the care system; rather they have been adopted because their parents have given their consent for their adoption and the children were then placed with their adoptive families' may or may not be true, as she gives no reference or evidence to support her view. Neither we, nor the readers of *Children Australia*, can know if this is fact or opinion.

In relation to our section titled 'Where to from here', Ms Moggach states that 'The AIHW does not collect information about consents or dispensation of consent for 'known' child adoptions; therefore there is no information as to the number of consent dispense applications made in these adoptions'. This is, of course, correct. But our comment about the 65 children relates to local adoptions and not 'known' adoptions.

Data about consent dispensations for local adoptions is collected by AIHW. Table 4: Local adoptions, by type of consent, 2004-05 can be found on page 10 of the *Adoption Australia 2004-05* report from the Australian Institute of