

## Summaries

# Senate Inquiry — Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

## Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry: Volumes 1–3 (2012)

Two important documents that address the health, care, protection and wellbeing of children and families, both past and present have been recently published and distributed within the public arena. Here I would like to provide a brief overview of each document. The aim is not to review or critique the publications, but rather act as a summary of their content and intent, with particular reference to their recommendations.

The first document is the Senate Inquiry undertaken by the Community Affairs Reference Committee that investigated the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* (2012).

The inquiry provides a thorough account of the historical beliefs, values and frequency of forced adoption by way of statistics and discussions about legislative processes but, most importantly, it tells the story through the voices of women and men, young and old, who experienced it. They discuss the short- and long-term effects of forced adoption on parents, children and the whole family. The inquiry, I believe, respectfully shares the stories of many parents whose children were forcibly removed from them, as well as the stories and experiences of the individuals who were removed. Those affected share very powerful and moving stories that elucidate a very sad and unjust period in our history. The inquiry culminates with twenty key recommendations based on what they call a need for a national framework. The first seven recommendations are a call for, and stipulations about, governmental and agency based acknowledgment and apologies to parents and children who were subjected to forced adoption policies and practices. These are followed by a number of recommendations, including the provision of appropriate

counselling and support services, financial reparation, and practical solutions for redressing the misinformation or lost information that resulted from forced adoption. And finally, the 'committee recommends that the Commonwealth commission an exhibition documenting the experiences of those affected by former forced adoption policies and practices'.

Thankfully, the practice of forced adoption appears to be extinct, and 'old fashioned' societal views that once endorsed, indeed provoked, such practices have diminished; so we will, hopefully, never see new accounts of trauma associated with forced adoption again. But for those who did, and are still experiencing such trauma, we hope to see the appropriate recommendations implemented that will help individuals and families recover from their experiences and rediscover their true history. The submission can be found at [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Committees?url=clac\\_ctte/comm\\_contrib\\_former\\_forced\\_adoption/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Committees?url=clac_ctte/comm_contrib_former_forced_adoption/report/index.htm).

The second document presented here is the *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry: Volumes 1–3* (January, 2012) reported by the Honourable Philip Cummins (Chair) in conjunction with Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott (OAM) and Bill Scales (AO).

The report has been divided into three volumes. Volume 1 includes the 'Executive summary and Lists of recommendations, findings and matters for attention as well as an Implementation plan'. Volume 2 provides greater detail about the investigations, and within the 23 chapters of this volume, the authors report on the impact of abuse and neglect, Victoria's current system and performance, the policy framework, major protective system

elements, the law and the court, system supporting capacities, system governance and implementation and conclusion. And finally, Volume 3 contains the appendices and references.

The purpose of the inquiry was to evaluate the current child protection system and make recommendations for improving the lives of vulnerable children and young people in Victoria, both now and in the future. The authors put forward a number of substantial recommendations that incorporate all of the organisations and processes that make up the current protective system that, if implemented, would constitute a fairly radical overhaul of the current system. They have examined the system from all angles including policy, legislation and practice and performance perspectives. Special attention has been given to meeting the needs of Aboriginal young people, young people from cultural and linguistically diverse communities and young people in, and leaving, out-of-home care.

To help strengthen and improve a system they call ‘complex and fragile’, the panel has made 90 recommendations. Obviously this list is too extensive to reiterate here but, in essence, the panel recommends the following:

- That a whole-of-government approach to the identification and protection of vulnerable children be established. Within this framework, called the Vulnerable Children and Families Strategy, the protection of vulnerable children will not be the sole responsibility of the Department of Human Services (DHS), but rather a coordinated approach by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Department of Health (DH). With this comes a call for greater accountability by all departments and organisations involved in child protection through greater scrutiny of their roles, responsibilities and performance. This, they believe, should be monitored by a Children’s Services Committee of Cabinet comprising the ministers responsible for community services, children, education, health, community development and justice.
- The government should establish a Commission for Children and Young People and an Aboriginal Children’s Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner appointed by the Governor-in-Council.
- To strengthen the collaborative relationships between statutory child protection and family support services. The focus of this will be strengthening area-based planning and coordination of services.
- Simplifying procedures and processes for child protection practitioners, as well as establishing a child and family welfare sector training body to oversee development of an industry-wide workforce education and development strategy.
- To better meet the needs of children and young people in out-of-home care by finding permanent care in a timely manner, improving the stability, quality and outcomes of out-of-home care placements and providing children with appropriate therapeutic care, education and other services. The panel recommends the introduction of a professional carer model to help implement these objectives.
- To improve the services offered to young people leaving out-of-home care by ensuring they are provided with adequate resources to find appropriate accommodation, employment/education and health. When necessary, young people should be ‘followed-up’ until 25 years of age to ensure they achieve the best outcome possible.
- That Aboriginal cultural competence is made a feature of the DHS and the standards for community service organisations, and that a plan is developed to delegate the care and control of Aboriginal children removed from their families to Aboriginal communities.
- To improve knowledge and data on vulnerable children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds so that the appropriateness of current service provision can be considered.
- The following Acts should be amended to ensure that service providers assisting adults also have a clear responsibility to the children of their clients:
  - *Disability Act 2006*
  - *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*
  - *Health Services Act 1988*
  - *Housing Act 1983*
  - *Mental Health Act 1986*
  - *Severe Substance Dependence Treatment Act 2010.*
- Other recommended legislative changes include amendments to the Family Division of the Children’s Court to improve services and outcomes and to work from a ‘best interests of the child’ model. In addition, they recommend that court personnel receive appropriate training in child development, child abuse and neglect, trauma, and child interviewing techniques.
 

The current information management system should be refined and extended to include more detailed data, data sharing between relevant agencies and utilising the data for research and policy development.
- These recommendations come with the associated recommendation that there is an increased investment in universal services and programs aimed to prevent child abuse and neglect as well adequate funds to set up the new strategies.

As mentioned earlier, this is not an exhaustive list of recommendations, but rather a brief outline of the main issues raised by the panel. It is clear that a lot of these recommendations, if implemented successfully, should go some way to improving the wellbeing of vulnerable youngsters in our community. It will be interesting to watch the progression of the panel's ideas over the coming months

and years — let's hope they go some way to improve the lives and wellbeing of Victoria's vulnerable young people and their families. The inquiry can be found at <http://www.childprotectioninquiry.vic.gov.au/report-pvvc-inquiry.html>.

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