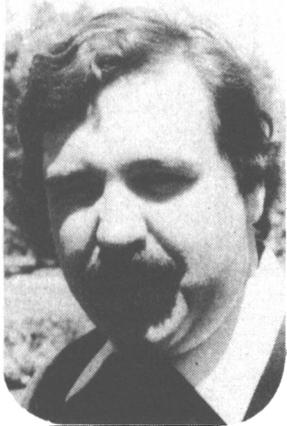


COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY INTO CHILD CARE SERVICES IN VICTORIA



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Background

The report of the Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria was tabled in the Parliament on the 22nd September, 1976.

The report follows more than 18 months of deliberation on the seven terms of reference which are included elsewhere in this report.

The committee was until the 1.8.75 chaired by Mr Maurice Brown, who was appointed to the Public Service Board. Mr J. D. Norgard, the Chairman of the Metric Conversion Board, was then appointed Chairman.

Around 80 submissions were made to the Committee by individuals and organisations.

Mr Ray Cleary, who has contributed this comment on the Committee of Enquiry Report into Child Welfare Services in Victoria, is the Administrator and Deputy Director of Mercy Family Care, a child and family welfare service in Geelong, Victoria.

Mr Cleary is also a member of the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria and contributed to the Association's comprehensive submission to the Enquiry.

In this comment he makes strong criticism of the lack of an adequate philosophical base for the Report, and is disappointed that it did not go far enough in encouraging the development of innovative preventive programmes.

The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria, presented recently to the Victorian State Parliament may be best described as a review of the current Victorian Child Welfare scene. While it makes some specific recommendations regarding ways in which the present programmes and services may be improved, it offers few guidelines for the future in the establishment of a total Child and Family Welfare Service for this State.

Recommendations such as the Licensing of Children's Homes, the provision of Community Education Programmes, the establishment of Contracts for Voluntary Agencies, a review of Wardship and Guardianship, the establishment of specialist services for emotionally disturbed families and children, the development of staff training, are all valuable programme developments in themselves. However, any service development needs to be based on a sound framework. The Report does not adequately establish any framework (except as an Appendix) for service development, nor does it clearly state in any

detail the values and philosophy on which a Welfare Service should be established. One may assume therefore that the Enquiry has viewed a number of new and innovative programmes and ideas as stated above, and attempted to relate and incorporate these into the existing welfare pattern.

The "criteria" for the establishment of any new Welfare Service in any Region or Area is for the needs to be fully established, for the idea to be researched, proven needed, and then hopefully implemented. At all times the objectives and goals of the programme must be clearly stated. Further, the new programme must be considered in relation to existing services and local area needs and policy. The service provided should not overlap or duplicate existing programmes. Similarly the Child Care Enquiry Report should have stated basic goals and objectives upon which the programmes and services which it has recommended may be based. The Report appears to have taken the easy way out in the area of philosophy and goals when it says,



Mr. J. Norgard
Chairman
Committee of Enquiry

“Our broad policy has been to see the family and the community as a whole working as a partnership, with the aims of promoting the welfare of the child within the family at all times.”

“We come to the conclusion that services aimed at preventing families’ disintegration and admission of children to State Care are under-developed in Victoria.”

“We see the Federal Government retaining responsibility for national policy co-ordination and funding in the welfare field and administering such national provisions as personal maintenance and income supplements.”

Concern

The Committee’s decision to recommend a reformed Family Welfare Advisory Council is another area of concern. Many of the submissions and comments presented to the Board called for the establishment of a separate independent authority, such as that being established for the Health and Mental Health Departments. Both the Statutory and Voluntary Sectors would then be responsive to the planning, funding and co-ordinating function which this Independent Commission could undertake.

Compromise

It appears however, that the recommendations regarding the Family Welfare Council is a compromise for both the Voluntary and Statutory Sectors. As the Report reads, neither Sectors nor the Minister for Social Welfare has to accept the advice received from the Council. In what way then is this new Family Welfare Council any better than the existing Advisory Council? A look at the Councils functions (see page 33 of the Report) does not indicate any real power to determine policy or action, and thus the Council remains Advisory. A further question posed is that of the relationship between the proposed Family Welfare Council and the Social Welfare Department’s Policy, Planning and Research Unit. An extension of the Council’s membership may broaden its outlook but provides little strength for its voice to be heard. This also is the major criticism of the existing Advisory Council.

The areas of Prevention and Detection are of prime importance in establishing a Child and Family Welfare Service. The report says that preventive services should be available to all families in the Community, and that these services while ultimately being the State Government’s responsibility may be implemented jointly by Government,

local authorities and voluntary agencies.

Most of the suggestions and recommendations regarding Preventive programmes appear to be at the remedial level (i.e. the provision of Home help, Counselling Service) rather than at the primary preventive level. How in fact do we break the cycle of family conflict and distress? How do we detect families or individuals who are not functioning? What in fact do we want to prevent and detect? These basic questions regarding Preventive Services will remain unanswered. Nor is there discussion regarding the co-operation needed between Health, Education and Welfare groups.

Further, the two basic questions of how do we get people to use the available preventive and remedial services and if the services are available, what guarantee is there that families will want to use them anyhow?

It is one issue to introduce further counselling services, it is another to have people use these services. Co-operation between other Government departments should also have been investigated. A good detection procedure overlooked is that of the Infant Welfare Service Sister. Infant

The Report recommends that no children’s home should cater for more than 40 children. This would mean the eventual closure of some larger homes.



Welfare Sisters employed by the Health Department are in a prime position to detect families not functioning and young children in distress. Why no discussion in this area?

“Relationship”

The relationship between the Voluntary/Statutory Agencies is another major area of concern which still needs an answer. The general tone of the Report places responsibility for welfare services with the State Social Welfare Department. While saying that Voluntary bodies do have a role, it appears that this role will only exist if the Department wishes to involve the Private Agency. No provision is made to directly involve the Voluntary Agency. This is not so different from the current position. A true Voluntary/Statutory relationship would involve co-operation in consultation and planning at all levels, not just when the Voluntary Agency takes the initiative.

The Social Welfare Department is currently involved in a major re-organization of its own service from a centralized administration to a Regional Model. Despite this the Enquiry has decided to make no comment about this re-structuring. It is apparent however that this current re-organization will have a major effect on Service delivery. Such re-organization should have received comment from the Enquiry task force. Was the Department's re-organization taken as a “facie-complice” and therefore it does not really matter what the Enquiry Report comments.

While advocating Licensing and Contractual arrangements, considerable work still needs to be carried out on the details. The question of the Voluntary Agency's function and what is meant by its Approval still needs clarification.

Is the Voluntary sector to be only another arm of Government, or will it offer an alternative service to families and children? Should it act

as a watch dog on Government Welfare policy?

The Child Care Enquiry Report has made no great pronouncements regarding Welfare Services in this State. It has attempted to add new services and “good ideas” into an already diffused and uncoordinated field. The lack of any direct policy guidelines or suggestions by the Enquiry for a Welfare Service may mean that if the ad-hoc ideas are implemented the overall service delivery will not be improved. It has further failed to deal adequately with the areas of prevention and detection.

The Child Welfare Community must not accept the document as an adequate response and analysis of the Child Welfare field, but take alternative measures to ensure that Child Welfare policy, based on sound values and philosophy is designed and implemented at an early stage.

1. Enquiry Report, pp 10.
2. Enquiry Report, pp 11.
3. Enquiry Report, pp 101.

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