

Policies, Obstacles and Opportunities for the Children of Victoria in the 1990's

By The Hon. Kay Setches M.L.A. Minister for Community Services.



INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Government has a strong commitment to the provision of services to children. This commitment is reflected in recent initiatives and will continue to be enhanced by development of services for children and their families throughout the 1990's.

- The Victorian Government will;
- continue to support and develop the range of traditional children's services of which the community is justly proud.
 - support the development of services where identified needs emerge.
 - seek to establish innovative services which draw together and enhance existing services as well as expand the service system.

These service responses are tied together by the State's Social Justice strategy. The strategy provides a framework for developing services which meet the needs of the whole community whilst acknowledging the needs of particular groups and individuals in the community.

TRADITIONAL CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Maternal and Child Health

The Maternal and Child Health Program is a program funded jointly by the State Government and Local Government. The program provides a highly trained nursing service in every municipality.

One of the main responsibilities of the program is to provide an effective health screening and nursing support to families with infants and young children. It is also able to provide pre-natal care for mothers and is a critical element in the State's capacity to provide early identification of additional needs including those relating to maternal health and wellbeing in the post-natal period.

The Maternal and Child Health Program is a cornerstone of our children's and family service system. It is in contact with almost every family within a week of a child being

born can provide;

- mothers with assistance, advice and support about their own health and wellbeing both before and after birth.
- regular screening of children to ensure that developmental milestones are being achieved and to advise on appropriate action or referral where they are not.
- parents and the general community with advice, information, and education about child health, development and sound parenting.

During the 1990's it is anticipated that this program will be strengthened to;

- further develop the relationships between this program and other children's and family services and women's health services.
- ensure that effective screening activities across the 0-6 age range are undertaken.
- make sure that community and parent support activities are relevant to the wide range of groups in the community including disadvantaged groups. This will involve the Maternal and Child Health Program and other programs developing a greater capacity to provide relatively intensive outreach support to families in the first twelve months of their child's life.

The rapid growth anticipated in some areas will undoubtedly stretch the community service system. It will also raise many questions about the way services are designed and with creativity and goodwill is likely to encourage the development of innovative, integrated and cost effective service models. These areas may be the 'test bed' for the community service industries approach to structural efficiency.

Kindergarten

As a result of Government efforts 97% of four year old children are now attending Kindergarten. The Government's commitment to provide one year of pre-school for all children will be maintained and efforts

will continue throughout the 90's to ensure that the service is readily accessible to families. This will mean that efforts to ensure that families living in isolated parts of the state and families which have a child with a disability are assisted to use the pre-school service.

Changes in the community such as growing involvement of women in the workforce and a large number of single parents indicates that the pre-school service will face a number of challenges if it is to retain its relevance and community support. Those changes are likely to focus upon increasing the level of flexibility and increased involvement with child care provision and other community support services.

SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS

Child Care

The Victorian Government has shared with the Commonwealth government a strong commitment to a significant growth in child care provision. Victoria has successfully implemented the agreement which has seen an additional 99 child care services established in the last four years. The Government is therefore confident that this state will be able to join with the Commonwealth in developing the services proposed during the recent election campaign. The full implications of the Commonwealth promises are not yet clear however it is anticipated that several thousand additional child care places will be created in this state in coming years. The Victorian Government is very aware of the important role that readily available child care services can play in family life and will be working actively to ensure that services including long day care, occasional care, before and after school and holiday services are available in high needs areas.

Children's Services Regulations

The Government has also put in place new child care regulations which will provide uniform coverage and give parents some security that their pre-school child is in a good quality environment. The regulations include the requirement that where children are cared for long periods some trained staff are required.

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Child Protection

Child abuse has been the subject of serious public concern and discussion in this state in recent years. The Victorian Government received "The Report on Protective Services for Children in Victoria (known as the Fogarty Report) in February 1989.

The Government provided an additional \$7.2 million for child protection services. These funds have supported a major boost in staffing. This has resulted in a 100% increase in the number of reports of child abuse investigated. A 24 hour seven day a week service for children has also been established and the first phase of implementing a wholly welfare based child protection service has commenced.

These initiatives have been backed up by the provision of additional funds to support the closure of child welfare institutions and an expansion of community based services for children unable to live with their parents.

Victoria's child protection service is now well placed to deal with the challenges of the 1990s. The "dual track" system for dealing with child protection notification is being phased out and CSV will progressively assume sole responsibility for this role.

New Legislation

The Government has also passed the Children's and Young Persons Act and this will be progressively implemented in the early part of the decade. The Act provides a vastly improved and integrated legislative framework for the child protection and juvenile justice services. The Act requires that protection issues and offence proceedings must be dealt with separately.

The Children's and Young Persons Act includes new and more specific grounds under which a protection application can be made in respect of a child who appears to be in need of protection. The Act also introduces a vastly more appropriate range of court dispositions to enable magistrates to make an order appropriate to the child's needs and circumstances surrounding the case.

The criminal divisions of the act also specify new procedures and introduces new dispositions. These dispositions provide a hierarchy which will assist the court to make an order appropriate to the crime and the young person's circumstances.

Early Intervention

Victoria already has an extensive range of services for children with additional needs and their families. There is, however, a clear recognition of the need to extend the range of services and to achieve change within existing services.

A recent study of early intervention services has highlighted the need for change and has identified the need for;

- clear policy frameworks which are applied by all relevant government agencies.

- the development of information systems which families can easily use when they suspect that their child may have an additional need of some kind.
- greater reliance upon the existing community service system to support children with additional needs and their families. This will involve change to the service model and resourcing requirements of these services as well as changes to many centre based services.
- cross departmental assessment and referral protocols which enhance the certainty that families will receive a complete service with little or no chasing around to a variety of agencies.
- increased support for and involvement of families with a child who has additional needs. Their involvement needs to be with the agencies involved and we need to assist them to establish mutual support groups.

Family Support

Families provide the basic nurturing and support that children require. Families also require support from time to time to enable them to perform their functions. The Family Support Program in Victoria is currently being redeveloped to ensure its relevance and effectiveness is maintained throughout the 1990s.

Victoria has recently established a pilot Parent Education and Skilling Program. This program is designed to promote and support an expansion and upgrading of parent education activity and courses. Local Parent Resource Co-ordinators play an important role in the program particularly in focussing attention upon encouraging the development of courses and activities which are relevant to the more vulnerable families in the community. Whilst the program is a pilot the early results are encouraging and it is hoped that the lessons learned can be applied in a more widespread fashion during the 1990s.

Population Growth

Victoria anticipates a continuing population growth with much of this

occurring in the areas around the perimeter of Melbourne. This growth and the changes in population mix in established areas will pose major planning and resource allocation challenges for the Government. The Victorian Government recognises that families moving into growth areas require and deserve a basic community service infrastructure comparable with that which exists in most inner metropolitan areas. The resources to support this service development will have to come at least partly through reallocation from older, established areas.

The rapid growth anticipated in some areas will undoubtedly stretch the community service system. It will also raise many questions about the way services are designed and with creativity and goodwill is likely to encourage the development of innovative, integrated and cost effective service models. These areas may be the 'test bed' for the community service industries approach to structural efficiency.

CONCLUSION

The Victorian Government and community is proud of the range of services available for children and their families and the co-operative arrangements which exist to deliver these services. The coming decade will bring major changes to the service structure as we seek to respond to community and population changes. Those changes will involve reorganisation and relocation of existing services to enable them to respond to changing community need as well as new service development. The development of the service system will also occur in a period of economic restraint and careful scrutiny of all proposals involving public funds. There will also be changes to the roles of the state and local government and the non-government organisations involved. The history of co-operation which exists will ensure that these changes result in a continued strengthening of services for children.

