

Submission

No 18

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

Organisation: Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre

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Submission

From: Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre, 89 Waldron Rd, Chester Hill 2162
To: Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Children and Young People
Subject: Need for more support for the needs of children from 9-14 years of age.
Date: 29th April 2008

Who we are

The Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre serves the districts of Chester Hill, Sefton, Birrong, Regents Park, Villawood and Bass Hill in the North Ward of the Bankstown Municipality in the south-west of Sydney. Its offices are located only two hundred metres from Chester Hill Railway Station at the eastern end of the Chester Hill main shopping street. It can also be reached by any of the bus services that pass through Chester Hill.

The Centre, which is one of over three hundred in the state, offers a range of needs-based services to people in the district, including activities and support specifically geared for men, women, children, youth and the aged. It provides for assistance, advice and training to those who are disadvantaged, disabled, lonely or distressed. As an organisation it also runs programs on a non-profit basis that promote healthy, active and purposeful lifestyles. Our mission statement describes our aims as:

- To help in the relief of poverty, distress and misfortune affecting residents of the North Ward of Bankstown.
- To direct those needing help to the most appropriate resource centre if assistance is beyond our own resources.
- To develop a community where the principles of social justice and access and equity are practised and where the disadvantaged are encouraged to decide their own futures and make their own choices.
- To seek appropriate funding to address the identified needs of the community and provide suitable facilities for the Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre to function effectively.

While it operates as a non-government organisation, the bulk of its funding comes from government grants received for specific purposes. These funds are used to provide services and to engage and deploy qualified staff who are selected for their skills and commitment to the needs of people in the community. The Centre follows a strict non-discriminatory, equal-opportunity policy in both the employment of its staff and the provision of its services.

The Centre team is led by Ms Dale Donadel. There is an overall supervision provided by a Management Committee of community members.

Our Submission

Notwithstanding the fact that there is scope for many new developments in the area of providing for young people in the age group 9-14, the limited time given to frame this submission requires us to focus on only one area of need.

It is the belief of the Management Committee and Staff at the Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre that the age group from 8-11 the group that would be expected to be in Years 3 to 6 in Primary School, together with their families, is not well-served with a balanced program of support within local communities specifically and across the state generally. The Department of Community Services (DOCS) focuses on early intervention for families with children in the age range of 0-8 and there is a wide range of services for those of high school age and their families with youth and family liaison programs such as Youthlink..

However there is a very limited range of support for families with children in the ages in between 8-11. These children are at an age when they are most impressionable, especially from role models, both positive and negative, provided from among older people. Yet they are too young to range about unsupervised even though the majority come from homes in which both parents work and are forced by economic necessity to continue to work regardless of what their preferences might be.

There are, of course, organised sporting involvements, such as football and netball activities managed by clubs, but these are often prohibitively expensive in the cost of insurance, registration fees, boots or shoes and uniforms. There are also some before-and-after-school care and vacation care centres, However these involve payment of fees that can prove such a serious burden on low-income or heavily indebted families that parents prefer to allow their children to walk home from school and stay at home unsupervised, or at best, under the care of grandparents or neighbours. This often invites long-term trouble. There are few services involving these children that provide for life-enrichment activities rather than simply supervision and entertainment until parents pick them up. The parents of children in this age group also struggle with parenting children who are approaching puberty, are faced with never ending commercialism and are strongly influenced by media and peer pressure.

The Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre would like the opportunity to provide a range of activities that meet these needs and we are of the view that other Neighbourhood Centres would also respond well to these opportunities. We hold the view that we have skilled staff and know of people in the community who are skilled and willing to work in the area of primary-age children and their families.

We would perceive these as long-term programs and would further envisage that they would embrace a range of cultural, artistic and creative activities, which might include, as opportunity and skilled personnel can provide, the music, art, handicraft, sculpture, drama, puppetry and dance genres. Parenting support programs would assist the families and compliment the activities for children.

To be effective, the funding should provide fully for the wages of skilled personnel and appropriate administrative support, along with some necessary capital equipment and consumables, as well as training and preparation time. We would hope to avoid a dependence on volunteer labour, which is often, with the best of intentions, unreliable. Ideally we would hope that such funding is sufficient to eliminate or, at least, reduce the need for fundraising by Centre personnel, a regular but frustrating, time-consuming activity.

This funding should provide for comparative award wages for staff that is capable of reducing staff turnover. It is a sad fact of life in the broad area of neighbourhood centres that skilled staff, having been trained within the environment of those centres, is then attracted into higher paying jobs in other environments such as Police Liaison and DOCS. This problem can only be overcome when centre personnel are paid appropriately for the work they perform.

Our Recommendation

It is the view of the Management Committee and Staff of the Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre that

1. The NSW Government should assume a greater responsibility outside of school hours for the welfare of children between the ages of 8-11, and their families, in the light of the fact that modern society is now geared irreversibly for families in which parents, whether both or sole parents, need to work full-time and are unable to maintain reasonable supervision of their children all the time.
2. Neighbourhood Centres should be used as one of the major providers of these out-of-school services
3. Services established and funded should provide enriching social, cultural and creative experiences and opportunities for families with children in the age range of 8-11 years.
4. Adequate government funding should be provided, in particular, for families with children, from low-income families in order for them to take advantage of such services.
5. Funding should embrace the employment of staff at award rates that compare favourably with people of similar skills.
6. Funding should allow for training and accreditation of staff, preparation and follow-up time and administrative support as well as the provision of activities themselves. Further they should be provided on a long term time frame, as time limited programs rarely rise above the status of "band aid" solution to issues.
7. Funding should be adequate to provide basic equipment and consumables used in the programs.

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