

**Submission
No 36**

CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

Organisation: Mission Australia

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NSW Child Protection and Social Services 2020

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NSW Inquiry into Child Protection and the Social Service System 2020

Mission Australia is a national, non-denominational Christian charity that has been helping vulnerable people move towards independence for more than 160 years. In the 2019-20 financial year, we supported over 167,000 individuals through 483 programs and services across Australia.¹ Our goal is to end homelessness and to ensure people and communities in need can thrive.

Currently, Mission Australia delivers 58 services supporting children, young people and families in NSW, including Targeted Earlier Intervention, Brighter Futures and Intensive Family Preservation services. We also deliver a number of youth homelessness services. During the last financial year, we supported almost 17,000 children and young people under the age of 18 across all our services in NSW.

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the NSW Inquiry into Child Protection and the Social Service System. This submission is based on insights from our service provision across NSW.

Recommendations

- Commit further investment to prevention and early intervention services, including primary interventions that strengthen communities and those that are targeted to children and families immediately at risk. Specifically, additional investment in the Intensive Family Preservation program is needed.
- Invest in more alcohol and other drug (AOD) and mental health services, particularly in regional, rural and remote NSW, and consider how decisions about placements into out-of-home care are made in the context of parents seeking treatment for AOD or mental health issues.
- Ensure that the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) provides appropriate guidance to the staff of Specialist Homelessness Services in how to support children under 18 who present alone to a service, and take responsibility for the welfare of children presenting alone to homelessness services as a matter of priority.
- Extend the age of leaving out-of-home care from 18 to 21 years for any young person who chooses to remain in out-of-home care. Where this is not an appropriate option, intensive exit planning and support should be provided to ensure young people do not exit out-of-home care into homelessness.
- Reapply previous administrative practices under which Memoranda of Understanding were put into place between each CSC and Brighter Futures services.

¹ Mission Australia, Annual Report, 2019, accessible at: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2019/1320-annual-report-2019/file>

- Change the referral system for Brighter Futures to allow a flexible approach and/or greater proportion of community referrals.
- Allow participation of service providers in Weekly Action Meetings in all regions across NSW.
- Reconsider service provision timeframes to allow flexibility for those children and families who need longer-term support.
- Invest in responsive Aboriginal-led supports for Aboriginal children and families.

Support for recommendations made by Fams

In addition to these recommendations, we also endorse the submission made by Fams to this Inquiry and highlight for the Committee’s attention the findings of their analysis that:

1. Reviews of the NSW child protection systems between 2008 and 2019 consistently arrive at similar findings regarding the failings of the system.
2. Less than two-thirds of recommendations from the reviews have been fully or mostly implemented.
3. Recommendations not implemented are focused on boosting funding for early intervention, and whole-of-system reform.
4. Consistent findings and significant investment into implementation have not led to the systemic change desired.

We support Fams’ position that, to ensure that children and families experiencing vulnerability receive the right support at the right time, NSW requires a universal service system model that:

- Is flexible to deliver tailored responses to reflect families’ unique needs and circumstances.
- Is data driven, with more transparent, regular and independent information made available to the sector so that we can work with government to identify issues, trends and problems, and co-design programs that provide help earlier.
- Funds service providers to work with families for as long as it takes to build resilience.
- Promotes access to and coordination of social services and other community-based supports for families.
- Is outcomes-focused and evidence-informed with a view to a return on investment within five years.

Current context

In 2016 the NSW Government implemented the *Their Futures Matter* reforms, a whole-of-government initiative to improve the provision of services to vulnerable children, young people and families. Despite an emphasis on prevention and early intervention in these reforms, our service delivery experience continues to be that further resources in this area are required to support children and families and prevent them from entering out of home care.

Mission Australia is the provider of a suite of child and family services, some of which are specifically targeted to children and families at risk of entering the formal child protection system. In NSW, these services include Targeted Earlier Intervention, Brighter Futures, and Intensive Family Preservation.

We also provide soft entry universal pre-natal supports, early learning centres and playgroups and other socio-ecological approaches such as schools as non-stigmatising hubs for parents and children outside school hours.

In our capacity as a provider of voluntary services to children at risk, our submission focuses on our experience in delivering these services and some of the remaining operational gaps we see in the service system.

Ongoing need for additional prevention and early intervention services

The return on investment of prevention and early intervention for children and families has been demonstrated in Australia and internationally.² However, prevention early intervention services in NSW are unable to meet the demand for wellbeing supports. Despite the focus of the *Their Futures Matter* reforms on increasing prevention and early intervention responses to vulnerable children and families, our services are finding that demand is still exceeding available program places in many areas. In Broken Hill, for example, there are only 38 IFP packages available and many more are needed.

Focus on strengthening communities

Even with a whole-of-government approach, such as *Their Futures Matter*, a key challenge will remain in establishing a service system that leads to early identification of children and families who may have multiple and complex problems before problems escalate.³

Mission Australia supports a focus on strengthening communities in addition to a universal prevention and early intervention approach.

The focus on prevention and early intervention should be expanded beyond children and families seeking assistance and look at community risk factors and opportunities to strengthen communities. Strengthening communities include building trust in community and enhance social connectedness as a foundation by strengthening the system of social support, coalition building, and information and resource sharing.⁴

² See further: Telethon Kids Institute, et al, How Australia can invest in children and return more A new look at the \$15b cost of late action, 2019, accessible at: <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/siteassets/media-docs---colab/coli/how-australia-can-invest-in-children-and-return-more----final-bn-not-embargoed.pdf>

³ Australian Institute of Family Studies, Issues for the safety and wellbeing of children in families with multiple and complex problems, Issue 33, 2010, accessible at: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/issues-safety-and-wellbeing-children-families/introduction>

⁴ F. Walsh, Traumatic Loss and Major Disasters: Strengthening Family and Community Resilience, Family Process, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2007, pp. 207-227.

Turning to prevention and early intervention measures, a de-stigmatised universal approach is likely to engage families earlier and more effectively. Ideally all parents and prospective parents would get universal supports with targeted supports for those at higher risk. Early screening for developmental and behavioural issues is useful.⁵

Pre-natal interventions are important and can be used as a preparation for parenthood.⁶ While the first five years from birth are crucial, in many cases a focus prior to the first 2000 days is required. To engage with expecting parents a variety of pathways are needed as people become parents at different ages and stages. Screening for at-risk parents, including while in hospital for the birth, can allow long-term support options to be offered. Providing services in areas with high levels of young and isolated parents may also be effective.

Parenting programs are an important part of early intervention and parents can be given tools such as Circle of Security and Positive Parenting training as well as provided with information to better understand systems and supports.⁷

Engagement with children, families and communities needs to be culturally appropriate with particular recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Recent migrants may face language barriers to connecting with services and need to feel comfortable in order to engage. In our South West Sydney services we have engaged Arabic speaking workers and translated materials into other languages.

Voices and Choices evaluation

Two Mission Australia sites are involved in the evaluation of the Voices and Choices model. Voices and Choices is a new person-centred approach to supporting the engagement of vulnerable families in the Brighter Futures program, enhance their capacity to make decisions and have greater control over outcomes with the aim of supporting those families to stay together. The Centre for Evidence and Impact, in partnership with Monash University and the Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, is leading the two-year outcome evaluation of the trial of the NSW Government's Brighter Futures Voices and Choices model across three sites in NSW. Although the evaluation is still underway, Mission Australia is encouraged by the results seen so far.

⁵ Benevolent Society, Interventions for parents and families: the evidence for improving social outcomes for children, Evidence Brief, 2016, accessible at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2016-03/apo-nid62315.pdf>

⁶ See further: T. Moore and M. McDonald, Acting early, changing lives: how prevention and early action saves money and improves wellbeing, Benevolent Society, 2013, accessible at: <https://apo.org.au/node/53227>

⁷ Benevolent Society, Interventions for parents and families: the evidence for improving social outcomes for children, Evidence Brief, 2016, accessible at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2016-03/apo-nid62315.pdf>

Intersection between child protection and other social service systems

Mission Australia's service experience goes specifically to the intersection between the child protection and alcohol and other drugs (AOD), mental health and homelessness service systems.

Alcohol and other drugs, mental health and child protection

Substance dependence, mental health problems and domestic and family violence are commonly associated with child protection involvement and are key risk factors for child abuse and neglect.⁸ There is a lack of AOD and mental health support services on the ground. This is a critical issue for the child protection system since a greater availability of AOD and mental health support options would result in a greater number of parents receiving needed support and the possibility of fewer children being placed in out-of-home care.

AOD and mental health support programs should involve community-based education and early intervention as well as outreach and casework services for vulnerable groups, access to appropriate local detoxification and rehabilitation services and community mental health services. Funding should be made available for after care to ensure that changes are sustained and lives are improved by supporting families to remain together where this is appropriate and children are safe.

Homelessness and child protection

In Mission Australia Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) programs, if a child aged under 18 presents alone, they are immediately reported to DCJ for assessment. However, the experience of Mission Australia service staff is that DCJ can be slow to respond to requests for assistance, that only limited support is provided when there is a response, and that the response is determined by the individual DCJ worker, some of whom are known among staff members to be more immediately responsive than others. Young people aged between 16 and 18 are not usually provided with much assistance at all from DCJ.

While waiting for involvement from DCJ, SHS staff will try to find accommodation and provide other forms of support to the young person. Accommodation is mainly in the form of crisis accommodation, but there are usually limited places available for children and young people. Alternatively, the young person may have to stay with a friend or return to their family home, which can place them at further risk if there are circumstances of domestic and family violence or child abuse or neglect.

Based on our service experience, we recommend that DCJ provide greater support and guidance to SHS staff on complex cases where homelessness and child protection are factors, become involved in these

⁸ Australian Institute of Family Studies, Issues for the safety and wellbeing of children in families with multiple and complex problems: The co-occurrence of domestic violence, parental substance misuse, and mental health problems, Issue no 33, 2010, accessible at: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/issues-safety-and-wellbeing-children-families/how-do-drug-and-alcohol-misuse-mental>

cases earlier and take greater responsibility for supporting children presenting alone to homelessness services.

Extending the age of young people leaving out-of-home care to 21 years

The Victorian Government has recently expanded its *Home Stretch* program and now offers support for all young people leaving out-of-home care to the age of 21. A 2018 report from Deloitte Access Economics, *Extending care to 21 years in New South Wales*⁹ provides compelling evidence of the social and economic benefits that would accrue to NSW if the age of leaving out-of-home care were extended from 18 to 21. This simple reform would achieve the following outcomes for young people in care:

- Homelessness halved from 39% to 19.5%.
- Rate of teen pregnancy reduced from 16.6% to 10.2%.
- Educational engagement increased from 7.0% to 16.3%, for non-parents.
- Hospitalisation rates reduced from 29.2% to 19.2%.
- Rate of mental illness reduced from 54.4% to 30.1%.
- Rate of smoking reduced from 56.8% to 24.9%.
- Interaction with the criminal justice system reduced from 16.3% to 10.4%.
- Alcohol and drug dependence rates reduced from 15.8% to 2.5%.
- Lost wellbeing due to mental illness and substance abuse reduced from 54.4% to 30.1%.

Mission Australia recommends that the NSW Government adopt the recommendation of the Home Stretch campaign and extend the age of leaving out-of-home care to 21 years if the young person chooses to stay in out-of-home care. Where this is not an appropriate option, intensive exit planning and support should be provided to ensure young people do not exit out-of-home care into homelessness.

Integrated response systems for Brighter Futures

Mission Australia strongly supports efforts to move towards collaborative, multi-agency responses and away from silos. We welcomed the focus in the Access System Redesign discussion paper on better integration of service provision but recognise that there are some significant outstanding issues in the way that the access system currently works in practice.

Brighter Futures Memoranda of Understanding

Under previous arrangements, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) were put into place between each Community Services Centre (CSC) and Brighter Futures services. This MoU helped to cover local service delivery specifics and Mission Australia recommends reapplying these administrative arrangements.

⁹ Deloitte Access Economics, *Extending care to 21 years in New South Wales*, 2018, accessible at: <https://www.anglicare.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Home-stretch-campaign-NSW-Oct-2018-v3.pdf>

Proportionate referral system for Brighter Futures

Referrals into the Brighter Futures program are intended to be 90 per cent from the local CSC and 10 per cent community referrals. This proportionate referral system leads to bottlenecks, because referrals from the CSC take so long to come through that there are often unfilled places in the program despite demand exceeding availability and despite having a lengthy community waitlist. In regions around NSW, places could be filled immediately from the community waitlist while waiting on the CSC referrals. Although there is provision to do so if the CSC referral is not filled within a month, this system is still creating a significant backlog of service provision.

This system is creating a disconnect between child and family services in the region. It makes it difficult for families to know what to expect about the availability of a place in Brighter Futures. Previously, there may have been a waitlist but at least the service would have been able to indicate what the wait time would be. Now the waiting time depends on the bottleneck of referrals from the CSC. This means that service providers are in a position where they cannot tell the community how long they would need to wait, they cannot promote Brighter Futures at interagency meetings and the like, because they are unable to say how long someone would need to wait following a referral. Many reciprocating referrals have been lost through the introduction of this system.

In larger communities with a range of service options there are opportunities for staff to divert referrals diverted to other programs, so if someone is referred to Brighter Futures but there are no positions available they can be offered a place in another program or different types of support until the Brighter Futures position opens up. At least this helps to maintain some contact with the family. However, in smaller communities, this is not possible and the referral is often lost when people cannot join the program immediately.

Information sharing

Mission Australia is involved in consultation processes currently being undertaken by the National Office for Child Safety around a national child safety and wellbeing information sharing scheme. The pursuit of a national scheme of information sharing should greatly improve the clarity of working arrangements for organisations like Mission Australia as providers of voluntary child welfare services. We support this initiative, would welcome a national information sharing scheme, and anticipate that it could have significant benefits for the way in which we can provide services to vulnerable children and families.

The emerging experience of our services is that Chapter 16A of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 is working effectively to facilitate the sharing of information about child protection and wellbeing between Mission Australia services and other organisations such as schools, NSW Health and NSW Police.

However, we note the impact of the discretionary extension of invitations to Weekly Allocation Meetings that can affect the range of information that is routinely made available to our services. Participation by service providers in Weekly Allocation Meetings is now at the discretion of the CSC. Ideally, these should be good opportunities for information sharing, but invitations are not issued by

every CSC and this has significant implications for practice in the regions where service providers are not invited, affecting our ability to effectively coordinate support to at-risk families

A positive model for information sharing is the Joint Investigation Response Teams (JIRTs) which are made up of Community Services, NSW Police and NSW Health professionals who undertake joint investigation of child protection matters. This model provides stronger connections within government and is a strength of the current system that can be built on. Unfortunately coordinated responses tend to happen less often outside of a crisis.

Other existing models outside of child protection include the cross-agency governance of Housing and Accommodation Support (HASI)/Enhanced Adult Community Living Support (EACLS). A broad steering committee of partners, meets to review referrals, service delivery and partnership arrangements, strategic directions, opportunities for growth. There are also local meetings, held monthly with the community mental health teams to discuss specific cases, pending issues and individual client matters.

Safety Action Meetings convened by Mission Australia under the Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Service program are also a good model. In Safety Action Meetings, agencies convene for case meetings about families where domestic and family violence has been identified as an issue.

Service provision timeframes

In Mission Australia's service experience, the timeframes allowed for the provision of early intervention services are simply not long enough. While families can be engaged in the Brighter Futures program for up to 24 months, providers are encouraged to retain them only for 12 months. The Intensive Family Preservation program only provides support to families for six months. At the level of need that families have once they have reached eligibility for IFP, they often require support for multiple, entrenched and serious issues, which can include homelessness or housing insecurity, domestic and family violence, alcohol or substance misuse or abuse and children with complex or high needs. Six months is not nearly long enough to engage with and respond to the issues that families are facing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collaborative partnerships and community-controlled services

We remain deeply concerned about the ongoing over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, which needs to be urgently addressed.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this has resonance with the experience of the Stolen Generations, and for many people '... casework practice reinforces the memory of the authoritarian state that dominated and subjugated Aboriginal lives during the protection era. It animates real fear.'¹⁰

¹⁰ M. Davis, Family is Culture Final Report: Independent Review into Out-of-Home Care in NSW, 2019, accessible at: <https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/?a=726329>

There have been repeated calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to lead the required changes to the child protection system. This is the essential paradigm shift required for closing the gap in outcomes and re-setting the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people.

Mission Australia supports investment in a strong and sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family sector and in responsive Aboriginal-led supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Targeted investment in Aboriginal-led solutions and supports will achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and be delivered in a culturally embedded and sensitive way that ensures outcomes are sustained.¹¹

Mission Australia is a signatory to the 'Principles for a Partnership-centred Approach' developed by the Australian Council of Social Services.¹² These Principles are designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream NGOs in tendering for program funds and engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

¹¹ Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care Secretariat, Delivering Better Outcomes for Aboriginal Children and Families in NSW, 2018, accessible at: https://www.absec.org.au/images/downloads/NSW-Election-Platforms-AbSec-May-2018_final.pdf

¹² Australian Council of Community Services, Principles for a Partnership-centred Approach, accessible at: <https://www.acoss.org.au/principles-for-a-partnership-centred-approach/>