

**Submission
No 106**

INQUIRY INTO CHILD PROTECTION

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To the Committee/Enquiry Panel, into child protection in N.S.W.

My name is Gavin Breen, I was a carer for over 16 years for my step grandson. Almost 8 years ago I was fortunate enough to become involved with a local Grandparent and Kinship care support group, this group is made up of extremely dedicated Volunteers from one of our local churches, and almost 40 carer families. From within that support group and other groups around the Hunter Valley and Central Coast areas, we formed an Association (Grandparents Relatives and Kinship Carers Association) aka GRaKCA Hunter Inc. Now defunct. I was the inaugural V.P. and then Secretary, over a 4 year period.

In the time I have been involved with these two entities I have advocated on behalf of a very large number of families, in FACS meetings, and also with John Robertson, former Opposition leader, his deputy leader Linda Burney and communications with Minister Goward.

As the person who handled all the calls for the Association, I heard some horrendous stories from these families, people whom I got to know personally, from visiting other local support groups, and also at a yearly respite camp put together from, a collaboration with the Association(GRaKCA) and the Salvation Army , through their Collaroy Convention Centre in Sydney, who graciously provided a week long camp for up to forty families(approx.130-140ppl).

These stories have come about because of the DISGRACEFUL, COLD, CALLOUS, and TOTALLY UNPROFESSIONAL conduct of FACS , Caseworkers, Case managers and Office Managers. I am going to outline 4 stories that resonate loudest with me, and also with all the other people who have heard their stories, including State M.P's.

All names in these stories are false , for privacy reasons.

Story 1

Shirley is a Grandparent carer for 3 VERY SPECIAL needs boys. Her problems began, when, she applied for the Supported Carers Allowance, after the children were placed with her by FACS. All the protocols were put in place for the Allowance to be paid, which she was entitled to, also the Care +1 and +2 Allowance. After making numerous calls to ask about the Allowance, she was always met with hostility and threats, this went on for 3-4 years by which time Shirley was in huge debt and under enormous stress.

Shirley's problems came to a head one afternoon whilst we were enjoying our time at the respite camp. Shirley and two of her friends came to see me and Shirley was in a very distressed state and sobbing uncontrollably. I asked what had happened, Shirley told me she had a call from the local FACS Office Manager wanting to know where the hell she was.

Shirley explained that they were at a camp having a holiday, the response from the Manager, was, 'who do you think you are taking the Children on a holiday without their (FACS) permission, where are you we are coming to get the Children and put them into Foster care , and you will never see them again, and you will be charged with Kidnapping and Child

abuse'. I told her to calm down and I will call Linda Burney (FACS Shadow Minister at the time) and see what can be done.

I called Ms Burney and explained the problem to her, she said she would speak to Minister Goward and see what could be done, and she said she would call back asap. About 25 minutes had elapsed and my phone rang, the Minister was on the line and asked me what she could do, I told her to ring Shirley and hear her story, she replied by telling me she had Shirley's file and would review it straight away and call me back afterwards, I told her to ring Shirley instead. Thirty or so minutes passed and Shirley got a call from Ms Goward telling her that her payments would all be paid, and, backdated to the time she started care for the boys, also she would be transferred to another office with strict instructions to be treated with respect and dignity.

In the end a great outcome, but, a story that should never have had to be told, as with the following three stories.

Story 2

Laura was a Carer for her Grandson for a number of years, until, FACS for some unknown reason decided she was too old to care for him any longer, this was a very spry and healthy 67 year old. When she was contacted by FACS and told this news, as you can imagine the devastation this, loving, caring woman must have felt. The conduct and unprofessional manner that the FACS workers mail then undertook to demean her, was nothing short of despicable. Laura was given very little time to have the child ready for transfer and after he was taken Laura was then treated like a criminal by the FACS workers, and the Office Manager. Whenever Laura tried to contact FACS about the where the child was and how he was going, she was met with such hostility, with responses of we are not able to tell you, and you cannot ever contact him again. The only information she was given was the child is 5 or 6 hours drive away.

Laura told her story at our support group and we were just amazed at the lack of compassion or any sort of compunction for her. Laura was still trying to have some sort of contact with him but, was stifled at every turn. Any gifts at Christmas or Birthdays were rejected by FACS. Laura's greatest concern was for her Grandson, and, how he was coping, was he in a good home or was he being bounced around from one carer to another.

After many, many stressful and worrying time for Laura she was granted contact with the child, via post at first, then on the phone. Laura learnt that he had been to three other foster homes before being settled at the latest. It turned out well for the child, as he found a very good home, with loving carers and is being adopted by them, a fantastic outcome for him, BUT, not so for Laura.

During the time of no contact, Laura suffered with massive emotional and psychological stress. Unfortunately we lost Laura to a terminal illness, and one can only wonder, how much the strain of all the pressure she was under did to her health, and also did it speed up her illness? Ask any health professional, and they will tell you that stress is a huge factor in contributing to and expediting illnesses. Just wondering?

Story 3

Coralie was a Kinship Carer to her two nephews and one niece for over 7 years, after the Mother was deemed to be unfit to parent, as she has a severe mental health illness, along with alcohol and substance abuse problems. Around 12 months ago the mother decided she wanted the children back in her care after a number of unsupervised visits with the children, BUT, only wanted the two eldest Children, basically splitting the family up, something which Coralie fought against from the very beginning.

After the mother made contact with FACS about her wishes, one can only describe the following as "ALL HELL BREAKING LOOSE"

The mother set out on a vexatious, and vicious, tirade of allegations and accusations toward Coralie. FACS decided they would come down on Coralie like a tonne of bricks, attacking her integrity and reasons behind her having the children in her care, the ensuing battle saw FACS coming in like the Gestapo and basically turning Coralie's, and, the children's world's completely upside down. The treatment of all involved (except for the mother who was treated like a saint) was nothing short of despicable, unprofessional, and totally heartless.

Upon having their requests to answer questions, the two oldest children refused to answer (aged 10 and 13) they turned their interrogation to the troubled 7 year old, who was willing to tell them exactly what they wanted to hear. This was done without the involvement of an independent observer, and one can only wonder how the child was manipulated into giving their required answers. I know this to be a fact, as I was involved in the ensuing meeting in the FACS office with Coralie and two FACS workers. I specifically asked the question of, did the child have an adult observer with him, their response was gobsmacking, "he didn't ask for one". This showed how arrogant and uncaring this pair of incompetents actually were, and, still are.

In the past 12 months Coralie has been subject to tirades of abuse and allegations, not only from her sister, but also FACS, she has had charges levelled at her in court by FACS, and they have had the case adjourned numerous times, adding to the expensive fees for her Lawyer, who has to appear at every hearing, a bill that is already up to \$15,000.

After putting a huge amount of resources in to the restoration of the two older children back to the Mother and the youngest into Foster Care, plus the cost of court hearings and other incidentals, it all fell apart after about 8 months. The eldest boy is now in full-time psychiatric care (a child the carer was having very good progress with after utilizing numerous mental health care facilities, psychologists, counsellors and parenting courses for troubled children, also liaising with the schools to get the best outcome for him) . As you can see the outcome of this is nothing short of an unmitigated disaster, caused by two members of a department that can only be described as full of ill trained and incompetent workers, who, in my opinion need to have some form of compassion, understanding, and respect for carers, not kicking them around like garbage at a football match. Worse still is the disastrous outcome for these children, who are now separated, more damaged, and traumatized, most likely irreparably. Particularly when prior to the FACS intervention they were all at school and doing well, getting necessary help and living happily with their carer.

Story 4.

Diana was, until very recently, the primary carer for her now nine year old Great Grandson, since he was a very small baby. Diana's problems began around late 2015 after making enquiries about Guardianship of the child. As is required, the parents are notified before any

of this can take place. Once they became involved the whole issue turned into a nightmare for Diana. At first it was fine as the Mother and her new Husband were happy with a 12 month transitioning period, before the child took up permanent residency with them, the Child was also okay with this arrangement but was hoping to finish off primary school at the school where he had started, but agreed with 1 year less.

Once again when FACS people decided that this was too long a process, they set out to expedite matters by attacking Diana, with false allegations, coming from her alienated and very vindictive Daughter, the child's Grandmother. The following attacks, as you would imagine were very harrowing for Diana. She has since been accused of a number of allegations by the FACS workers (from the same office as the 3 previous stories) and has had her integrity questioned by these workers, to the point where they wanted to visit on very short notice (5 mins) and Diana said, after she had taken the child home and settled him into his daily after school routine, not a huge request, as we are all told, routine is crucial to young children, something obviously, these two have no understanding of, which I thought would be part of their job, Diana was then told by one of the workers that people that are as uncooperative as she was, needed to be investigated, no signs of abuse or neglect towards the child detected, ever, just the musings of an unprofessional and ill-trained worker.

Since the unfounded and unsubstantiated allegations and accusations were raised Diana has been harassed, vilified and spoken to like she was dirt. This has taken place at meetings in the FACS office, witnessed by an independent person, invited by Diana as a support person, this person was also spoken to in a very belligerent way, asked why are you here, and why does Diana need to have a witness. Why not I ask?

After the just finished July school holidays, which the child spent with the mother and new step-father, Diana traveled over an hour to the Mother's residence to collect the child, where she was met with Major hostility, with the mother refusing to let the child return with Diana. As Diana did not want to inflame the situation she decided to leave things as they were, but notifying the FACS hotline to let them know what was happening, so the truth was heard and false statements were not made against her. All to no avail, as the stories were all very twisted by the time Diana had to meet with FACS again, obviously the FACS people seem to think they are Journalists for tabloid newspapers, never letting the truth get in the way of a good story.

Needless to say yet again another story that has left a Kinship carer in emotional and psychological turmoil. One can only hope that it works out well for the child, BUT, once again things are looking a little rocky already for him, with countless calls from the Mother about having to cope with all the expense and extra care these troubled kids have.

SUMMARY.

After dealing with so many cases over the last five years I have thought about my own experiences with FACS and the massive upheaval we endure when we take our Kin children in. If you have no understanding of the system, and try to deal with it alone, you will fail, as it is a minefield of emotional, financial and psychological unrest, to the point of considering and actually taking your own life, which I was literally only two minutes from doing myself early last year, only to have three little guardian angels pull me out of my state of demise, a story too long to tell. The support for Kin carers Just seems to be non-existent. After the changes in the legislation in October 2014 Supported Carers Allowance is almost impossible

to access, leaving families to deal with children that come with massive problems, caused by sometimes, years of neglect, abuse and trauma due to domestic violence. these problems become a financial burden that we bear, because, first and foremost we love and care for these children. We put our entire lives and retirements on hold to care for these kids, yet we are treated like pariah's who are only interested in the money we can get with taking them in. Well to all of the people who believe that (specifically the FACS workers who think we are the enemy) get your heads out of the sand or mud, whichever, as for every dollar we receive we spend two dollars on these kids, not only for their care but for all the reparations in our homes, the broken windows, ruined furniture, holes punched in walls. There is also the constant travel expenses for Paediatric appointments , psychologists, speech therapists and numerous other places they need to go to for help.

The treatment of the carers by FACS workers is appalling. Unfortunately for the FACS workers who are very dedicated, caring, compassionate people who, do, go over and above the call, are being dragged down by the Gung-ho mentality of a large number of FACS workers.

These are only some of the cases that FACS have screwed up over the past three years. The urgency that they seem to feel about reunification with the birth parents is nothing short of irresponsible. They do not take into account that the children are small people with feelings and needs and sometimes the parents can't, or are not interested in these needs. As I consider our support group as my large extended family, I am sick of my family's reputations and dignity being trashed by incompetent, uncaring, callous wannabe gestapo agents, these people need to learn firstly some respect for us, and also some common courtesy when dealing with very dedicated, caring, loving family carers, and I will fight for my family with all my heart and soul until I can't fight anymore. Leave us alone or give us the support we need not the absolute trashing you are dealing out right now.

With respect Gavin Breen(a very angry former carer).