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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 6100

Wanslea Family Services
Submission to Senate Inquiry
Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their Grandchildren

1. Introduction

Wanslea is a long-standing not-for-profit organisation in Western Australia providing a range of services to vulnerable children and families. Wanslea's Grandcare service provides support groups to grandparents who care full-time for their grandchildren in nine locations in metropolitan and rural Western Australia and an 1800 number for information to callers across the state. The service also provides information, referral, training, occasional respite and advocacy to grandparent carers. Wanslea is the largest service provider to grandparents who have the informal, full-time care of their grandchildren in Western Australia. At the time of the service's commencement in 2002, it was the sole provider of support services to this group. Over 450 grandparent carers accessed support through this service in the 2013 reporting year.

In 2013 Wanslea was contracted to assess and administer the Western Australian Government's recently introduced Grandcarers Support Scheme, a one-off annual payment to full-time, informal grandparent carers to support them in the care of their grandchildren. The Western Australian government is yet to announce whether this payment will continue in 2015.

Wanslea formed a Grandparent Research Advisory Group in 2013 to develop and prioritise research with and for grandparent carers that would serve to highlight and address their unique needs. Membership of that group includes service providers, academics, federal parliamentarians, and grandparent carers.

Wanslea is well positioned therefore to comment on the experiences and needs of grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren.

2. Profile of Grandparent Carers who access Wanslea's Grandcare service

An overview of the demography of grandparent carers who access Wanslea's Grandcare service is provided. While acknowledging this does not represent a profile of all grandparent carers in Western Australia, it is provided to give an emerging picture of the nature of grandparent-headed families and an indication of grandparent carers who do and don't access services.

In 2013 Wanslea Grandcare provided a service to 450 individual grandparent carers (some of whom may be couples). Of those, 319 or 71% were female and 131 (29%) male. Thirty-five percent (156) were aged 60 or under, with half being aged 60-70 years. The remaining 15% were aged 70-90 years. Approximately half (49%) of these grandparent carers have one grandchild in their full-time care; thirty percent have two grandchildren in their care, while 19% have three or more grandchildren in their care. There were 574 grandchildren cared for by these 450 grandparents. Thirty-three percent of those children were over the age of 12 years, 45% were aged 5-12 years, and 22% aged five and under.

Very few grandparents who access Wanslea's Grandcare service identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (9% of service recipients), or as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (11%). With little research or other demographic information available regarding grandparent carers it is difficult to say if this is representative; however, from discussions with other service providers and researchers, it is understood that this is an under-representation, particularly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents who care for their grandchildren.

Wanslea's Grandcare service is primarily aimed at those who have the informal care of their grandchildren. Formal carers are those who are registered foster carers with the WA Department for Child Protection and Family Support (CPFS), and receive a network of support and resources from that agency. Grandparents with informal care are those who have no legal arrangements in place regarding their care and responsibility of their grandchildren. There is a subgroup of grandparents who have Family Court appointed guardianship or residency of their grandchildren. Like informal grandparent carers, they do not receive the infrastructure of support afforded to those who are formal carers through CPFS. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the grandparent carers who access Wanslea's service have an informal care arrangement.

The following submission therefore is primarily related to the needs and experiences of informal grandparent carers, as this is where Wanslea's service and research experience lie.

3. Statement against Terms of Reference

3.1. *The practical challenges facing grandparents raising their grandchildren, and their support needs*

One of the most significant practical challenges facing grandparent carers is the **financial burden and changes** they experience (i) at the time of taking on their grandchildren's care in set-up costs such as purchasing furniture and clothes; (ii) in meeting their every-day needs such as food, schooling, utilities, and clothing; (iii) meeting any additional needs their grandchildren bring as a result of their often traumatic and deprived early childhood experiences, for example psychological services, speech therapy, tutoring and the like. Grandparents will often need to alter their employment arrangements to meet the care and economic needs of their grandchildren. Though this varies greatly depending on family circumstances, Wanslea has known grandparents who have re-entered the workforce, delayed retirement, brought retirement forward, changed their full-time or part-time work status, or left employment. Many have sacrificed their own economic well-being to provide care to their grandchildren.

Many grandparents make adjustments to their **housing arrangements** to accommodate their grandchildren. Wanslea is aware of grandparents who have undertaken renovations or moved house in order to create space for their grandchildren. Others have moved across the country in order to take on the care of their grandchildren, while others are required to move regularly in order to protect their grandchildren from violent and disruptive parents. Many grandparents also absorb significant **transport costs** – often travelling great distances so that their grandchildren can stay in their known school or daycare. Grandparents do this in recognition of their grandchildren's need for consistency and stability. Wanslea currently works with one grandparent who travels three hours a day to keep her grandchildren in the same school, leaving her home at 7am to get them there on time.

A related and significant challenge is **access to Centrelink benefits**. For a number of reasons, including their own assets and income as well as complex family issues, many grandparents report great difficulty in accessing information about and financial support from Centrelink. There is a dedicated officer in Centrelink in WA to attend to the particular needs of grandparent carers and who provides them with an excellent and comprehensive service. However, frontline staff are often unaware of this role, and so turn grandparents away early in their contact with the agency. The application process is then complicated by grandparent's lack of access to required documents, such as a child's birth certificate or

immunisation records as the parents often hold these. For many grandparent carers, family reasons underlie their difficulty in accessing payments. The children's parents will often still be claiming Family Tax Benefit for example, and in order to 'keep the peace' and avoid conflict grandparents will not challenge this. Keeping the peace means of course that grandparents don't threaten their grandchildren's place in their home and therefore ensure their ongoing care and protection.

An important link to financial assistance for Wanslea is an association with **Foodbank** – 208 cards were authorised in 2013 to grandparent carers. Foodbank gives grandparents access to affordable food and household necessities. In addition to the cards, nutritionists from Foodbank attend Grandcare support group meetings to provide important education to grandparent carers regarding the food pyramid; how to read food labels; as well as recipe booklets that describe simple, easy-to-cook recipes that children enjoy. Information flyers about the Hardship Utilities Grant Scheme and financial counselling have been distributed and, for those in certain locations, information regarding Centrelink's Voluntary Income Management Scheme has been made available. However, this information is available to those accessing support groups only. There is a significant need for reliable and accessible information, as outlined below.

Many grandparents are concerned about the **homework set by schools**. Their capacity to assist their grandchildren is limited by their lack of understanding of the work set because it is so different from the way they were taught. The new National Curriculum is adding to their concerns. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Aboriginal children were funded by ASSPA [Aboriginal Student Support Program], via the Federal Government, that allowed teachers to take homework classes and help the children *at school*, two days a week. Senator Dean Smith, who facilitated a meeting with Albany grandparent carers in 2013, where this difficulty was expressed, suggested that grandparents might be able to get a voucher that can be given to the carers to give to a teacher who could act as a tutor. Wanslea supports such a proposal

3.2. The role and contribution of grandparents raising their grandchildren, and how this should be recognised

Grandparents provide a significant social and economic benefit to society when they take on the full-time care of their grandchildren. The social, familial, developmental, educational and attachment benefits to their individual grandchildren are substantial.

If the children being cared for by grandparents were to instead enter formal state-provided foster care, there would be a significant annual cost to the state government in providing that care. Formal foster carers receive payment, training, respite and case management as well as there being associated costs in recruitment, assessment and retention. As it is, there is a significant shortage of foster carers in the WA child protection system, meaning that a significant economic and social burden would be placed on an already over-burdened system if these children were to enter formal foster care.

Grandparents provide their grandchildren with care that has emotional and social benefits to the community and their grandchildren. There is often already an attachment relationship, meaning the child enters the care of someone who already knows and loves him or her. The importance of family history and identity can therefore be respected. Grandchildren can be kept in ready contact with cousins and other relatives, depending on family circumstances. Often such access is difficult to achieve in formal foster care arrangements. Grandchildren being cared for by their grandparents have the opportunity to experience a stable, consistent and loving home and family. Grandparents often report to Wanslea that it is the love of their grandchildren and a concern to protect their safety that motivates and sustains them in their role.

The recommendations set out below under the term “Practical Measures” are all ways in which grandparents could be socially and economically recognised for their contribution. For example, by having their profile evident in Census statistics they shift from being an invisible to visible family form, which can then be recognised, provided and planned for in service delivery. When services are planned and provided according to their needs, the practical challenges outlined above are not only recognised but managed.

3.3. Other challenges that grandparents raising their grandchildren face in undertaking their role, including in circumstances complicated by family conflict, mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, child abuse or neglect, or family violence

It can be very difficult for grandparent carers to obtain credible and accessible information regarding their rights and entitlements. Additionally, grandparents have a need for information regarding current parenting practices and knowledge. Wanslea recognises the importance of providing personalised and comprehensive information to grandparent carers who often feel overwhelmed and confused in the initial stages of their new roles. In times of emergency or crisis it is difficult to obtain and/or retain large amounts of information, therefore access to a ‘one-

stop-shop' phone number is very helpful for grandparent carers. Wanslea's Grandcare Information Line receives approximately 100 calls a month. Many grandparent carers don't have the skills or interest to successfully access web-based information, so accessible written or oral communication is most suited to their needs.

Social isolation is a common experience reported by grandparent carers. They are unable to readily socialise with their peers due to their different caring responsibilities and economic limitations. For many, retirement plans of travel have been sacrificed. Many do not know others in their situation, and so do not have others with whom to share their experiences. The friendships and connections grandparent carers make at Wanslea's support groups do contribute to alleviating this, and they often will interact socially beyond the group setting. This broader social interaction gives grandparent carers a sense of belonging and community. It contributes to 'normalising' their complex circumstances and they nurture one another through whatever difficulties they choose to disclose.

Changed expectations and practices in parenting styles and disciplines, as well as child behaviour represent a great challenge for many grandparents. These parenting challenges are often compounded by grief and loss both they and their grandchildren are experiencing regarding the changes in their family, and the separations that ensue. Often children come into the care of their grandparents for serious issues of neglect, parental abandonment and child abuse. Therefore, the children present with particular behavioural and developmental challenges and a history of trauma that require particular parenting and/or therapeutic practices and strategies. Grandparents can also experience vicarious trauma having experienced their own child going through the above issues and living with the impact this has on their grandchildren. Grandparents also grieve the loss of a 'traditional' grandparenting role and instead have to take on the responsibilities of parenting.

Children come into the care of their grandparents because they are in need of care and protection. In these situations there are almost always family issues complicating the care experience. Children's need for care may be a result of parental substance abuse, mental health issues and domestic violence. Often it is as a result of the intersection of all three. Other children require care because of the death or incarceration of their parent(s). All of these circumstances result in trauma and grief for the children and their grandparents. The experiences and the resulting emotional and behavioural challenges mean these children have additional care needs. Often they are in need of specialist services to address these issues. Exacerbating this, grandparents may experience

financial and legal barriers in accessing these services. Compounding the issues of grief is that the grandchildren's parents are often absent or an unreliable and infrequent presence in their lives. In some situations parents represent a risk to their children, meaning grandparents as well as providing care for their grandchildren, must ensure their safety also.

Family relationships for grandparent carers are often highly conflictual. Grandparents report to Wanslea they take great care to manage relationships with their children so that they do not remove the grandchildren from their care. That is, they manage or avoid the conflict in order to ensure the ongoing safety of their grandchildren. Grandparents often find themselves at odds with their other children and grandchildren, who as a result of the grandparent's care responsibilities, also grieve the loss of their own 'normal' family experience. One grandparent told in a recent support group of her other granddaughter's jealousy and anger over what she perceived to be differential attention, time and gifts given to the grandchild in her care.

All of these situations create a significant emotional and mental health burden on grandparents. Wanslea has seen many grandparents suffering with anxiety, stress and depression. They worry about what will happen to their grandchildren when they are no longer able to care for them. As a result their worries are about both the short-term and long-term care and needs of their grandchildren. This comes at a time in their lives, when due to age, they may also be managing a variety of physical health issues. These issues are then unattended to in the busyness of caring for children.

3.4. *The barriers that grandparents raising their grandchildren face in acquiring legal recognition of their family arrangements, including Legal Aid entitlements for grandparents seeking to formalise their custodial arrangements through the Family Law Courts*

Most informal grandparent carers (see below regarding informal and formal grandparent care arrangements) in WA find they are not able to access legal assistance or Legal Aid in attempting to establish formal arrangements for the care of their grandchildren. Given their stage in life, many are deemed ineligible due to home ownership. Another barrier is that the parents of the child are given priority access to Legal Aid, such that grandparents are left to source and fund their own legal services. Even though they might own some key assets, such as their home, they do not necessarily have ready access to cash. Further, caring for their grandchildren has already placed a significant burden on their finances. The result is that legal services are unaffordable and inaccessible to

grandparent carers in attempting to secure the long-term safety and care of their grandchildren.

Without legal responsibility for their grandchildren, grandparents and the children they care for are left in a highly vulnerable situation. Without any formal arrangements in place, parents can collect their children at any time and resume care for them. When children have entered their grandparent's care due to safety, attachment or protection concerns and these remain unresolved, children may return to potentially unsafe and inappropriate environments.

A lack of legal or formal status also makes it difficult for grandparents to access services for their grandchildren, as they are unable to sign consents, as they are not legally next of kin. This can present significant issues when attempting to access health services. It also means that the grandchildren cannot be included on their grandparent's Medicare card or private health insurance, representing a further barrier to accessing health services. As noted before, these children often arrive with additional health and support needs due to their early experiences, and not being able to access health services increases their vulnerability and poor long-term outcomes. Access to schooling becomes another issue, as unless met by an understanding and compassionate individual school principal, grandparents can be denied access to schooling decisions for their grandchildren as they do not possess the legal responsibility or formal documentation.

The Grandcare Coordinator at Wanslea has worked closely with COTA, (Council Of The Ageing), to advocate for a position for a dedicated lawyer for Seniors. When this bid was unsuccessful, Wanslea continued to pursue various avenues including 'pro bono' work from reputable law firms and linking with Law Schools in a number of universities. It remains therefore, that in WA, access to affordable or free legal services is not readily available for grandparent carers.

3.5. *The practical measures that can be implemented by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the community sector to better support grandparents raising their grandchildren, including key priorities for action*

The following form Wanslea's recommendations to the Senate Inquiry as to how the needs and contributions of Grandparent Carers can be both recognised and addressed.

1. Peer support, provided through support groups or structured social activities, provides grandparents with the support to continue in their

complex roles. Support groups can provide: access to information about parenting, child development and behaviour, financial entitlements and the like, while the social support relieves one of the great burdens of being a grandparent carer: that of social isolation. It is essential that funding be made available for current support group services to continue their services, but also gaps in service delivery identified and services established or expanded where necessary. As not all grandparent carers are involved with state based child protection services – and some fear such involvement due to the nature of their family relationships – it is recommended that this service be provided through the not-for-profit community sector.

2. Grandparents require accessible and affordable access to legal assistance to ensure the care responsibilities for their grandchildren are legally recognised. This, in turn, facilitates their access to essential educational and health services for their grandchildren. This may require changes to eligibility for Legal Aid for grandparent carers, or as above, the creation of a dedicated lawyer for Seniors in each state and territory.
3. In the short-term, Centrelink processes and payments need to be more accessible for grandparents. As a starting point, Centrelink front-line staff need to be aware of, or alerted to, the role of the Grandparent Support Officer and automatically refer all grandparent carers.
4. In the longer-term Wanslea recommends the implementation of a National Carer Payment through the Department of Social Security (Centrelink). A model to identify and track children, and who has their primary care would benefit both carers and children whose financial support would not be compromised due to changing or conflictual family circumstances. A carer payment better reflects the nature of the care relationship and recognises and supports the role of grandparent carers in caring for their grandchildren.
5. The Western Australian State Government continues its Grandparent Support Scheme payment to grandparents who care fulltime for their grandchildren. As well as easing their financial burden it provides a level of recognition for the essential role they play in the community and their grandchildren's lives.
6. The information needs of grandparents who care full-time for their grandchildren be assessed and appropriate state-based resources developed. It is suggested their information needs are best met through written (paper) and oral communication rather than web-based

resources. Dedicated information phone lines for grandparent carers are seen as an essential and accessible form of information relay for grandparent carers. Such information strategies could be developed at a national level and modified for use in each state and territory.

7. Grandparents who have the informal care of their grandchildren have little to no access to regular respite. Regular respite can give grandparents a much needed break in which to attend to their own health and other self-care needs. It is a preventative measure in relation to both grandparents' physical and mental health, and in preventing breakdown of these family placements. In WA the State Government has provided a limited program administered by Wanslea to address some of these needs.
8. In Western Australia, Wanslea's comprehensive and well-utilised service to grandparent carers has only been possible due to partnerships with state government departments in particular the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and the Department of Local Government and Communities. Both departments have afforded Wanslea (and grandparent carers) flexibility, funding and support to provide respite, education, tutoring and parenting support to grandparents alongside the core service of support groups. For comprehensive services to be provided to grandparent carers, partnerships and networks amongst not-for-profit service providers, local, state and federal governments are essential.
9. The number, profile and needs of both informal and formal grandparent carers are underrepresented in government statistics and data, as well as Australian and state-based research. The needs of grandparent carers and the evaluation of services to support them need to be a priority in the Commonwealth Government's research agenda and associated funding priorities.
10. Consideration to be given to developing a method of identifying grandparent-headed families through the Australian Census. This will give government and service providers a picture of the demographics of grandparent headed families as well as a better picture than is currently available of the number of families where grandparents are the primary carers of their grandchildren. This would greatly assist in planning and provision of targeted services now and into the future.
11. As well as meeting their own health, social and economic needs, the burden of grandparent carers is eased when their grandchildren have ready access to the health, education, therapeutic and development

services they need. Grandchildren who live with their grandparents likewise require peer support so they recognise their family and individual experience in others, share experiences and challenges, have respite and engage with their peers, and engage in therapeutic processes to deal with their own grief, loss and trauma.

3.6. *The specific needs of particular groups within the caring population, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparent carers, grandparents caring for grandchildren with disability, grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, grandparents with mental health needs and grandparents with an informal care arrangement for their grandchildren*

As noted above, Wanslea's service experience is primarily with grandparents with an informal care arrangement for their grandchildren, and as such many of the issues identified in this submission pertain to them. Essentially informal grandparent carers don't have the same access to the structure of support and resources that formal (registered foster carer) grandparent carers do. Their lack of legal status means they have difficulty accessing services for their grandchildren, and perhaps more importantly, leaves the children vulnerable to being removed from their care and returned to potentially unsafe environments.

Wanslea's service is not accessed by a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or people from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background. It is understood from contact with other service providers and researchers in the field that this is not representative of the population of grandparent carers, but rather that these groups do not access services. As such, they remain a hidden and underserved population.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge around this most important area within the Australian community. Wanslea staff are willing to contribute to the Senate Inquiry in other ways as required and can be contacted as detailed below.

Yours sincerely

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