

SENATE COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important matter.

Credentials

My knowledge on this matter comes from personal experience gained over almost seven years.

My journey started with a call from DCP (Dept of Child Protection) in November 2007 announcing that my grandson was being removed from his mother and if I didn't take him, he would be placed in Foster care.

Subsequent hearings in Family Court of Western Australia ordered that I was given Sole Parental Responsibility of the child [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] is a child with severe disabilities.

The practicalities of raising a child, particularly one with severe disabilities are immense. When added to the age of Grandcarers these issues can be staggering.

Issues

There are two key issues that plague the mind of primary carers; "How can I get through today?" and "Who will care when I'm gone?"

These two fundamental questions should underpin the deliberations of this inquiry.

Finance and funding

Instead of a happy and relaxing retirement, Grandcarers are thrust back into the world of childrearing and teenage angst. Superannuation, meant for retirement, is now a thing of the past, devoured by the necessity of day to day living -child care, education costs, clothing, increased food and utilities. Who can afford holidays, sport and entertainment?

Unfortunately it appears that many parents are unable or unwilling to pay for the support of their children, nor are they prepared to give of their time for respite or holidays.

Given that the only alternative for these forgotten children is to be placed in foster care, it would seem that the minimum assistance for Grandcarers is for them to be paid a parenting allowance, on an equivalent level with State Government foster care payment, as is the case in NSW.

The added boost of Grandparent Child Care Benefit available for Childcare, Out of School Care or Vacation care is extremely welcome, however it would be better served if additionally, it was available to be used for overnight respite. Given their age, Grandcarers desperately need sleep.

Eligibility

Primary Grandcarers are identified as being having fulltime care of their grandchildren. Such children have been placed in their care by the intervention of the Dept of Child Protection and/or Family Court Orders.

Grandcarers are NOT part time babysitters.

People, not Paper

The current focus on acquittal and accountability in agencies has resulted in undue emphasis being placed on filling out forms, rather than helping people. Some estimates are that one-quarter to one third of resources are taken up by administration. This should be kept in perspective at around 10%. In addition to the obvious effect this has, it is also has a much more pernicious effect in changing the tenor and tone of services by driving out the 'people oriented' staff while attracting and promoting 'paper oriented' staff. This is the opposite of what should be occurring.

'Accountability' implies professional standards but means more paperwork.

This is predominantly noticeable to Grandcarers, in the workings of agencies like Centrelink and Child Support.

Help, not hinder

Many of the current processes are inordinately convoluted and complicated, and are beyond the comprehension and ability for the average person to navigate, particularly if they are in shock from a newly acquired Grandchild(ren).

Of special note here, is the Child Support Agency but other Government agencies and the Family Court processes are equally stultifying. In both Family Court and Child Support, Grandparents hold no appropriate place and are classed as 'interveners'.

It is of concern that Government agencies can ignore Court orders at their want. For example a Passport will not be issued to a grandchild without the permission of parents, or by special Court order. This is despite the granting of a Parental Responsibility Order.

For whatever reason, many Grandcarers find it difficult if not impossible to get a copy of their grandchild's birth certificate. This is particularly true where the surnames are different.

Difficulty has also been expressed in trying to gain a copy of the child's immunization records.

Why should this be so? Could this be another example of bureaucratic madness?

Stability and Certainty

A prime reason for the children being placed with their grandparents is alcohol and substance abuse. Unfortunately this means that many children have been subjected to abuse and witness to events no child should be expected to have happen. These children are often left with long term scars necessitating counselling and specialist care well outside the means of many Grandcarers. Available services providers are often unable or unwilling to help leaving Grandcarers to cope as best they may. These children are in the "too hard basket". This is not good for the health and wellbeing of the Grandcarers, children or indeed for the Community.

While such cases may not be the norm, the numbers are significant enough to be of concern. Grandcarers dealing with the children's parents often bear the brunt of threatening behaviours. Verbal abuse appears to be the norm in a lot of cases. Indeed it is not unusual for Grandcarers to fail to legitimise their family arrangements for fear they or the children will be physically harmed or, alternatively the children will be removed from their Grandparents.

Restraining orders are difficult to obtain and even harder to enforce.

It can even be difficult Grandcarers to gain recognition from the Police, although this is slowly changing.

Overlaps not Gaps

The current system has numerous artificial boundaries. This is compounded when Grandcarers seek help from agencies which see their role as 'border protection'. There should be overlaps not gaps; and cooperation not boundary riding between domains.

For many children, their Grandparents are the only stable family they have ever had. They are a home of love and laughter, of caring and happiness, of food, warmth and safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I would be happy to clarify or expand on any of the matters raised and would welcome the opportunity to give evidence at a public hearing. I wish you God-speed in this important task.

4th February 2014