

1 April 2016

Mr Tim Watling
Committee Secretary
Inquiry into the future role and contribution of Regional Capitals to Australia
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

Dear Mr Watling,

Please find below Catholic Social Services Australia's (CSSA) response to the question on notice (4th March 2016 hearing) to provide examples of which successful early intervention programs have been defunded or had funding reduced by the Federal Government.

As we have stated in our submission and at the hearings, CSSA believes that any discussion concerning strengthening regional communities should also include a focus on investment in social services. We believe that a strong and cohesive community that is supported by targeted investment in quality social service programs will better facilitate the skills and talents of local residents and in turn deliver greater economic development and prosperity to our regional communities.

The experience of social service providers on the ground in rural and regional areas is that investment in social services needs to be long-term, with an emphasis on early intervention. As documented in our submission and at the hearings in Townsville, Canberra and Geraldton, the social and economic benefits of early intervention can be significant. For example as outlined by Helga Biro, CEO Centacare Cairns, it is far more socially and financially beneficial to the affected family and Government to assist a family with securing affordable housing before they forced into homelessness and in need of emergency relief and homeless services. Yet we continue to see the withdrawing of government funding in the very programs which will give long-term benefits to those affected communities. It is also worth noting that decisions to cease or reduce funding to social service programs in regional areas will have a greater impact, than in metropolitan areas, as there is often a lack of alternative or substitute services in these areas.

As requested please find some examples of programs that have had funding reduced or changes which have reduced their effectiveness.

Youth Mentoring Program - cessation

A CSSA member in a regional capital was funded a relatively small amount from the Federal Government to run a youth mentoring program from 2000 to 2009. This was an important program focussing on providing mentors to boys who had no significant male role models in their lives. Despite this program ceasing some 7 years ago, the CEO is still approached by participants of the program and told how important this program was for them and other young people in providing someone in their lives to support and guide them, especially for young people who lived in a sole parent situation. This program provided important social support to young people. The value of this program is that a number of these mentoring relationships have continued and provided long term support for vulnerable young people.

Specialised Family Violence Program - cessation

A number of CSSA members ran education and support groups for men at risk of becoming perpetrators of family violence. As a result of the cessation of the Specialised Family Violence program these agencies can no longer fund these early intervention services. They anticipate that these clients and their families, without early intervention, are more likely to require more intensive support through specialised support services such as medical, housing or mediation which is already subscribed in regional communities. Family violence also has severe impacts on children and wider family members who often have to provide support services in lieu of community based services. Given the concerns expressed by the social services sector this program has received a recent reprieve for 2 years whilst other family services have five year certainty of funding. The future of this program is still uncertain.

Child and Parenting– changes to program

The changes to the federally funded Child and Parenting Program on the ground will exacerbate demand for out of home care services for children. If parents are not able to get the support that they need in the early stages, the burden will shift back to the out of home care system which is under stress and does not always have good outcomes for children. A CSSA member agency in Queensland has experienced an increase to its waiting list of up to 300 referrals for support services relating to child safety matters.

The Carmody Report into child protection in Qld (released 2013) noted that the increasingly risk averse approach to child protection over the past 10 years has put an even greater burden on the statutory sector, and resulted in over reporting, resource wastage and an over-crowded Out of Home Care system. The report recommendations focus on diverting resources from the statutory system to early intervention and support.

Drought Relief Funding – Counselling Services

Currently funding for drought relief counselling is for a 12 month period in communities nominated as being in drought. The impact of this short term contract is felt by our members and the communities they serve with hiring and retaining trained staff, developing relationships with the affected communities and concerns by people receiving counselling that their supports will be removed from 1 July. We know that many skilled staff with a few months to go on their contracts are looking elsewhere for employment and that the people they assist are also anxious about ongoing support. There have been calls over many years to shift the focus of this program to building resilience so individuals, families and communities can better cope with the cycles of drought. Early intervention to develop coping mechanisms before a drought event occurs can be more cost effective in the longer term in regional communities.

We also understand that some state funded early intervention programs have ceased and which have flow on effects to federally funded programs such as Emergency Relief.

We reiterate that there is significant evidence that investment in prevention and early intervention, improves immediate and long term outcomes for clients and communities, and decreases dependence on specialist and statutory interventions.

Please contact me if you require any further information or wish to follow up any details.

Yours sincerely,

Liz de Chastel
Director Social Policy