

To Whom it may Concern:

I am the Aunt of 3 children aged 7, 10 and 12 who are being raised by their Grandparents, my mother and her husband. Through no fault of their own these children have found this fact their fate. They are loved and cared for dearly however the cost of their upbringing is solely the responsibility of their Grandparents who are in their 70's, pensioners and meant to be enjoying their retirement.

My mother has always been a caregiver and has fostered children for over 30 years. Each of those children has grown up to be responsible, hard working and effective members of their community. She has had jobs as varied as a farmer's wife and a sports coach, but her most cherished role has always been to provide the best support and an ongoing commitment to her family.

The mother of the children, my sister, dedicated her youth to gymnastics and travelled the world representing Australia. In her prime she contracted schizophrenia and has since battled with the illness. The father of the children has never taken any interest in their wellbeing. My mother was given the children by Family and Community Services in Sydney 7 years ago however this was never formally recorded, there were no court orders sought by Family and Community Services and consequently there is no entitlement for the children's primary carers for parenting subsidy. The Carers cannot afford to legalise their arrangements and were not entitled to Legal Aid.

My sister is currently homeless and struggles with her everyday existence. Her illness is not getting better despite ongoing medication prescribed to her and she will never be a fit parent. Family and Community Services agree with this statement and have deemed her to be an unfit parent following an assessment they conducted. My mother does an amazing job and maintains regular contact with her and provides my sister with the opportunity to stay in her home once a week. My mother has at times provided my sister with accommodation however this proved to be at her peril as my sister was abusive verbally and physically toward our mother, as is often the case with mentally ill people. My mother is the Peace Keeper and gives her grandchildren the opportunity to have an ongoing relationship with one of their parents.

The children's father has also been "assessed" by Family and Community Services and was deemed a suitable parent. He has never shown a real interest in his children and recently visited our local area without even making contact with the children at all. He chooses to reside 800km away from his children. He has not provided financially for the children and is not required to make ongoing financial contributions, which I think is inconsistent. Given he has no interest in their wellbeing why should he be part of the reason the children's Care Givers are not entitled to any ongoing government subsidy?

We have spoken to Family and Community Services and Centrelink on many occasions about the Grandparents entitlement to some financial assistance and it appears that because there is no formal agreement in place with Family and Community Services they are not entitled. What this effectively says is that given the children have not been subjected to ongoing abuse and subsequently forcibly removed from their parents the government will not support their upbringing.

My mother and her partner raise these children on their pensions. Their car has a cracked head gasket, they do not have access to public transport because they live in a rural area and each day is a

constant financial struggle. This is unacceptable for a country as wealthy as Australia to not support the Carers in their difficult task.

They require respite and access to free programs to maintain their Charges and their own health. I presently provide respite however this puts a strain on my family. The Carers would also benefit from interest free small loans so that when they have a cost such as a major repair bill for their aging vehicle they can meet it. Having access to a funding body that will pay for extracurricular activities such as sport and excursions would be highly desirable.

The Carers are troubled by the question “what happens when we die or are incapacitated?” Over the last 4 years my mother has battled an aneurism in her brain which required brain surgery and breast cancer. Throughout her treatment I provided ongoing respite. I am a single parent with 2 children and I had friends and family who came to assist me in looking after the 5 children in my care. The Doctors Surgery we attend and I sought respite programs however there was NOTHING! I had to continue to work full-time and look after 5 children under 10.

The eldest two children attended a two week program in Sydney which was organised by the Principal of their school. This provided opportunities that would not have normally been open to them because of the dire financial situation of their Carers. Vinnies also provides respite in the form of camps held in various locations such as Lake Ainsworth Recreation Facility Lennox Head annually. This gives the Carers 2 nights off annually. Vinnie’s also provide a Family Fun Day held at the local pool and waterslides which provides the opportunity of an activity which cannot normally be afforded by the Carers.

We are blessed in that our local Child Care Provider, Rainbow Children’s Centre, runs great vacation care programs and the children are entitled to a full subsidy for attendance. The other program they access is a Grandparents Carer Support Group – however given they are not able to access the same programs as some other grandparents, because they are not on a carers pension, it brings up the unfairness and inequity of their predicament; they feel polarised. They receive Homecare twice weekly and this helps them to stay on top of the everyday chores such as changing beds and general cleaning.

The cost of rearing children is practically insignificant, by comparison, to the cost of a person who becomes a dysfunctional society member and/or a criminal. These children are worthy of financial support by their government and it is criminal that my elderly mother should have to struggle financially as well as physically raising another 3 children after all that she has done for her loved ones and her country. These children will contribute to a greater Australia and I believe that it is the Government’s responsibility to provide support for the carers whose job is difficult enough already.

I hope that this Inquiry makes recommendations to benefit the Carers. The issues which require resolution include: access to Legal Aid, respite programs (ongoing short and medium term), interest free loans, accessibility to ongoing government subsidy, supervised visitation for mentally ill parents, access to housing for the mentally ill to facilitate their relationship to their children and financial support to pay for extracurricular activities such as sport and excursion. This burden should not be provided by the family alone and the Government needs to provide programs to assist the Carers in raising children that have already been dealt an innate and potentially volatile existence.