

CARE LEAVERS AUSTRALIA NETWORK INC.



SUBMISSION

PO Box 164 Georges Hall NSW 2198.
Email: careleavers@hotmail.com
Tel: 02 9709 4520 / 0425 204 747

www.clan.org.au

CLAN - Care Leavers Australia Network - is a national support and advocacy group for older people who grew up or spent time during their childhood in orphanages, Homes and other institutions away from their own families, whether as state wards, Home children or as foster children. It is the only organisation of its kind in Australia. CLAN's office is in Bankstown, Sydney, but we support and work for older Care Leavers all over Australia. We have close to 450 members, from all states, and including Australian citizens who grew up in institutions in the UK, Ireland and New Zealand.

CLAN was set up both to acknowledge the histories of Australian Care Leavers, and to lobby for support services to assist them in dealing with the traumatic consequences of growing up in the child welfare system which characterised the postwar decades up to the 1970s in Australia. CLAN was instrumental in establishing the current Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, which is due to report at the end of August on the experiences of survivors of the 'care' system of the recent past, and its effects on those who have survived it. The Inquiry was set up, in fact, in part to put on the public record the little acknowledged but deeply traumatising effects of this system. Although this is a largely forgotten history, it affected a huge number of Australians, since close to 500,000 children grew up in 'care', predominantly institutional care, in Australia in the 20th century.

We urge this committee to obtain a copy of the Senate Inquiry's report once it is released (on August 30, 2004), since it is concerned almost entirely with the experiences of people who are now part of the ageing population sector. CLAN believes that special consideration must be given to this very large group of people, which will take into account the ongoing effects of their childhood experience. The more than 500 submissions to the current Senate Inquiry are a

substantial addition to the growing body of evidence of the often irreparable damage inflicted on people who grew up in this system, of the broken lives which have been its legacy to its survivors.

Older Care Leavers were subject to a child welfare system - whether state or charitable - which, unlike today, made little or no attempt to take account of children's feelings, needs, or family ties. Where children were fostered, it was often to grossly unsuitable carers, and natural parents were discouraged and even prohibited from contact with their children. However it was church or charitable Homes and institutions that were the most common form of out-of-home care for children who were unable to be cared for by their birth family. Children went into care not only on the grounds of neglect and abuse, as today, but also simply because of family breakdown, in an era characterised (before the 1970s) by little government or community support for families in difficulty.

Media reports and public inquiries in recent years such as the 1999 *Forde Inquiry* in Queensland, have amply demonstrated that institutional care has characteristically involved high levels of sexual and physical abuse. What is less understood is the systemic emotional abuse, which was unavoidable, indeed predictable, when children were warehoused in institutions. Children growing up in the institutions of this era suffered profound emotional neglect, cut off from both family and community ties, and stigmatised as 'rejects of society'. The routines of Children's Homes and institutions were as inflexible and depersonalising as prison routines, siblings were separated from each other, visiting hours were minimal and infrequent, and staff were discouraged from any meaningful interaction with the children in their care. Children who had already suffered the traumatic rupture of attachment bonds with their own parents - who had lost their mothers and fathers - grew up in such Homes feeling completely abandoned and unwanted. There was little contact permitted between children and remaining family members once they were in care, and no attempt to foster knowledge of and connection with family and kin.

Over time, state wards and Home children - exactly like the Aboriginal Stolen Generations - frequently lost all contact with their siblings and with their family and place of origin, and consequently developed a confused and unstable sense of self and of identity. Many have only a hazy knowledge of their own childhood histories. They have no photographs, medical histories, school reports, or personal mementos from their childhood years. Most have no knowledge of their aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents. Many have led their adult lives as 'parentless people', feeling that they belong nowhere.

The institutional environment presented enormous barriers to developing an integrated sense of self on which to build a functional adult identity, and Care Leavers received little or no preparation for adult life on the 'outside'. In addition, many, if not the majority of, Care Leavers were poorly educated or even left the 'care' system illiterate. This has had long-term and far-reaching effects on their life prospects and achievements, and on their ability to provide securely for themselves as they age.

Research into the outcomes of growing up in this sort of 'care' is minimal. However anecdotal evidence, of which there is now a great deal, indicates a disproportionate representation by Care Leavers in the national statistics for relationship breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, mental and emotional problems, homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and suicide. Care Leavers - who have grown up without parental models - often find parenting their own children very difficult and extremely stressful, as well as a painful reminder of their own abandonment at this vulnerable stage of life. This has meant, for many, that they have not been able to create a nurturing family environment to sustain them as they age. The majority of Care Leavers from this era have become accustomed to living with profound feelings of worthlessness and insecurity; many have lived all their lives with one or more of the symptoms of what is now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

People from fractured families do not have family bonds to sustain them through crises in their lives. Age brings further problems. For most people, the capacity to cope and remain independent is compromised by getting old. This capacity is exacerbated for people who have felt marginalised all their lives and thus unable to build up financial, emotional or social capital to support and sustain them in their later years. People who as children were emotionally neglected and abused in Homes when vulnerable through their youth come full circle by ending up more vulnerable than most when old. Once again they may well end up in a Home. Members of CLAN often express their fear of this happening to them, and their determination not to let it happen - although through lack of resources they may well have no other option but an Aged Care Home run, as in their childhood, by a church or charity, sometimes the same one.

In the interests of social justice, we urge the committee to consider the particular needs of this vulnerable sector of the ageing population.