

Chairperson
Parliamentary Enquiry into
The Department of Community Services
State Wards
Parliament House
Canberra



I have decided to make this submission to your Parliamentary Enquiry due to my own negative experiences in the care of the Department, (then known as the Department of Youth and Community Services), in the 1970s, and due to my recent experiences in attempting to help current departmental clients through the organization known as CARE FOR US.

A: Observations from my own experiences as a State Ward

- Past institutional care of State Wards did not prepare children for life in the real world
- We were poorly educated and often described as mentally retarded
- We were often looked after by poorly trained staff who did not appear interested in either our health or emotional well being
- These staff had to look after to many children who therefore had to struggle for adequate attention and recognition
- Family relationships were discouraged and we often lost track with our siblings and our parents
- Nothing was done to develop our life skills and we often found ourselves in atrocious boarding houses with older demented people
- there were no ways of making complaints about our poor treatment and the system often appeared to try to crush us rather than help us

• I also have some doubts about the ethics of the department's actions in maintaining these clients files. I was informed that in 1996, a number of staff was ordered to shred some State Ward files, which apparently contained information very damaging to the departments reputation. It has been alleged that some of these files were required at the Police Royal Commission. I have no reason to doubt the word of the departmental staff member who gave me this damaging information.

• My current observations about the departments response to criticism:

- Over recent times, I have become alarmed at the department's unwillingness to genuinely investigate cases brought to their attention by either my organisation or the media.
- Their huge media unit, which has significantly grown over recent times, seems more interested in protective cover ups than in investigating the truth and correcting organisational problems. Meanwhile casework and management systems remain faulty and fail to adequately respond to the needs of clients, particularly teenagers. The focus seems to be on denial and the protection of the minister and the hierarchy. Perhaps the cost of the media unit should be compared with those of similar sized departments.
- In my view, the sacking of Roger West as Community Services Commissioner, and the dismantling of the role of the commission in scrutinising the work of the department, has all been part of a plan to minimise criticism of the government, the current minister and Carmel Niland the secretive Director General.

- The department does not have the capacity to keep track of these kids because their record keeping is appalling, and their staffing level cannot cope with this additional needy client group. Some believe that the department has lost the kid-skills to look after and support troubled teenagers
- In fact I have heard of some cases where young people have had to sit in district offices all day while busy district officers struggle to find alternative accommodation for them in refuges or other less suitable places offering little support or hope
- I have been told that some of these kids have been placed in caravan parks and with private profit organizations, which have no experience in dealing with kids with these complex problems. One must ask what standards the department has established to determine whether these organizations are capable of meeting their duty of care.
- Whilst I agree that the department has changed the practice of institutionalising these kids, I don't believe that the standard of care has improved for this most difficult teenage client group.
- And the cost of some of this so-called care is absolutely outrageous; sometimes up to \$6000 per head per week. Is this really good value for money and what outcomes are being achieved?
- I have grave concerns that the staff employed by some of these agencies have received virtually no training and are therefore poorly equipped to support and manage these kids on a twenty-four basis. Perhaps the department should be asked for a list of all the organizations (both non profit and private for profit) it has used to provide accommodation for this

- In my opinion, the Department still tries to ignore this terrible period of mistreatment and attempts to hide rather than face up to the consequences of this institutionalised abuse.

- Medical and dental treatment was very poor and staff ignored our pleas for this sort of assistance. For example I am still suffering from a serious medical complaint which should have been diagnosed whilst I was in departmental care. Even now the department tries to actively avoid dealing with my legitimate medical complaints. This is obvious from my files, which I enclose with this submission

B: My current observations of departmental services for vulnerable teenaged children:

- While I acknowledge that all of the older, larger style institutions have been closed, I still believe that the current treatment of teenaged kids in need of care is totally inadequate

- Many of these kids now appear to be on the streets, suffering the same sort of problems as we did in the large institutions

- They have inadequate, often temporary accommodation, have dropped out of the education system, cannot find employment and therefore have little money and often have to resort to either crime or prostitution to survive

- Unfortunately, the department has lost track of many of these kids and does not appear interested in finding these kids or helping them. They are therefore left vulnerable, and are easy prey for the predators who sell drugs or are involved in paedophilia.

- This was made known in the police royal commission but seems to have been ignored by the department which now mainly focuses on the abuse of babies and young children

- The current complaint system does not afford young people, their parents or other clients the same personal contact as they had with the previous commissioner or his supportive, objective investigating staff.
- This means these vulnerable people are less willing to confront the department with their legitimate complaints and are therefore forced to approach agencies such as Care for Us or, even the media, for help and support

D: My current observations about the department's casework focus

- Because of the current focus on investigating child abuse allegations, the department does not seem as interested in providing support, counselling or guidance to stressed parents seeking help at local district offices
- These people report that they are often quickly pushed away to other agencies without adequate or sensitive referrals or introductions. They therefore get the impression that DCS is not interested in any preventive work and that they will only receive attention when the case requires crisis intervention after referral by the school or neighbours.
- Despite all their advertising rhetoric inviting people to seek their help, little help seems readily available at the majority of DCS offices

E: My current observations about the department's attitude to "whistle blowers"

- Over recent times, my organization has received an increasing number of anonymous calls from departmental workers who are claiming that they have no means of redressing staffing problems in their offices
- They seem to be overworked and burnt out, and receiving little case management support from their

- many claim that the departments senior managers have threatened them with disciplinary action if they take their complaints outside the agency. However, some have become so disillusioned that they are prepared to take this risk to draw community attention to their problems and the repressive nature of the current management regime.
- I was reliably informed that, at the time of your inquiries announcement, all staff were sent an intranet email from the Director General warning that staff did not have permission to appear before or make submissions to the inquiry. They were apparently also warned that under public services legislation they would be subject to disciplinary action if they named clients or other staff members. I am currently awaiting a copy of this document
- Some staff members have informed me that their telephone conversations have been recorded and monitored and that they have been confronted and disciplined about these by their departmental supervisors
- I am also reliably informed that supervisors monitor staff emails
- All these procedures seem to have been adopted to protect the department from adverse publicity and to minimise genuine whistle blowing.

As I have said in section C in relation to huge media unit growth its about cover up and protecting the departments interest. Its a department falling apart at the seams. One only has to look at all state ward files there all the same the files always seem to turn state wards down. They've never got anything nice to say theres no encouragement by the staff, the idea is to drug them up label them with labels like mentally retarded every x-state wards file is labelled mentally retarded. Theres plenty of drugs that were given to x state wards in large quantities

department puts in a lot of false documents to the department of security claiming a pension and lying saying that a person has a mental retardation so that they get paid and using their words mentally retarded. They tried to put me in Parramatta, Rydalmere, then they tried to put me in Callan Park, then they tried to put me in an industrial unit in occupational therapy. They basically tried to get rid of me and tried to ride me off, as far as I'm concerned the way I was treated I would be concerned and Australia should be concerned if children have been treated this way and x-state wards. There were questions asked in Parliament by Phillip Ruddock on 27th of November 1995. There is a document that Dr Robyn Godding, Director of Australian Government Health Service, which she says in her document as a result of a neuropsychological assessment that Mr Nicholls is not mentally retarded and goes on to blaming DOCS for given false document that Mr Nicholls is retarded. Any assessment that was done by the departments staff of psychiatrist was done to suit them and we were bound to fail their testings again Phillip Ruddock asks other questions about state wards being placed on disability pensions. I enclose copies of that and other documents to back up what I said. As you will see on the Register of Admission of Rooty Hill High School for the age of 11, yet when I come into the departments care I'm so drugged up we were just there so that could have a job and we were their slaves. They didn't care then, and they don't care now about state ward or x-state wards. We worked very very hard, long hours. So if any tells me that DOCS are good, always tell them that's really hard, hard hard

for children. If they did I should have been a well educated person. They have done alot of damaged not only to me but many other state wards. The only thing that I did wrong as they said was be an uncontrollable child, considering what children get up to today I must have been an angel. At the end of the day by taking children away from parents who were trying to punish. ~~The~~ If they think their punishing the parents, think again. You don't just punish the parents you punish the children as well.