

**National Alliance for Children and Families at Risk**  
**PO Box 224**  
**New Lambton NSW 2305**

**14th November 2005**

**Hon Kay Patterson MP**  
**Minister for Families and Communities**

Dear Minister

We refer to our letter dated 22nd August 2005 which your office has acknowledged and advised that it would be forwarded to the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations for a response. To date, we have not received a response from Mr Andrews.

We note that some changes have been made (ie single parents can stay on the Parenting Payment until their youngest child turns eight) however we continue to have serious concerns regarding the negative impact which will be experienced by some birth families and foster families as a result of the Welfare to Work reforms. The current child protection and alternative care systems are already overloaded and rife with problems which contribute to situations where children and families are failed by both systems. The reforms planned by your government can only worsen the situation as some already vulnerable and struggling single parent families will be forced to endure further financial struggle if they cannot find work and possible anxiety about suitable child care arrangements for those that can. The health and well being of single parents will undoubtedly suffer as a result of the additional stressors created by these reforms and it is more than likely we will see more children "at risk" and in some cases in need of care and protection, due to these circumstances.

Is the government preparing to inject the child protection and alternative care systems with more resources to cater for the "fallout" of the reforms? Obviously, this is a ludicrous situation - if on the one hand we are removing income and support for the vulnerable families we should be helping, and on the other hand considering the additional resources that will be needed when these families cannot cope. We keep hearing governments talk about early intervention and prevention of child abuse and neglect whilst they now make plans to make things even harder for the very children and families most at risk.

In terms of the Foster Care System it should be clearly evident to managers in government departments and non government agencies associated with the provision of foster care, that it is no longer appropriate to rely on "volunteers" to care for vulnerable, traumatised and abused children in need of care and protection. Our children deserve to

be placed with foster carers who are not only loving and nurturing, but have the competency and skills to assist these children and work with other professionals to ensure the case plan goals for the child can be successfully achieved - regardless of whether the plan is to reunite the child with his or her family or for a long term placement.

The current system is simply not structured to support successful outcomes for many of our most vulnerable and needy children, and the reliance on “volunteers” to do this important work is a major part of the problem. This matter needs to be addressed urgently and there is no better time to do so than at a stage where the question being asked is “should the role of foster carers be classed as a voluntary or paid occupation”? The child care industry demands that child care workers be accredited and paid to care for children with much less complex needs - yet when it comes to foster carers, they are not paid and nor are they required to attend on-going compulsory, competency based training to ensure they have the competence, knowledge and skill to look after abused and traumatised children and work effectively with all parties involved.

The reluctance of governments to address this situation has contributed to unsatisfactory and damaging situations where children experience multiple foster care placements. As these children reach adolescence, they may understandably feel rejected and unworthy and be “out of control” - foster families don’t want them - creating the need for other types of care ie residential care facilities. Historically, it appears that generally children do not cope well in residential care facilities or “institutions” and therefore we should be focussing on how we can best prepare and support foster families to eliminate as much as possible the need to place children in these types of facilities.

We plead with you on behalf of children and families “at risk” that you revisit the Welfare to Work reforms to address these matters and take seriously the need to professionalise the foster care system without delay.

Yours sincerely.

Nina Weston (S.A.)

Pat Walker (N.S.W.)

Elizabeth Anderson (Qld)

cc Hon Kevin Andrews MP