

# Fears grow for foster care

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By Deborah Gough  
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Foster care faces collapse in three years, with children at risk forced back into institutional care if the shortage of carers is not rectified, experts warn.

In a radical shift, major Victorian agencies have dropped their resistance to paid foster carers to supplement the shortfall in volunteers.

Professor Dorothy Scott, a leading social work academic at Melbourne University, said that in three to five years the number of children in need of foster care would exceed the existing places.

"We are rapidly approaching a crisis point and it is very alarming to say what the situation might be in three to five years," Professor Scott said.

Agencies, including providers such as Anglicare and Mackillop Family Services, say dwindling foster carer numbers and children with increasingly complex behaviour problems are at the core of the crisis.

"If nothing changes, the Government would be forced to provide for these kids themselves," Anglicare Victoria chief executive Dr Ray Cleary said.

"I would suspect that would mean state-run homes, and the cost of that would be three or four times greater than it would be otherwise."

Mackillop chief Paul Linossier said professional fostering - carers employed at commercial rates - was worth pursuing among a range of options. Foster Care Association of Victoria president Janice Hughes said volunteer carers, who receive only their expenses, were leaving because they could not cope with children who came too late to care, often damaged by years of neglect and abuse.

Ms Hughes said the association had long resisted the introduction of professional foster carers, but

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it might now be inevitable in some cases, although voluntary carers should remain a big part of foster care.

"The children that are coming now are so much more damaged and more challenging and I think that it (professional foster carers) is something to look to for the future," Ms Hughes said.

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There is wide agreement in the sector that proper reimbursement is an issue for carers.

"We don't foster to be paid," Ms Hughes said. "All foster parents want to do is seek a true reimbursement of the costs involved with having a child. To care for a young child with nappies, formula and clothes that they quickly grow out of, \$100 doesn't go very far."

Anglicare's manager of the out-of-home program in the eastern region, Brigitte Boulet, said the agency was forced to put children with inexperienced carers or overload experienced carers they could rely on.

"We feel we just cope now, but we fear that there might be an incident or a mistake that we wouldn't have made if the system was not under this strain," Ms Boulet said.

Community Services Minister Sherryl Garbutt said the Government was working "to strengthen the foster care system".