

# Editorial

Guest editor

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It is both a pleasure and a privilege to have been invited to contribute to a 'Queensland edition' of *Children Australia*. The invitation extended to policy-makers and practitioners from Queensland's government and non-government child and family welfare sector provided both the opportunity and impetus to share information with other States and Territories.

All States and Territories face similar issues in the struggle to improve child protection services to children, young people and their families. We can and should learn from each other and take opportunities to work collaboratively in developing responses to these issues. However, it is all too easy for policy-makers and practitioners in each State or Territory to work in isolation.

The selection of articles published in this edition provides a snapshot of some of the current and ongoing work in Queensland. It is hoped that they will stimulate discussion and debate about similarities and differences in work across Australia.

## THE CURRENT SCENE IN QUEENSLAND:

Currently child protection services in Queensland are jointly delivered by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and the community services sector. The Department has 35 area offices across the state which deliver statutory child protection services. The community services sector is primarily funded by the Alternative Care and Intervention Services Program (ACISP). This program has a recurrent budget of approximately \$14 million and has three major components:

- residential care
- shared family care (family based care)
- intervention and assessment services.

## Data

The Department records child protection notifications if information indicates that a child has suffered harm or is at risk of harm due to the action or inaction of a parent, careprovider or person living in the child's home. In 1997-98 there were 17, 233 child protection cases notified in Queensland. Of these cases, 2,492 (14.5%) related to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children, who comprise around 5% of Queensland children.

For 88.5% of the cases notified, it was determined that an investigation and assessment response was required.

However 91.5% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cases were responded to with investigation and assessment compared to 88% of non-indigenous cases.

If we look at substantiation rates, 41.5% of cases notified that required investigation and assessment, were substantiated. That is, for every 2.4 cases notified which required investigation/assessment, one case was substantiated. Overall, 35.5% were unsubstantiated and 23.1% were not finalised. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cases requiring investigation and assessment, 47.6% were substantiated, 31.1% were unsubstantiated and 21.3% were not finalised.

What is interesting about child protection practice in Queensland is that most statutory intervention with families to protect children is done without the need for a court order.

At 30 June 1997 there were 3,066 children on protective orders. Children in the 15-17 age group comprise 23.5% of all children on orders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprise 25.3% of all children on orders. They are six times more likely to be subject to protective orders than non-indigenous children.

Analysis of this data indicates that there is increasing demand for child protection services in Queensland, with significant and sustained increases in cases notified and cases substantiated. It would appear that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are subject to more intrusive intervention than non-indigenous families – their children are three times more likely to be subject to notifications, which are more likely to be responded to with investigation and assessment. These assessments are more likely to be substantiated.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Queensland is entering a very exciting period in the child protection arena with plans to implement significant reform that will assist in addressing the issues outlined above.

In early 1999 Parliament will consider new child protection legislation to replace the 1965 Children's Services Act. This legislation reflects where policy and practice has moved to as well as embedding key principles into a legislative framework. These principles can be summarised as:

- recognition that the child's right to protection is paramount;
- recognition of the right of families to be supported and assisted in the task of providing safe care for children;

- the responsibility of the State to intervene to protect children when necessary, and to do so in a way which recognises the rights of all individuals involved – in particular to ensure that when intervention occurs it does not exceed the degree necessary to protect the child;
- accountability in the exercise of authority and in administrative decision-making, including administrative appeal;
- adherence to the fundamental principles of equity, equality and participation and those arising from recognition of ethnic and cultural identity – in particular recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices.

It is anticipated that the legislation will be implemented in late 1999. Preparing for the introduction of new legislation has provided the impetus for broad-based reform of child protection service delivery across the government and non-government sector. This reform is vital for Queensland's child protection system to effectively respond to increasing community expectations that:

- families be supported in their primary role of protecting children;
- children be protected from harm;
- children who suffer harm receive quality care and services which promote their emotional, physical, social and educational development, and
- children who are removed from home receive safe alternative care.

The reform process, 'Partnership in Action', is a collaborative strategy between children, young people and their families, the government and non-government sectors and careproviders. It is focused on enhancing outcomes for children and families.

The broad themes to be considered in Queensland's child protection reform are:

- locating child protection service delivery within the broader community service framework;
- integrating prevention, family support and child protection intervention responses to children and families;
- enhanced collaboration between key stakeholders including government and non-government sectors, careproviders, and service consumers;
- ways to increase participation by children and families in the child protection process;
- more effective ways of working with indigenous children, families and communities.

Specific issues targeted by the reform are:

- enhancing prevention and family support responses;
- addressing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system;

- managing the increased demand for child protection services;
- developing flexible and effective responses to children and young people with high support needs;
- placement stability;
- flexible and effective services to young people including assistance for young people leaving care and post-care support.

Queensland is unique in its geography and spread of population. This provides significant challenges for the delivery of child protection services. One of the challenges faced by child protection workers in Queensland is the 'tyranny of distance' – finding effective ways to meet the needs of remote and island communities in keeping with principles of equity and social justice. This will continue to be an issue underlying the planning for reform of child protection service delivery in Queensland.

The North Queensland region covers an area which extends west to the Northern Territory and north to the international waters of New Guinea, an area of 680,379 sq km with a population of approximately 440,000 people. Although this represents the smallest population of any region within Queensland, this includes 46% of the indigenous population. This region also has a younger age profile than Queensland as a whole.

North Queensland has a direct service delivery team which services the remote indigenous communities of Cape York and the Torres Strait, working collaboratively with community networks. Some of Australia's most innovative and responsive child care services have been established in remote communities in Queensland's far North. These services were developed under the Remote Area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Care Program (RAATSIC). The Program has been expanded through funding to provide a broad range of child and family services including child protection and domestic violence.

RAATSIC is a unique program that harnesses the knowledge, skills and talent of local women's groups in the planning and design of services that will meet the specific needs of their communities. The aim of the program is to assist remote communities to respond to the needs of children and their families in a culturally appropriate and locality specific manner. The exciting feature of the RAATSIC program is the range and diversity of the services created, from the provision of safe and stimulating outdoor play areas and mobile playgroups to children and family activity centres, family support workers and licensed day care centres. The significance of this program, apart from the innovative services it has created, has been the evolution of a genuine partnership between the Department and Aboriginal and Islander communities. This partnership provides a workable model for future innovative services in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Workers in Central Queensland service an area of 600,429 sq km, stretching from the Whitsunday shire in the north to Maryborough in the south, and west to the Northern Territory border, with a population of approximately 471,500

(approximately 14% of Queensland's total population), which includes 15.6% of Queensland's indigenous population.

Departmental officers in North and Central Queensland travel in light planes, dinghies and long distances in four-wheel drives. They carry survival kits, safety and communication equipment – mobile phones, satellite phones or two-way radios. Workers regularly embark on overnight journeys or trips for a few days or a week at a time to service remote communities. What is essential to this demanding work is building strong relationships with other government service providers in these areas, eg, police, health and education workers, as well as with key community groups and significant people in the communities. Workers in this area demonstrate a high level of commitment and energy in difficult circumstances.

The southern area of Queensland is covered by three regions, which include the majority of our population spread across urban and rural communities. Brisbane South has three of the 20 local government areas across Australia identified as having the largest increase in population from 1991 to 1996 – with further rapid increases expected in the next five to ten years. Population growth and the spread of population will continue to provide challenges in developing flexible and innovative service responses to the needs of children and their families.

We look forward to providing you with interesting stories about future work to address child protection service delivery issues across Queensland's wide open spaces!

#### CONCLUSION

Some of the articles published here represent work being done to prepare for new child protection legislation. Others highlight some of the work going on outside of this context.

Time is always an issue and at this point in Queensland a scarce commodity! However Queensland child protection workers – policy-makers and practitioners – have got a very exciting year ahead and intend to continue sharing information about the work to be done. Look forward to articles on Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect teams, child protection service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities and their families, and more information about the ongoing collaborative work across the government and non-government sector in implementing the legislation and broader child protection reform.

Merry Christmas, with best wishes for a joyous and safe New Year to you all!

Paul Testro

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## NATIONAL EDITORIAL BOARD

The new national editorial board for *Children Australia* as mentioned in the editorial of the last issue, Vol 23, No 3, is now taking shape. We are pleased to list the following members:

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We hope to list further members in the next edition of *Children Australia*.