

SOUTHERN REGIONAL CHILD CARE CO-OPERATIVE

A short explanatory statement

For the last thirty years the literature in Victoria has been replete with reference to the need for co-ordination and integration of child welfare programmes. Some commentators on the child welfare scene have detected not only an indifference but in fact a deep rooted antagonism towards planning, co-ordination and integration.

The Reverend Graeme Gregory, in his paper to this Conference a few years ago, after compiling a reasonably comprehensive list of representative organisations who fulfil a co-ordinating function in the child welfare field concluded:

“I believe that most of us have a deep rooted antagonism towards planning and co-ordination. The origins of this antagonism lie in the fact that we want to be our own bosses and feel threatened when someone else is going to have the right to make a decision which affects us. I am convinced that the best interest of all children and all families will be served only if there is greater co-ordination between existing child care agencies, and the development of planning at the highest level in the State. If children are to benefit from actions on their behalf, there must be co-ordinated policy making and planning that brings in the resources of both statutory and voluntary agencies.

In latter days the Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services Report presented to the Minister in July, 1976, stated:

“The child care field in Victoria involves a wide variety of people and organisations. Practically all call for co-ordination in the interests of efficiency, but in many important areas, only tentative steps have been taken to overcome long standing fragmentation.”

Attempts made at high levels to co-ordinate programmes have been characterized by a lack of effectiveness and co-operation by participating agencies. Witness the current efforts of the Social Welfare Department and the Health Department to resolve some of the grey areas particularly related to child maltreatment. It is hoped that the revamped Family Welfare Council will go some ways towards providing a more coherent family welfare policy in the State in the future but we could be forgiven some scepticism about its possibilities to achieve any meaningful co-ordination and integration of services.

The Southern Regional Child Care Co-operative has attempted to meet this problem at another level. It was established in the firm belief that co-ordination is more easily achieved and probably more effective if it begins from the ground up. In late 1976 and early 1977, a series of meetings were organised in the southern region in which agencies delivering child and family welfare programmes participated. Representatives from government, municipal and non-government programmes attended. It was at these meetings that administrators of agencies began to express their concern regarding the lack of a comprehensive range of services in the area, the sense of isolation experiences by agencies and the consequent reluctance to involve themselves in new programmes.

The nature of funding in child welfare in the state at the moment has meant that many residential programmes have been locked into services which have been perceived as being no longer appropriate and yet because of the nature of the funding it has not been possible for agencies to move out of these programmes because it could severely jeopardise their financial status.



One of the urgent needs of Government at the present time is to give consideration to a transitional funding arrangement so that agencies with a genuine desire to move into new programmes have the opportunity of doing so without facing bankruptcy.

These and other matters were canvassed and frequently discussed at Co-operative meetings and it was determined that the Co-operative itself which represented a wide range of resources and expertise was an appropriate body to establish an action research project which aimed at investigating residential care.

The Social Welfare Department figures indicated that there were 220 children in care within the region, which meant that the Southern region had the second highest concentration of residential care programmes in the State. The figures also showed that in 1974-75 there were some 124 children who came into care from the region and that there were about 100 children in the 1975-76 period. It was quite clear from the information that was covered from the agencies at the meeting that while the services offered were generally highly regarded, they were not comprehensive in terms of region, nor was there any real attempt to provide any diversionary, emergency or crisis intervention programmes. The Co-operative had been discussing the possibility of establishing a programme that would provide for intervention at court level so that many children who, under normal circumstances would have made their way into reception centres, could now be diverted into programmes within the region.

The Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (Geelong Branch) had sponsored the "Alternative to Wardship Programme" in 1975. It was a pilot project designed to discover if, by providing a range of options for the Court, children could be diverted from wardship.

The Committee began by examining the existing wardship provision within the framework of Victoria legislation and it concluded that they contained numerous disadvantages, such as:—

1. The effects of separation on children.
2. High monetary cost.
3. High incidence of delinquency resulting from wardship.
4. The stigma attached to wardship.
5. The demoralizing effect of the Court action and police intervention on the parents.
6. The open ended nature of wardship.

It also concluded that far too many children were made wards, not because of the advantages attached to this process, but because of the lack of suitable alternatives available to the Courts.

Some children are being made wards not because they need protection from their parents, but rather because some parents have difficulties with their parental role.

Wardship then is likely to be counter-productive as the whole Court procedure could make the parents feel even more inadequate.

The objectives of the programme were seen as follows:—

1. Keeping children within their own family.
2. Helping these families to function more effectively.
3. To provide a service that offers alternatives to Court action and admission to wardship.
4. To isolate those cases that fail to respond to the services offered.

While the number of children involved in the project was only fourteen, the results were quite significant.

Seven children were returned to their families on supervision orders.

Six children were admitted to wardship.

One child was released to the care of a substitute family.

There would be little doubt that if this intervention had not taken place all children in the programme would have been admitted to wardship.

The members of the Co-operative believed that this programme provided the rationale and the encouragement for a more concerted effort. The Co-operative also discussed the comprehensive Emergency Services programme which has been established in 1973 in Nashville Tennessee. The results of the programme were very impressive. The Comprehensive Emergency Services programme was based on the same work of inter-agency co-operation as the southern regional programme. It was designed to co-ordinate the wide range of programmes provided for neglected and abused children in the metropolitan area of Nashville and the results achieved indicated that its objective of diverting children from residential care programmes was highly successful and that it was effected as a substantial reduction in costs i.e. comparative to traditional residential care.

The services revolved around the establishment of four new programmes. One was a 24 hour emergency intake service operated 7 days a week. The second was an emergency caretaker service intended primarily for cases of temporary abandonment or unforeseen emergency where children were without parental supervision. Caretakers served as temporary guardians until the parents returned or until an alternative plan was developed. The third service made emergency homemakers available on a 24 hour basis during crisis situations where parents could not exercise their routine responsibilities. Finally, emergency foster homes were established to provide temporary care for children who could not be maintained in their homes or in regular foster care placement. In addition to these emergency services, the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) also realigned and expanded outreach and follow-up services.

The services were complemented by the establishment of three programmes independent of the DPW. One was an emergency family shelter, established by the Salvation Army, that could accommodate three four-member families on an emergency basis (normally less than 14 days). Richland Village, the local child shelter care facility, set aside space for 12 to 15 older abused and neglected children, thereby offering an emergency residential service for brief periods (up to 2 weeks) when other programme options were unavailable. And the Metropolitan Nashville Juvenile Court's Protective Service Unit began to co-ordinate with the DPW on decisions involving removal of a child from his home. The court's intake division complemented that of the DPW by receiving and screening complaints on a 24 hour basis and by working closely with the Metropolitan Police Department.

Results of the Project

A brief summary of the outcome statistics indicates the success of CES in meeting programme objectives during a period when the number of child neglect and abuse complaints and referrals had increased 92%.

* The number of Neglect and Dependency partitions filed was reduced from 602 in programme year 1969-70 to 266 in program year 1973-74, reduction of 56%.

* The number of families that contain one or more children named on N & D petitions was reduced from 339 to 156 in these years, a decrease of 54%.

* The number of cases screened where an N & D petition was not filed increased from 770 in programme year 1969-70 to 2,156 in programme year 1973-74, an increase of 180%.

*The number of children removed from their homes and placed in some type of substitute care decreased from 343 in programme year 1969-70 to 174 in programme year 1973-74, a decrease of 51%.

* The number of children under the age of 6 who were institutionalized was reduced again

* The number of children institutionalized was reduced from 324 to 50 in those years, a decrease of 85%.

* The number of children under the age of 6 who were institutionalized was reduced from 180 to 0.

* The number of recidivistic cases (i.e. the number of children on whom petitions are filed in given years who previously had petitions filed) was 196 in programme year 1969-70 out only 23 in programme year 1973-74, a decline of 88%.

* The recidivism rate (i.e. the percentage of children on whom petitions are initially filed who are abused or neglected again by the end of the subsequent year) declined from 16% in programme year 1969-70 to 9% in programme year 1973-74.

* The number of children who had delinquency records declined from 44 in programme year 1969-70 to 0 in programme year 1973-74.

* The incremental difference in cost between the old system and the new system was a net savings of \$68,000 an efficient use of resources in view of the substantial increase in effectiveness; a solution was achieved in which effectiveness was increased while costs decreased.

Follow-up Work

Comprehensive Emergency Services staff, in their follow-up efforts, worked intensively with parents of children placed in longer-term foster care to re-establish families, or sought placement with relatives. This was done in conjunction with the regular DPW foster care staff. Further, the DPW increased its efforts to place children who were in foster care or adoption. As a result of these efforts, only 34% of these children remained in longer-term foster care two years after initial placement, compared with at least 94% under the old system. Several children were adopted, compared with none under the old system.

On the basis of the information available in these two programmes the Co-operative resolved that an action research project would be developed utilizing those aspects of the Alternatives to Wardship Project and the Community Emergency Services Programme that were relevant to the needs and the resources of the Southern Region. The co-operative formulated its basic aims as:

1. By co-operation and co-ordination of the child welfare agencies presently situated in the region, to provide a comprehensive range of services to children and their families.

2. Provide, by establishing contacts with police, infant welfare centres, etc., a means whereby emergency services can be offered to families at the point of crisis, so that children who, under normal circumstances would have been placed in care, can be either

(a) retained within their own family unit by providing the alternative domiciliary or social work support, and if this is not possible,

(b) provide emergency care within their own area so that the trauma of separation from family and friends is minimised.

The Co-operation outlined the following objectives:

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify and utilize effectively, services presently offered in the Region.

To develop alternatives to services presently offered where this is necessary so that children may be diverted from Wardship.

2. To encourage the development of emergency care facilities that will enable children to remain within their own area and so minimize the trauma and disruption associated with removal to reception facilities.

3. To encourage the development of programmes aimed at early intervention of children at risk and then families.

4. To offer 24 hour social work intervention services to children and families.

5. To encourage and support agencies where appropriate to review children presently in their care so that realistic alternatives for future care are actively sought.

In the development of an organisation structure designed to meet these objectives several models were considered. It would have been possible for instance, to justify the establishment of an agency providing social work domiciliary and residential support services and this was discussed. However, in the interests of enhancing the sense of participation of the various agencies and the workers within those agencies and in having due regard for the dubious possibility of collecting sufficient funds to finance such a programme in the short space of time it was decided to utilize, wherever possible, administration and professional services presently available within the agencies within the region.

It was however determined that a professionally qualified research Officer to oversee the programme was necessary.

The Research Officer will be responsible to the Board of the Southern Regional Child Care Co-operative to:—

1. establish and maintain a sound administrative structure.

2. initiate with the co-operation of participating agencies new services and programmes relevant to meeting the objective of the co-operative.

3. provide professional leadership for staff attached to the Co-operative.

4. co-ordinate the work of staff, Board and agencies working in the Co-operative.

5. publicity promote the objectives and work of the Co-operative within the region.

6. act as a community leader of “catalyst” in encouraging the development of a comprehensive range of programmes for children and families within the region.

7. developing contacts with police, courts, infant welfare centres and other agencies who come into contact with children who are at risk.

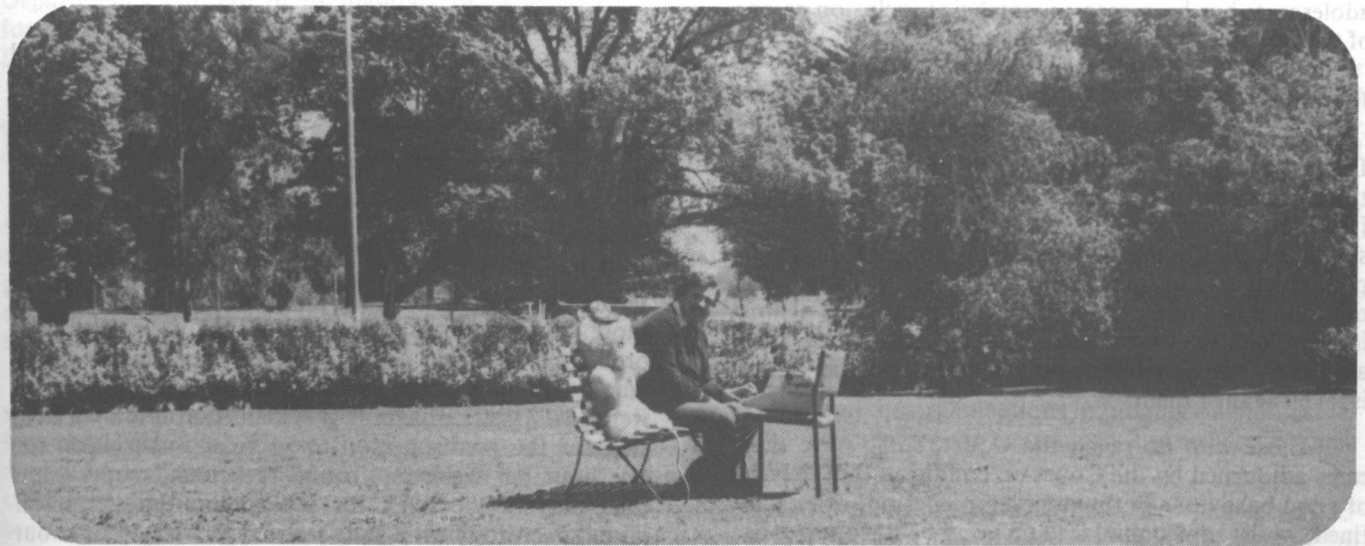
8. to supervise and co-ordinate the work of part-time and volunteer workers who staff a 24 hour telephone and emergency case work service.

9. produce an Annual Report and Evaluation on the work of the Co-operative.

10. attend to all such other matters as directed by the Board of the Co-operative. It is intended that social workers in the agencies in the region will provide after hours duty services on a roster basis. They will be responsible to attend in the company of police or any other agency involved at the point of crisis and hopefully be able on the basis of their knowledge of services within the region, to offer a realistic alternative to reception centre care.

The programme will be sponsored by the Children’s Welfare Association, but administered by a local board drawn from both Statutory and non-government Agencies’ Representatives.

It is planned that appropriate evaluation procedures will be built into the programme so that at the end of two year period a comprehensive report on the Project will be provided to Government and funding agencies.



“Many significant ventures have humble beginnings!”