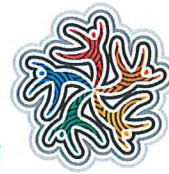




Commission for Children
and Young People

improving young lives



3 February 2015

Dear Friends

2015 Report on Government Services

I distribute this letter to you in response to the rapidly increasing number of Victorian Aboriginal babies and children being removed from their families and placed in statutory care.

The *2015 Report on Government Services* notes that the number of Aboriginal babies and children in Victoria being placed into statutory care rose by 42 per cent in just the 12 months to 30 June 2014.

This was an increase of 386 children; rising from 922 to 1308 children at 30 June 2014. This represents a rate of 62.7 per 1000 compared to 5.1 per 1000 for all Victorian children. We already know that the rate is much higher in many of the regional areas across the state for child removals while other areas experience lower levels of removal.

We cannot improve the lives of vulnerable Aboriginal children by applying a band-aid to the out of home care system. Without significant changes in practice and service provision, and based on current trajectories, I would expect this number to grow to around 1500 by July this year.

From the 250 children we have considered as part of Taskforce 1000 we know that male perpetrated family violence and alcohol and drug abuse are present in over ninety per cent of families where children have been removed. We have also seen significant system deficiencies in respect of cultural connections and relationships along with the application of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. The results when processes to identify and engage with family and kin do not take place early in the child's removal is that children languish for many years, often until permanency planning is taking place, in placements away from kin and community.

Children with out of home care experiences or currently in care make up a significant number of children in youth justice. These children are commonly disengaged from education and many go on to have contact with the criminal justice system and later incarceration.

This has a particular and urgent consequence for our children in out of home care come July 2016 when legislative change from the *Permanent care and other matters bill* take effect impacting on family reunification; permanent placements and cultural support planning.

There must be a broader and more preventative approach to addressing the drivers of disadvantage. Government must adequately resource and provide training opportunities to the Victorian Aboriginal community sector, particularly in the areas of family prevention and early intervention, as well as fund local delivery of out of home care programs.

The previous government identified the development of a *Complementary 5 year plan for Aboriginal children in out of home care* sitting alongside *Out of Home care - A Five Year Plan* as their solution - the current government still to identify their response.

I am advocating for the development of a state-wide strategic response to improving the lives of vulnerable Aboriginal babies, children and young people with child protection, youth justice and child homelessness as well as children's trauma and mental health at its core.

A strategy based on the principles of transparency, accountability, honesty and the recognition of the role that the Aboriginal community is critical in the development and implementation of policies and programs to improve the lives of Aboriginal children.

The strategic response should be an initiative agreed between the broad Aboriginal community and government, with governance arrangements on par with the *Aboriginal Justice Agreement*. The response at a minimum should include; principles, protocols, targets and measurable outcomes monitored through a partnership forum.

I remain optimistic with the recent election of the Andrew's Government, the appointment of the Hon Jenny Mikakos MP as the Minister for Families and Children and Dr Pradeep Philip as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services that we will see a real improvement in the service outcomes and the lives of our children.

I know both the Minister and the Secretary are committed to a collaborative approach and the building of transparency. These improvements will only be achieved when the Aboriginal community is empowered to exercise its responsibility and obligations.

It is important that Aboriginal community in general and more specifically the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations express their concerns to the government about the increasing vulnerability of our children and reinforce if you support the concept of developing a state-wide strategic and partnership response to improving the lives of our most vulnerable children.

Our children deserve much better than what they are receiving now. Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries in respect of the above.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Jackomos PSM

Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.