

ACWA – the peak body for NGO child welfare organisations in NSW

Policy area

ACWA is the peak body for NGO child welfare organisations in NSW, working towards systems reform in order to bring about improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families. It is the wide held hope of ACWA and the sector as a whole that child protection will be treated as a priority issue in the 2019 NSW Election.

Introduction

Good functioning and safe communities support people in their times of need. Everyone needs access to justice in times of need – legal advice, help, support and representation – to help them navigate any issues they are facing and stopping these problems from spiralling out of control and causing further harm.

Problem/Issue

As part of our pre-election advocacy platform, ACWA is asking all NSW members of parliament to commit to:

1. **A radical new approach to raising the unacceptable levels of educational disadvantage currently experienced by children and young people living in out-of-home care in NSW.**

The poor educational outcomes attained by children and young people in out-of-home care has long been a concern for the child and family welfare sector.

Education plays a fundamental role in helping children and young people growing up in care achieve a productive and rewarding life. However for this particularly vulnerable group of students, experiences of abuse and neglect, trauma, disrupted attachments, removal from family and placement changes can all impact negatively on their ability to learn. Research consistently indicates that far too many of these children and young people are missing out on the good quality education that is so critical to their future health, welfare and wellbeing.

2. **Prioritising investment in prevention and early intervention services to support struggling families and reduce the number of children entering out-of-home care.**

The NSW Government's current investment approach to child protection is heavily weighted towards crisis responses. This model is failing to prevent the neglect and abuse of children and young people in our community.

ACWA advocates for a major shift in investment, as emphasised by ARACY's widely applauded Inverting the Pyramid – Enhancing Systems for Protecting Children report, towards proactive prevention and early intervention services that will give families the support they need long before they come into contact with the child protection system.

3. **Providing care leavers priority access to essential services across the course of their lives.**

The personal limitations borne from disadvantage and neglect and abuse are carried throughout a lifetime by many who have been in care. The Longitudinal Outcomes for Forgotten Australians (LOFA) research and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse have identified both the need for ongoing support for survivors of childhood abuse and neglect and support related to specific life events.

These individuals were once the responsibility of the state and deserve access to a lifelong body of services - at a time when they are ready to access them. Services should include scholarships for: remedial education, vocational education and training, higher education opportunities and priority access to housing, primary health and dental services.

4. **The establishment of an independent advocacy mechanism for responding to the specific needs of children and young people in out-of-home care.**

While the out-of-home care system in NSW is subject to a strong framework of regulation and oversight, ACWA believes there is a missing piece – the function of rapid review, advocacy and powers to intervene when the care system’s response is not protecting or safeguarding the child. This function must be independent of service provision and funding bodies to enable a focus on the child’s best interests.

ACWA envisages this role would focus on identifying and responding to the children who are falling through the cracks or our service system, ensuring their ongoing needs are being met through case planning and management and suitable placement.

Solution

To help address the significant educational disadvantage that children and young people in care face, ACWA is calling on the incoming government for an investment of \$15 million over four years to implement across NSW a virtual schools program similar to the model being rolled out with great success in Victoria through its LOOKOUT Education Support Centres.

For additional information – key contacts:

