

YOUTH ISSUE – BRIEFING

TO: CHIEF MINISTER

DATE: 06/12/2015

FROM: TENNEIL ROSS

TOPIC: CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM, IN PARTICULAR THOSE IN RESIDENTIAL CARE HOMES

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Northern Territory Government:

1. Continue to fund ongoing support services for young people and carers.
2. Invests in the establishment of more therapeutic home environments with specialist carers as an alternative to current residential facilities.

BACKGROUND

Having been subjected to the child protection system for 10 years, I decided to work on a project that is really important to me and very close to my heart. I endured many struggles through my experiences in care and can now relate to and understand other young people currently struggling in the child protection system.

I have a strong passion for helping young people. Some say that the care system either breaks you or makes you. At times it definitely broke me but if it wasn't for my experiences and the people that I met over the 10 years; I wouldn't be the person I am today.

DISCUSSION

As of June 2015, there were roughly 1000 young people in the Northern Territory (NT) subject to a Care and Protection Order. When a child enters the child protection system the desired outcome for families and frontline workers is for the child protection concerns identified to be addressed to enable children to be safely reunited with family. This may take time and is sometimes, unfortunately, not possible at all and young people are subjected to long-term orders until they attain the age of 18, remaining under the care of the Chief Executive Officer.

Despite every child's circumstances being different, when a young person is placed in care it is very daunting and traumatising for them. Being separated from their family and being placed with different carers who they have never met can bring on stress and anxiety as they are not sure how they are going to be treated. In some cases the child may not be placed in care with their siblings. This can be very difficult and traumatic as the child wonders where their siblings are, who they are with, if they are being treated properly and when they will be able to see them next.

When a child moves into a foster family they are at their most vulnerable state. Some children suffer from separation anxiety and some grow up never having received or witnessed love and affection. Young people in care may have behavioural issues linked to



the early childhood trauma they may have experienced in their lives. They lack trust. Experiencing trauma as a child through abuse or neglect can lead to mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and suicidal ideation. Diagnoses of youth mental health disorders are currently on the rise and it is important the government continues to improve the provision of mental health services for disaffected youth.

Despite many of the challenges that young people in the care system have faced, they often have incredible strength and are really the true experts when it comes to the care system.

This year my goal has been to provide support and advocacy to young people in the child protection system through my volunteer work for the CREATE Foundation. I have participated in many different projects and events with young people, including:

- Being a representative at the Youth for Change conference in Brisbane
- Coordinating the development of a fundraising calendar to help young people access support services and facilities; including young people designing a calendar that showcased what their community means to them.
- Attending the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect child protection breakfast (NAPCAN), speaking on behalf of the young people and presenting their work to the event participants.
- Having the opportunity to speak about the importance of child protection on ABC Radio.
- Holding focus groups with foster carers and young people across the Northern Territory.
- Helping facilitate connection events for young people.

Providing support is crucial for young people and their carers

CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national consumer body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. CREATE Foundation represents the voices of over 43 009 children and young people currently in care Australia wide; and those who have transitioned from care up to the age of 25.

The vision is that all children and young people with a care experience reach their full potential. The mission is to create a better life for children and young people in care.

To achieve this they:

- CONNECT children and young people to each other, CREATE and their community to
- EMPOWER children and young people to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and skills that enable them to have a voice and be heard to
- CHANGE the care system, in consultation with children and young people, through advocacy to improve policies, practices and services and increase community awareness.

They achieve the mission by facilitating a variety of programs and services for children and young people in care and developing policy and research to advocate for a better care system.



CREATE Foundation have a three year service plan with the Department of Children and Families from 2013 to 2016. The funding covers all operations of CREATE in the NT including staffing, office support and the services they provide to the children and young people across the NT. This includes ClubCREATE, Connection events, Youth Advisory Groups, Speak Up training, Worker Training, CREATE your Future workshops and CREATE Bank alongside the advocacy role that comes from working with young people.

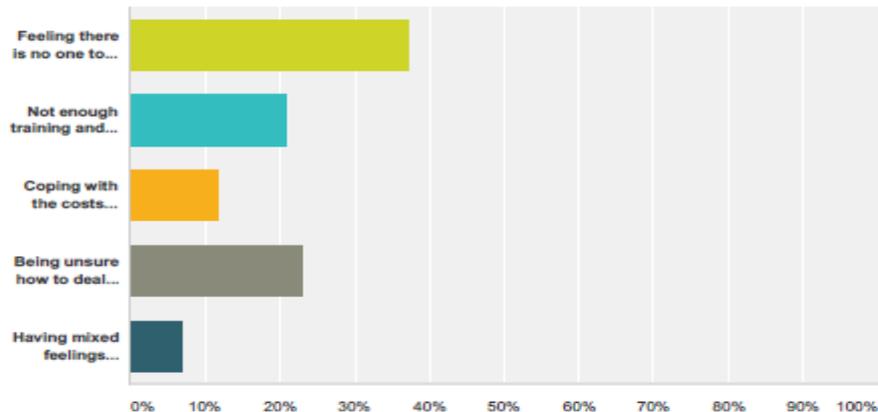
CREATE Foundation are constantly striving to provide more for young people and of course the numbers of young people are increasing over time which is why donations, fundraising and grants are much appreciated and very much valued by the organisation.

Foster Carers

Foster carers do an amazing job in the community and face many challenges when dealing with children with complex needs. During the year I surveyed 43 foster carers asking them what they felt was the biggest challenge. Surprisingly, almost 40% of respondents reported that they “felt there was nobody to talk to when a crisis occurred” with an additional 20% stating “they felt there was not enough training and support for them to deal with a foster child’s complex needs”

Q7 As a Foster Parent, what do you find the biggest challenge?

Answered: 43 Skipped: 15



Answer Choices	Responses
Feeling there is no one to talk to when a crisis occurs.	37.21% 16
Not enough training and support for dealing with a foster child's complex needs	20.93% 9
Coping with the costs relating to foster children	11.63% 5
Being unsure how to deal with complex emotional reactions of children after having seen their biological parents.	23.26% 10
Having mixed feelings towards the biological parents of the children in care.	6.98% 3
Total	43

Foster carers across the NT need more support when dealing with a child with complex needs. The Northern Territory Government should consider funding for specialists for specific trauma informed and behavior management strategies specific to the needs of the child so that they feel they can manage the presenting needs of the child.



I would like to see that there is ongoing support and training, not just the initial mandatory training for foster parents; so that they are being adequately trained and supported to alleviate the anxiety of dealing with a crisis. Offering professional debrief opportunities for foster carers after an incident has occurred would be highly beneficial. The foster carers would feel more supported and would have fewer doubts about the job they are doing.

The standard of care in residential facilities is not meeting the individual needs of young people.

Residential care is not a healthy place for young people. They deserve a much better standard of care than what they are currently receiving. Residential facilities need to be removed and replaced with therapeutic home environments with specialist foster carers.

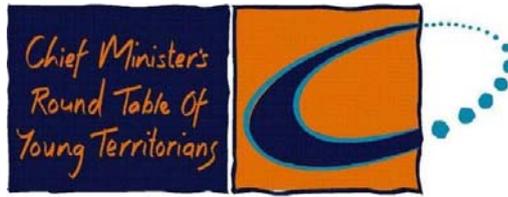
Residential care is a system that is set up with carers on rotational shifts. These facilities can house up to four young people at any time. These young people come from different cultures, ages and backgrounds. Residential facilities in the Northern Territory are only supposed to take young people with a complexity four rating which means that facilities end up with young people with complex behaviours and/or extensive trauma. The complexity scale is one to four, with four being the most complex.

Through my role at CREATE, I have had the chance to speak and interact with young people who are living in these facilities and hear their thoughts and opinions. A lot of young people don't have a positive experience when in residential care. Young people stated that they feel it is not a comforting or homely environment and there is generally a high rotation of staff that are not adequately trained.

In these facilities, young people struggle to form relationships and attachments due to the frequently rotating carer arrangement, which is in contrast to a normal foster care placement. Young people in these facilities become stressed and anxious as they are unaware of who will be on shift that day/night. A regular foster carer would give structure and routine. This would give the young people the opportunity to develop a connection with the carers and a chance for the carer to build a rapport with the young person. Carers would understand their behaviours more clearly rather than reading it on case notes from the previous shift worker. Young people need someone that they can trust and not just see them as 'another worker on shift'. The carer needs to take the time to know the young person and not just treat them as a client, but to provide support and a sense of stability for them.

A young person's behaviour doesn't reflect who they are as a person. If workers take time to get to know their young person more they would be surprised in the way they react. Without a regular carer young people have neither boundaries nor expectations. They would be different for each carer and there would be no structure within the household. Young people need a stable structure and need to understand that all boundaries, rules and expectations are the same.

A lot of young people feel that residential facility carers 'don't really care' and 'are only in it for the money'. If young people are placed in a home environment with a specialist foster carer, they will feel that they are being cared for in a home that doesn't feel like a 'facility' and will have a stronger sense of stability.



Young people who are placed in residential care facilities often engage in high risk behaviours such as:

- Misusing alcohol or other substances
- Volatile substance abuse
- Self-harming and violence.

This makes young people highly vulnerable and impressionable to others, they are often easily influenced and can also easily influence. Young people who might not have been in trouble prior to living in this environment often get involved with other young people that have been in and out of the youth justice system. It is not a normal or nurturing environment. It is also important to understand that many of the young people in residential care are amazing, strong and intelligent young people who should not be judged by the experiences and challenges they have faced.

Some young people are exposed to crime and violence as a child and may not know a life that is any different. These acts might be considered normal to them. Young people should be placed in a nurturing and positive home environment where these things are not normal. Residential care does not offer hope for these children and if we don't do a better job at assisting them and provide them the standard of care they deserve, it's only going to get worse.

Case Study

The experiences of a 16 year old male who lives in a residential home.

This person has seen the harsh reality of a residential home. He has lived in a residential home for over two years. He moved into a residential home when his placement broke down and this caused him some distress and anxiety.

As he moved from home to home, it became tougher for him to find a stable placement with a family. Eventually he mixed in and started getting caught up in youth crime. He became impressionable to others in the house and also influenced others. He engaged in high risk behaviours that included misuse of alcohol and/or other substances, volatile substance use became a regular issue and he was regularly misusing. He started harming himself and sometimes even others. He spent nights at the watch house as he had been picked up off the street for being intoxicated. Sadly he set himself up for a trail of destruction and over time it was getting worse and worse. Soon he was committing crimes such as theft of motor vehicles, break and enters and so on. He was at his most vulnerable stage.

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

I know I can't change the world, but what I can do is make it a better place for children and young people within the child protection system. No child should have to experience any of the acts that they are faced with during early childhood, as the years go by more and more damaged children are being created and they aren't being provided with love and care. They are at their most vulnerable state and I can only understand the behaviours that they show towards workers and their carers.

I feel that residential homes are a traumatising, horrible place to live. We need to focus on young people more than ever so that a tragedy like this one does not happen. We need to



work closely with young people and put their needs first and make sure that they have an adequate standard of care whilst they are in care. We have too many young people in the courts daily, young people are in detention too often and too many young people are engaging in high risk behaviours. We need to provide young people with a therapeutic home environment with specialist foster carers that can provide for their needs and where they can get the help and assistance that they require.

In conclusion, I would encourage the Northern Territory Government to consider funding for additional specialist foster carers. Specialist foster carers will be able to provide care for young people who have trauma informed behavior and complex issues, in a nurturing home environment. This would be a much more positive alternative that the current residential facilities. I would also like to highlight the ongoing need for funding to support young people and foster carers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people who played some part in my project and provided me with support over the year:

- The Honourable Adam Giles, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory
- Peter Styles, Minister for Young Territorians
- Colleen Gwynne, The Northern Territory's Children's Commissioner
- Michelle Barry, The Northern Territory CREATE Foundation's Territory Coordinator and the CREATE Foundation team in Darwin.
- Samantha, Peter, Morgan – The team at Office of Youth Affairs
- All foster parent's that have contributed to my report
- And lastly all the amazing and strong young people that contributed to my project.

TENNEIL ROSS

Chief Ministers
Round Table Of
Young Territorians

