

CASE NOTES

ACCREDITATION: SUBSTITUTE CARE PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN.

A STEP FORWARD

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A history of children's welfare services in Australia demonstrates the significant and on-going role of the non-government sector. This is particularly true within New South Wales. Many programmes, frequently under the auspice of mainstream religious institutions, were established early in response to critical social needs. These programmes routinely developed in isolation from each other, often with primary ties only to the auspice body and the local community. Some things are slow to change.

Today the non-government sector is an amorphous collective of agencies with highly variable philosophical underpinnings, welfare ideologies, resources and competency levels.

We have learned a great deal about the needs of children, the process of change, and competency in service delivery (within a specific statutory umbrella). Our new knowledge is yet to be consistently reflected in practice.

The debate on quality of care, and related issues such as that of funding, has always been with us. It has been the fodder of countless studies, research projects, reports and so on, most of which did little more than add fuel to the fire. The welfare industry has been largely paralyzed by rhetoric. Many recognized the need to shift from intent to action.

The 1982 NSW Premier's Task Force Report on Residential and Alternate Care for children marked the need for change. The Report noted the variable quality of services in programmes of substitute care for children and the need for upgrading. Any improvement would be complemented by greater recognition of the role of the non-government sector and a corresponding response by the public sector to take increased responsibility in providing some of the funds required to meet the costs of better quality services. Higher standards of care and more money – it made perfect sense. (The term “voluntary sector”, with all the connotations of a charitable service, has diminished as use of the more common “non-government sector” paralled the

movement towards professionalism and parity with the state welfare department.)

In New South Wales, the peak organization for non-government agencies providing programmes of substitute care for children and adolescents is the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies, Inc. (Formerly the NSW Association of Child Caring Agencies.) This organization, constitutionally committed to the welfare of “disadvantaged” children and adolescents (and particularly those requiring out-of-home care) and long involved in lobby efforts towards greater financial subsidy of such programmes, responded to the need for a system of upgrading and professionally standardizing programmes. These standards would satisfy the requirement of greater accountability which accompanied the new injection of funds from the public purse. The system is one of Accreditation.

The scheme was two years in the development. The bulk of the time involved the co-operative development of a set of standards relating to:

1. Agency Purpose
2. Administration
3. Personnel
4. Services
5. Physical Facility/Environment
- and 6. Programme Evaluation.

The standards are presented in the form of two handbooks, one of Principles and the other of measurable Indicators related to the endorsed Principles. The handbooks are divided into sections under the above headings.

The Standards were developed by staff of the Association in collaboration with the Executive Committee, membership agencies and the primary funding body. There were numerous consultations, amendments, re-writes, reconsiderations, edits and re-edits prior to the endorsement of documents which were consistent with the provision of quality standards and in which there was a broad base of ownership and acceptance.

The process, most simply, involves a “Survey Team” of three people, assessing the compliance of the operational levels of a programme against the approved standards, then submitting a report and recommendation to an “Accreditation

Steering Committee”. The Steering Committee may grant Accreditation for a three year period, or a one year period, or deny Accreditation, with the decision based on the overall level of compliance. It is largely an administrative procedure with assesses the existence of a structure which is consistent with the provision of a quality services, rather than actual assessing the quality of a service. By not subscribing (in a major way) to particular welfare ideologies or models, the Accreditation Standards strive to achieve a balance between professional credibility and merit, and the avoidance of an intrusiveness which significantly impinges on the autonomy of independent organizations. In other words, profiling what should be done without dictating how it should be done. The ethos of the scheme is reflected in the programme self-evaluation, consultation with the Accrediting body, and the policy and procedural amendments within the programme, which constitute the process of preparation for the Accreditation Survey.

The link between Accreditation status and funding eligibility for the 114 programmes funded under a specific scheme within N.S.W. (Alternate Care Committee funding) has the potential for the actual assessment procedure (survey) to be intimidating. Early experience has indicated that the ACWA scheme has been successful in circumventing this unhelpful dynamic, largely by appealing to the professionalism of practitioners. (This is further evidenced by the considerable interest from agencies/programmes outside of the specific funding scheme referred to above.) Accreditation is viewed as co-operative and supportive enterprise for evaluating, upgrading and recognizing quality services. As Accreditation services are conducted only on request and at a time convenient to the applicant, and as the Accreditation Handbooks (Standards) are freely available, the scheme holds no surprises. As there is no direct cost for Accreditation services or restrictions on re-applications for Accreditation, additional barriers are removed. The policy is one of openness, fairness and common sense. The Accreditation Scheme has been appropriately described by a colleague as “scheduling

an exam and providing the answers ahead of time". If a programme is committed to the notion of everyone finding the appropriate answers, it is a good way to teach.

The Accreditation Scheme can consolidate a disparate sector, challenge our attitudes and our thinking, and provide a direction for growth. Importantly, it also provides a vehicle for the professional accountability which is required more and more as the public sector acknowledges it's basic responsibility in ensuring the coninuance of quality welfare services.

The ACWA Accreditation Scheme is unique within Australia. It is new and not yet fully tested but has great promise as a system for development, maintenance and recognition a quality services, and for the consolidation of the non-government sector as a consistantly professional and credible complement to government welfare services. It is wisely envisioned as a dynamic scheme, with both standards

and process subject to ongoing review and periodic ammendment. The promise is for increased esteem for service deliverers, a brighter future for consumers, and greater growth for everyone. A Step Forward . . . you bet!

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2. References should be referred to in the text by giving, in brackets, the surname of the author and should be listed in numerical order at the end of the article, as follows:

BOOKS: Author's name and initials; year of publication (in brackets); title of book underline; publisher, page reference, if appropriate.

ARTICLES: Author's name and initials; date of publication (in brackets); title of article; abbreviated title of journal underlined; volume and number.

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