

REPORT ON THE VICTORIAN REVIEW OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

The State Government announced the appointment of a Committee of Review of Early Childhood Services in October 1982. The Committee was accorded broad terms of reference and requested to report to the Ministers of Health, Education and Community Welfare Services in nine months time. A total of seventeen members were appointed, indicating some degree of the complexity of this task, as a committee of seventeen would generally be regarded to be marginally workable. The Committee worked hard during the ensuing ten months and finalised its recommendations and completed its report in September 1983. Disagreements throughout the process of the Committee's work finally reflected themselves in the decision of six members to withdraw their support and endorsement of the final report. A few weeks later a minority report was produced and the Government agreed to formally print the minority report and contribute to its overall distribution.

Despite this action, and the printing of a summary of the majority report, discussion of the Review's recommendations has been somewhat limited because of difficulty of access by many of those parties interested in its work and recommendations. One of the major problems identified by the Committee — the fragmentation of services and, as a consequence, the personnel in the field of early childhood services — worked against the effective distribution of the Report and adequate discussion amongst the myriad of organisations, projects and services in the Victorian community. This problem with distribution is particularly disappointing in view of the number of people who contributed to the work of the Review, both in terms of formal submissions and the attendance at local and regional meetings of various types and on various topics. The Committee estimates that, at a very conservative level, over 50,000 people were involved in the Review in some way. This figure indicates the extent of interest about children and the services that the community provides for them.

CHILDREN, POKER MACHINES AND CASINOS

The degree of interest was not matched, however, by the resources and back-up available to the Committee to undertake its work. While many people have acknowledged the far-sighted nature of the Government's decision to appoint three ministers to oversight the Review, this progressive step presented some difficulties to the Committee because of the lack of

David Green

David Green, Associate Director, Social Services, Brotherhood of St. Laurence. Chairman, Victorian Early Childhood Services Review.

strong support from a major government agency. The Committee had to wind its way through State Government agencies for its basic needs, equipment, resources and support, and was finally allocated to a small department with no experience or particular interest in the field under review. While the Ministers themselves were interested and supportive of the Committee's work, inadequate provision was made for administrative back-up for the Committee during the period of the Review.

The Committee worked to a budget which was one-quarter of that allocated to an investigation of the desirability of poker machines, and one-tenth that of the judicial enquiry into the question of a casino for Victoria. The differential relates, of course, largely to the cost of legal fees in the judicial process. This explanation does not, however, really mask the irony of such a discrepancy — an irony which was not lost on the Committee, which worked hard during long hours and with the support of only two staff — one research officer and one secretary. The Committee also reflected from time to time that it would be very desirable if some of the issues regarding children and their future in our rapidly changing, complex society, could be as straightforward as the interests and basic issues determining the future of poker machines or casinos. The differential highlights again, not only the readiness of citizens, parents and workers in the field of community services to contribute to government enquiries and reviews of this nature at substantially little cost, but also the continued readiness of central governments to underestimate the complexity of the really difficult areas of government responsibility — those concerned with the well-being of people and the well-being of communities in rapidly changing and difficult times.

IMPACT OF CONTEMPORARY CONDITIONS IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Committee was concerned to set its work in the context of the contemporary conditions which affect children and their families. It believed that there was inadequate recognition of the way these conditions should also affect the services, many of which were designed and planned

in different times and in the context of different conditions. The Report highlights how a variety of changes in our society have had marked impact on the patterns of family life and have created a demand for new approaches to the way services are planned and the way they are provided. These changes will, of course, be familiar to the readers of this Journal — the problem is not with familiarity, but with the understanding at Federal, State and local levels as to what they mean for the structure and provision of services to children and their families. The Committee noted the significant changes in family types, or family constellation, reflecting increases in marriage and divorce rates and the substantial increase in the number of one-parent families, which has more than doubled in Australia since 1969. By 1990, almost one out of three of all Australian children will experience significant periods of time in households with only one parent, and/or in households where one of the parents is not their own biological parent.

The Committee was also concerned with the relationship between increased family mobility and increased family isolation. Undoubtedly, even in highly developed parts of the metropolitan area, isolation incurred by lack of public transport and lack of community facilities where people can meet and establish new friendships, are factors which significantly affect family life.

The Committee noted substantial changes in the trends of employment, the distribution of employment opportunities from low skilled to more highly skilled areas of the employment market, and the overall increase in the rate of unemployment. Notwithstanding the optimism and the enthusiasm about economic recovery, there appears to be little doubt that the Victorian community will be sustaining a significant rate of unemployment for some time to come — if not permanently. Families in which no adult can gain paid work are those most dramatically affected by poverty and most dramatically affected in terms of their access to services they need for their children.

Within the family itself, changing roles and expectations of fathers and mothers contributes to substantial differences in traditional patterns upon which many services were based. Put in other terms, many services are primarily only accessible to those families in which there are two adult members, one of whom does not work. However, this pattern, which was once the predominant pattern of family structure, has now significantly changed.

Alongside these changes is the significant and dramatic effect of post-war

immigration. Despite the long-standing position of many ethnic groups in our community, it is only in recent years that services have started to examine the cultural assumptions on which they are based. Much work needs to be done yet to provide services which reflect not only the multi-cultural nature of our society, but those values and aspirations which, rightly and particularly, belong to various cultural groups.

In addition to these factors, the Committee also wished to reinforce recognition that early childhood services should not be seen as separate from the major and dominating issues of public policy — income and its distribution, employment and its distribution, housing and its distribution, and health and the distribution of services. The Committee was concerned at the tendency, particularly in recent years, to return to a picture of early childhood services as part of the stop-gap measures which are provided for the families who do not do well in the overall distribution of wealth and opportunities in our society. Early childhood services cannot substitute or attempt to compensate for inadequate income, lack of availability of satisfactory employment for adults, or compensate for poor housing or poor general health services.

THE CHILD AS A MEMBER OF A FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

The Committee was convinced that any government which had a concern for the future of its children must recognise the breadth and significance of planning for the future for children and young people, as well as the significant impact that major policies had on the individual and the family. As a consequence, early childhood services should be seen within the context of those major policies and programmes of government which address the overriding social and economic conditions within which families rear their children. It was with this perspective in mind that the Committee attempted to set a framework which focused not only on the needs of the child, but on the needs of the child's family, and the community within which the child grew and the family lived. The Committee took the view that any approach which focused on the child exclusively, or in separation, from the child's family and the child's community, perpetuated the distortions and dilemmas of services which are based upon a narrow viewpoint and without adequate recognition of the substantively complex factors which affect the development of children within a modern western society. The Committee's viewpoint on this matter has been one of the areas for which it has been most often criticised. The argument is that the Committee has neglected the unique and particular characteristics and needs of the child. The response of those members who have endorsed the Report would be that reports which focus on the unique and very particular needs of the

child finally do the child an injustice because they fail to recognise the complex environment within which the child lives and grows.

The Committee was also concerned at the overriding fragmentation of services to children in their early years and the parallel and significant fragmentation of the child into different needs, different stages, different health problems, and different functions. The loss of the whole child and the capacity of services to see the child as part of a family, and that family living and growing within a community, became a major concern of the Committee during its work. In part, the subsequent recommendations about the appropriate administrative arrangements of the three levels of government, reflect in large part the Committee's concern that early childhood services would be seen, firstly in the context of the broad social and economic conditions which affect families and secondly, would be planned and developed by government departments that had some recognition of the wholeness of the child and the importance of the child's family and community.

THE MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

From the outset, the Committee found that many of the problems experienced at the basic service level were largely generated by a fragmented planning and administrative system. Unfortunately, the three levels of government have acted independently of each other and with little regard for the interdependent nature of children's services at the neighbourhood, local, regional and state levels. As previously discussed, children's services have developed along the major streams of health, education and care and have often failed to recognise the child as a total person with inter-related needs. In addition, some services have largely related exclusively to the child, forcing artificial distinctions between the interests and rights of the child, as distinct from other members of the family.

The overall complexity and fragmentation of existing arrangements have meant that different authorities have responded to the same, or related community need, by setting up separate services, employing different staff under different conditions, located in different buildings and working to different administrative arrangements. This has had disastrous implications for the integration and flexibility of services, and for access by different sections of the community to those services. It has led to a highly inefficient use of resources, with services overlapping or duplicating their efforts in some instances, and with glaring gaps in service provision in others.

The Review Committee, therefore, agreed that in the short time it had available it would focus on issues of planning, funding and organisation, rather than on the detailed design and activities of individual services.

The ability of services to meet identified principles for service planning and development is largely affected by policy and administrative considerations such as funding and condition of subsidy, regulations, distribution of resources and administrative arrangements, rather than by lack of commitment or inattention on the part of individual workers.

In addition, the Committee felt that by addressing these issues, future directions for individual services would become clearer, and that it was only on the basis of a planned approach that services can implement changes which will enable them to meet needs more effectively.

This approach occasioned some criticism, and it was considered by some of the dissenting members of the Committee, and has been considered by some readers, that more attention should have been given to the role and development of specific services. The Committee acknowledges the desirability of such analysis, but points out that there are over 70 different service categories in the field of early childhood. Some of these have been subject to review which has occasioned substantial amounts of time and research. It was absolutely impossible for the Review Committee to embark on such a path.

The major recommendations of the Report, therefore, relate to the need for:

- 1 The three levels of government to develop a co-operative forward planning framework with contractual agreements between the three levels and the non-government organisations. This framework should facilitate a co-ordinated approach to the development of broad policy goals, co-operative funding arrangements with block granting from Federal to State, and State to local levels, and co-operative administrative and delivery arrangements;
- 2 The roles and functions of each level of government need to be clarified and re-allocated, so that each level has clearly formalised and appropriate responsibilities;
- 3 A reformed state level administration to establish mechanisms for the oversight and co-ordination of policy development and the consolidation of responsibilities for the administration of children's services into one government department;
- 4 Devolution of responsibility for the planning and development of services at the local level to local government, via block granting of funds to local government authorities which are willing and competent to administer them.

In summary, the roles of the three levels of government are proposed as follows:

Federal Government

The responsibilities of the Federal Government level should be the development of national policies, national monitoring and data collection, the development of

block funding to the States and the establishment of consultative structures with State and local governments, community groups and service users. The Committee recommended a drastic change in the role and focus of the Office of Child Care, including withdrawal from specific project funding and management.

State Government

The responsibilities of the State Government are to allocate a share of State resources to children's services, and to ensure its equitable distribution via an appropriately phased devolution of responsibility to local government, and to regional and sub-regional organisations. In addition, the State Government must establish a sound basis for the oversight and co-ordination of policies for children and families. The Report recommends the establishment of several structures to enable the Government to develop a sound basis for such policy oversight and co-ordination. In order to effectively rationalise the administrative arrangements at the State level, the Report recommends that one Government department should co-ordinate the administration of services.

After extensive examination of a number of alternatives, the Committee opted for the creation of a new department with broad-ranging responsibilities for human services, including the aged, youth, children, and general community services. The Committee believed that the new department would be more capable of moving away from the traditional fragmentation of services into functional categories of health, care, education and welfare, and would be able to implement policies and programmes on principles common to the range of human services.

This department would have both a central and regional administration, and would be responsible for the equitable distribution of funds across the State, via

the allocation of funds to local government.

Local Government

The Committee endorsed as one of its major planning principles, that services should be locally based, planned around the value and relevance of local neighbourhoods. This means that in an overall planning framework the co-ordinating functions and structures at other levels of government should operate to reinforce the planning and co-ordinating capacity at the local level. However, the Committee also recognised that not all local councils are willing or able to assume responsibility for the planning and co-ordination of children's services and recommends that no council should receive funds until it has demonstrated that it can meet certain conditions including: development of a municipal early childhood services policy; ensuring community involvement in the planning process through the establishment of an elected family and children's services committee, and the establishment of an early childhood services team within council's administration, including a planning and development officer and advisory staff. In addition, local government would delegate through legal contracts, responsibility for service provision to community groups and non-government organisations. This delegation would be conditional upon agreement by these groups and agencies that they would operate within State and municipal policies. Once the above conditions are met, local government authorities would receive block grants from the co-ordinating department and allocate funds to the designated services in the municipality. Where a local government authority is not willing or competent to assume responsibility, the State would find other auspices for service delivery, whilst assisting those councils to develop local plans and eventually assume responsibility for planning and co-ordination at a later stage.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

The Report concludes that planning for the provision of children's services cannot be suspended in a time of economic recession, and recommends that immediate priority must be given to the implementation of a social development committee of Cabinet to oversight the policies and programmes of the State Government. The co-ordinating ministry should be established and reviews of both the current system of regulations and standards, and of current industrial issues, must be undertaken as a matter of urgent priority.

In conjunction with the priorities for changes to planning and administrative arrangements, the Report recommends a number of areas of service provision that require immediate attention, including: extension of basic early childhood services to underserved areas of the State, increased funding to those services currently facing financial difficulties, and extension of resources for those groups identified as having special needs. Some, although inadequate attention, is given to the particular needs of the disabled, Aborigines, ethnic communities and children living in isolated areas.

Those members of the Committee not signing the Report did not necessarily disagree on many of the recommendations. They were all agreed, however, that the Report was incomplete, and that its recommendations needed more consideration, elaboration and study. Conversely, those endorsing the Report believe that their analysis of the overall problems of early childhood services is adequate and accurate, and that on this basis, clear recommendations can be made. They also consider that while public policy is developed and defined on the basis of the narrow and limited interests of particular functions, services, or professions, children and their services will be short-changed in Victoria.

A LAST MINUTE REMINDER ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

A PLACE TO GO --- A PLACE TO GROW

You're invited to a National Child Welfare Conference to be held in Brisbane from the 16th – 21st September, 1984.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER:

Dr. Janet Lahti – Principal Investigator at the Regional Research Institute, Portland State University, Oregon. Dr. Lahti has had a long term interest in Permanency Planning.

FURTHER INFORMATION FROM:

Dr. Gary Engleton, Brisbane CAE, P.O. Box 284, Gillmere, Queensland, 4034.
Telephone: (07) 263 6222