

Committee of Enquiry into Child Care Services, Victoria

1975 – 1976

Details

The Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria was announced by Premier R.J. Hamer in December 1974. Its final report, from June 1976, is often referred to as 'the Norgard Report' (after the Committee Chairman, Mr J.D. Norgard). The Enquiry led the Committee to a two-fold conclusion: 'not only is there a disconcerting degree of malfunction in many aspects of the child welfare system, but the system itself is in many ways inappropriate for contemporary society'. The Norgard Report called for a 'fundamental revision and reorganisation' of Victoria's child and family welfare system. Its recommendations framed the basis of the 1978 White Paper 'The future of social welfare in Victoria'.

Howe and Swain depict the period leading up to the announcement of the Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria as one of 'financial panic among children's institutions'. In November 1974, the superintendents of a number of non-government institutions threatened to 'hand back' state wards to the government.

The Terms of Reference for the Enquiry into Child Care Services in Victoria were as follows:

To enquire into, and to report on, and, where necessary, make recommendations with respect to:

- 1. The facilities necessary for the care of wards of the Social Welfare Department and other children requiring full-time care apart from their families, and the facilities now existing for these purposes.*
- 2. The provisions necessary for registering or approving voluntary organizations involved in residential or foster family care for children, and the alternative means of ensuring maintenance of acceptable standards in these programmes.*
- 3. The nature and extent of preventive facilities and services that should be available in the community to avoid the need for children to be removed from parental care.*
- 4. The procedures whereby children are admitted to the care of the Social Welfare Department, and whether alternatives to wardship should be provided in cases where protective intervention is necessary.*
- 5. The facilities and services necessary for the implementation and development of such new policies as the Enquiry may recommend, the staffing needs of those facilities and services and the training requirements of the staff.*
- 6. The extent to which the facilities and services recommended should be provided by the Social Welfare Department and/or by voluntary organizations.*
- 7. The priorities for, the cost of, and methods of financing the implementation of the recommendations made under the Terms of Reference.*

The Norgard Report described Victoria's child and family welfare system as 'inappropriate to contemporary society':

It is our view that there are inherent conflicts between the procedures by which children are brought into State care and many generally-accepted welfare principles. Current legal and procedural provisions for children's admission to State care are largely survivals from much earlier periods and reflect not only the practices of earlier times but also social and political values which, in many ways, are out of step with those of today.

The Norgard Report recommended that children be admitted to state care only 'after all possible alternative arrangements have been considered'. The Committee was of the belief that Supervision Orders (where the Children's Court can order a child to be supervised by the department, but remain with their family) were a valuable alternative to full State wardship. It recommended that guardianship should initially only be granted for a 12 month period.

The Norgard Report recommended the development and progressive implementation of a 'comprehensive family welfare program' in Victoria, stating that since the 1860s, services had developed 'in a random and unco-ordinated manner, resulting in gaps and overlaps'.

In its evaluation of the facilities necessary for the care of wards (term of reference 1), the Committee stated that it 'constantly kept in mind the Director-General's legal responsibility when arranging care for wards to make their welfare "his first and paramount" consideration'.

The 'facilities' evaluated were the many forms of residential care (including reception centres, youth training centres, children's homes, hostels, foster homes), specialist accommodation for children with special needs, and administrative procedures and staff.

The Report highlighted Victoria's traditional reliance on voluntary organizations to provide residential care for wards of state. Fewer children were fostered out in Victoria compared with other states. The Committee noted that, of Victoria's approximately 5,800 wards of state, 45% were cared for in residential establishments run by voluntary organisations. The only Australian state to rely more heavily on voluntary organisations was Western Australia (60%).

The Report went on:

It appears that by relying on voluntary residential provision the State has neglected some of its responsibilities to develop innovative programs which would keep children out of long-term State care or provide more adequately for those who are admitted.

The Report noted significant improvements in Victoria since the early 1960s, particularly the decline of 'congregate care' and the increase of family group homes.

The Committee expressed concern about the geographical location of children's homes in Victoria (particularly the shortage of regional homes outside towns like Ballarat and Geelong and the pattern of homes in metropolitan Melbourne).

The location of many children's homes makes practical nonsense of the accepted principle that links between children in homes and their parents, relations and friends should be maintained ... In the metropolitan area, most children's homes are in eastern and southern suburbs while the north and western suburbs have little accommodation, although many children come from these areas. The task of helping parents and children to rebuild family life is made more difficult when geographical separation hinders parental contact.

The Committee found widely varying standards of care and accommodation, and expertise amongst management and staff of children's homes in Victoria.

The Report stated that the Social Welfare Department's present provisions for record-keeping and for reviewing the progress of its wards require thorough overhaul. Inefficiency in these fields can result in real – sometimes permanent – harm to individuals. The record-keeping standards in children's homes were also evaluated:

some organizations document children's progress and social relationships most competently; in others, little may be known of children and their families except what exists in the memories of senior staff. It is still possible in some organizations for much effective knowledge of a child's past to vanish with a retiring staff member.

The Committee recommended mandatory annual reviews of children in care to prevent children becoming 'lost in the system'.

Chapter 6 of the Report related to the processes for approving voluntary organizations and residential establishments for children. The Committee noted that there was no recognized code of standards to provide criteria for the approval of homes. Since the earliest days, the state of Victoria's authority to regulate voluntary children's homes has come from child welfare legislation, legislation seen as severely limited by the Committee.

The Committee recommended the abolition of the present system of open-ended approval for children's homes. It called for the introduction of a licensing system, and a new contractual relationship between the Social Welfare Department and voluntary organisations. These contracts would stipulate 'all aspects of service required', not only accommodation and provision of physical care'.

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Child Welfare Practice and Legislation Review, Victoria \(c. 1982 - 1984\)](#)

The Norgard Report (1976) recommended a review of child and family welfare legislation in Victoria. This review began with the election of the Labor government in 1982.

Related Organisations

- [Social Welfare Department, State Government of Victoria \(1970 - 1978\)](#)

Resources

- Liddell, M., [Submission no 313 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care](#), February 2003
- Lewis, Antonina, [Filling in the blanks...](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 12 October 2015
- [Donella Jaggs interviewed by Jill Barnard in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\]](#), 20 January 2011 - 18 February 2011

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