

Neglected Children's Department, State of Tasmania

1901 – 1918

Other Names:

- Department for Neglected Children
- NCD

Details

The Neglected Children's Department, was originally established in March 1897. In 1901, following Australian federation, the newly formed state government took the Department over. It was the first government department in Tasmania that specifically managed children who were considered to be offenders or neglected. In 1918, the Children of the State Department replaced the Neglected Children's Department.

The *Youthful Offenders, Destitute, and Neglected Children's Act* established the Neglected Children's Department.

The Department was a part of the Chief Secretary's Department but with its own Secretary. The offices were in the New Town Charitable Institution, an invalid depot a few miles from the centre of Hobart, in the same building as the Boys' Training School. Between 1896 and 1912, the Secretary of the Department was also the Administrator of Charitable Grants as well as the Manager of the Boys' Training School, the Invalid Depot in Launceston, and the New Town Charitable Institution. The close relationship between the Charitable Grants and Neglected Children's Departments may explain why, in 1907, when the *Public Service Act* proclaimed the first list of departments, Charitable Grants appeared but Neglected Children did not. Technically, this meant that it was not really a department. Even so, the government treated it as one.

Frederick Seager was the second Secretary of the Department, having been appointed in 1898. In that role, he was the guardian of all wards of state. He decided whether to place them in a receiving home, the boarding out system, in a training school, such as the Boys' Training School, a voluntarily run children's home, or in an apprenticeship in which boys usually learned farm labouring and girls domestic service. These apprenticeships did not involve formal indentures and the Secretary remained the children's guardian.

Seager (and subsequent) Secretaries preferred the boarding out system to institutions. In 1909, Seager said that industrial schools 'fell far short of the requirements of motherhood' and that the 'motherly interest' that foster mothers took in the children made their training more effective. However, he could also be pragmatic. On one occasion, he placed neglected boys in the Boys' Training School to make up the numbers for farm work.

The work of the Department included correspondence with children, especially older ones, their parents, foster parents, and employers. The Department also carried out inspections of the homes where wards of state lived.

From 1911, the Department employed Inspecting Nurses, professionally trained women, who took over the role previously performed by the position of Inquiring Officer – inspecting foster homes and reporting on children's circumstances prior to committal. The Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department hoped to improve the health of state wards by appointing the Inspecting Nurses in 1911.

Department officials maintained a separate file for each child that contained correspondence, inspectors' reports, and other information about his or her life. In 2014, the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office holds these files.

Seager lived on the grounds of the New Town Charitable Institution where, according to Naomi Parry, the whole family helped destitute people who turned up at all hours of the day and night. This was important career preparation for the eldest son, Charles, who was appointed as a clerk in 1900. His father had pushed for the appointment, arguing that he was 'peculiarly adapted for the service required', and, since he lived on the premises would help with work after hours. Charles Seager went on to become the Chief Clerk in the Chief Secretary's Office and, in 1923, the Administrator of Charitable Grants. In 1934, he became the Director of Social Services, retiring in 1941.

The Neglected Children's Department struggled for funds during Frederick Seager's administration. One difficulty was that many more children were committed than had been expected. In 1898, the Premier, Edward Braddon, had said that, to save money, the *Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act* might have to be repealed. In 1902, a Select Committee was established to investigate the government's overall budget problems. One witness suggested that 'unprofitable' departments be abolished. He almost certainly meant the Neglected Children's Department, among others. After that, cost cutting led to a drop in the number of committals. This frustrated Seager who wanted to rescue more of the state's destitute children. He spent much of his time managing the tension between committing more children and saving money.

He was also frustrated by the terms of the Act which did not allow children to be committed solely on the grounds of destitution. Instead their parents had to be persuaded to surrender them as 'uncontrollable'.

In 1907, the South Australian child welfare activist, Catherine Spence, wrote that the number of children in the care of the Tasmanian Neglected Children's Department was low compared to South Australia. She concluded that: 'Either the population is more virtuous or there are far less clear ideas as to what constitutes a neglected child'. Prompted by this criticism, Seager asked the government to commit more children. The Attorney-General, WB Propsting, responded in 1908 by setting up a committee to consider changes to the Act. Its members included Seager, a doctor, and representatives of the Children's Protection Society. They recommended widening the definition of a neglected child to one:

who is found begging, receiving alms, thieving in a public place, sleeping at night in the open air, wandering about at late hours, associating or dwelling with a thief, drunkard or vagrant, or a child, who by reason of neglect, drunkenness or other vice of its parents is growing up without salutary parental control and education, or in circumstances exposing such child to an idle and dissolute life or who is found in a house of ill fame or known to associate with or be in the company of a reputed prostitute, or who is an habitual prostitute, or an orphan and destitute, or deserted by its parents, or whose only parent is undergoing imprisonment for a crime, or who by reason of ill treatment, continual personal injury or grave misconduct or habitual intemperance of its parents, or either of them, is in peril of loss of life, health or morality, or in respect to whom its parents or only parent have been convicted of an offence against this act or under the criminal code, or whose home by reason of neglect, cruelty or depravity is an unfit place for such child.

This definition drew on Ontario's 1893 *Children's Protection Act*. Its exact words were never used although the *Children of the State Act* 1918 included most of its ideas.

In 1911, the charitable departments were brought under the direct jurisdiction of the Under-Secretary, HE Packer, and the offices moved into Hobart. Packer assumed direct responsibility for the care of the wards of state. The reasons for the change are not clear but it is possible that the government now considered Seager difficult to get along with and not fully competent. If so, the underfunding and isolated location of his Departments must have contributed to his difficulties. Poor health may have been another factor. Seager died in 1914 from a chronic illness.

The Under-Secretary's administration appears to have created more confidence because the government increased funding to the Department and the number of committals rose.

In August 1912, Packer suggested that the Neglected Children's Department be moved to the Police Department which already administered the babies who came under the *Infant Life Protection Act* 1907. In 1916, there was a proposal to transfer the babies to the Neglected Children's Department. Neither took place. The children in the two Departments did not come together until the passage of the *Children of the State Act* in 1918.

Packer died suddenly in 1914 and D'Arcy Addison replaced him. Addison was well connected, a member of the Hobart establishment, with impeccable manners and dress. As Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department, he advised the Attorney-General, WB Propsting, while he was framing the *Children of the State Act*, also known as the *Children's Charter*, which widened the definition of neglect and provided for the new Children of the State Department.

More info

Chronology

- Neglected Children's Department, Colony of Tasmania (1896 - 1901)
 - **Neglected Children's Department, State of Tasmania (1901 – 1918)**
 - Children of the State Department, State of Tasmania (1918 - 1934)

Related Entries

Ran

- [Hobart Receiving Home \(1898 - 1958\)](#)
- [Omaru Receiving Home \(1910? - 1968\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Hobart City Mission \(1852 - current\)](#)
City Missioners assisted the officers of the Neglected Children's Department.
- [New Town Charitable Institution \(1879 - 1912\)](#)
Until 1911/12, the Neglected Children's Department was on the grounds of the New Town Charitable Institution.
- [Boys' Training School \(1884 - 1926\)](#)
The Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department was the Manager of the Boys' Training School.
- [Magdalen Home \(1893 - 1974\)](#)
Officials at the Neglected Children's Department used the Magdalen Home as a place of last resort for state wards.
- [Glenorchy Infant Orphanage \(1898 - 1912\)](#)
The Neglected Children's Department does not appear to have placed children at the Glenorchy Infant Orphanage.
- [Police Department, State of Tasmania \(1898 - 2004\)](#)
The Police Department assisted the Neglected Children's Department.
- [Charitable Grants Department, State of Tasmania \(1901 - 1934\)](#)
The Charitable Grants and Neglected Children's Departments were closely related.
- [Chief Secretary's Department, State of Tasmania \(1901 - 1914\)](#)
- [Children's Protection Society \(1903 - 1920?\)](#)
The members of the Children's Protection Society worked with the Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department to reform the *Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act*.
- [Chief Secretary's Department and Premier's Office, State of Tasmania \(1914 - 1955\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act 1896 \(1896 - 1918\)](#)
The *Youthful Offenders, Destitute and Neglected Children's Act* established the Neglected Children's Department.
- [The Children of the State Act 1918, Tasmania \(1918 - 1936\)](#)
Under the *Children of the State Act*, the Children of the State Department replaced the Neglected Children's Department.

Related Concepts

- [Training School \(1881 - 1926\)](#)
The Secretary of the Neglected Children's Department was the Manager of the Boys' Training School.
- [Adoption in Tasmania \(c. 1920 - current\)](#)

Resources

- Evans, Caroline, [Landmarks in Mothering: Tasmanian Child Welfare Legislation, 1895-1918](#), Australia and New Zealand Legal History E-Journal, 2006
- Evans, Caroline, *Excellent Women and Troublesome Children: State Foster Care in Tasmania, 1896-1918*, Labour History, 2002
- Evans, Caroline, *Declining Volunteerism in Tasmania's Neglected Children's Department, 1896-1918*, Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2011
- Evans, Caroline, *Perceptions of fatherhood in Tasmania's Neglected Children's Department, 1896-1918*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association: papers and proceedings, 2003
- Evans, Caroline, *State girls: their lives as apprentices*, Tasmanian Historical Research Association: papers and proceedings, 1994
- Evans, Caroline, *'Poor wand'rers': Tasmanian street children and social policy in the 1890s*, Tasmanian Historical Studies, 1998
- Evans, Caroline and Parry, Naomi, *Vessels of Progressivism? Tasmanian State Girls and Eugenics, 1900-1940*, Australian Historical Studies, 2001

Records

Records held by other organisations

- [Correspondence Relating to the Custody and Welfare of Children under Various Acts \(1887 - 1954\)](#)
This archival series contains the files of children committed to the 'care' of the Neglected Children's Department.
 - [General Correspondence, Chief Secretary's Department \(1897 - 1946\)](#)
 - [Register of Wards of State \(1897 - 1989\)](#)
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