

## Foster Care Association of Victoria

### Foster Care Issues

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) is asking the Victorian Government to target foster care as a priority ahead of the state election in November. Foster care support is a critically underfunded and under resourced area of child welfare and volunteer foster carers have borne some of the highest health, wellbeing, educational, social and economic costs during the pandemic.

The FCAV has worked with over 5100 of its members to ascertain the priority needs of volunteer carers of our state's children and young people in care and to identify vital reforms for their support. Victoria again had the highest number of carers (596) exit the foster care system in Australia during 2019-20<sup>[1]</sup> and proportionally fewest commencing foster care (354). This represents a net loss of 242 carers for the state.

The FCAV has previously welcomed better support for carers in the 2020-21 budget including:

- a short-term extension of the Carer Assistance Program (CAP) that provided therapeutic support to foster carers,
- universal access to the Better Futures/Home Stretch that extended care support for all young people in care; and
- the consolidation of ongoing funding for Carer KaFÉ training with expansion to include permanent carers.
- The announcement of funding of \$5.8m over four years for the Carer Help Desk handed down in the May Budget 2022.

These initiatives are essential for achieving stability for carers (and therefore, in the lives of vulnerable children and young people in their care) leading to long-term benefits for those children and the wider community. Evidence suggests these measures represent future cost savings in the areas of education, employment, mental health, housing and welfare services.

Unfortunately, the administrative and financial costs imposed on carers who are funding care out of their own pockets remain as barriers for accessing carer support and undermining carer retention. This has significant impact costs including placement instability, carer attrition costs, loss of experienced carers and increased recruitment costs.

#### **Recommended funding and initiatives to better support foster care ahead of the Victorian Election 2022:**

The FCAV recommends that the following initiatives are funded through the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (the Department) to build on the initiatives from 2020-21 and to address systemic problems in current supports to foster carers and the children in their care.

1. Increase the Carer Allowance in line with recommendations within the 2020 KPMG report.
2. review the Client Support Funding Framework (CSFF);
3. fund the Carer Strategy;
4. provide ongoing funding for the Carer Assistance Program (CAP);
5. fund a Carer Help Desk at the Department

Achieved

With subsidiary recommendations regarding:

- Women carers;
- Client Incident Management System (CIMS) support;
- Carer Advisory Group (CAG) administration; and
- Victorian Handbook for Foster Carers update and administration.

## 1. Carer Allowance review

The FCAV recommends an increase to the care allowance and a simplified structure to meet the true costs of caring for a child or young person in home-based care. This includes aligning allowance levels with key education life stages, for example, pre-school (0-4), primary school (5-12) and secondary school (13-17) and ensuring indexation is applied year on year to keep pace with those costs. The FCAV recommends regularly reviewing allowance rates against cost of care data on an ongoing basis.

The recently conducted *Victorian Home-based Carer Census*<sup>[2]</sup> found that 59% of foster carers regularly use their own funds to cover costs of care for their child and that 75% report that providing foster care has had a negative impact on their finances.

In Victoria, foster carers are accredited **volunteers** who provide temporary, short-term or long-term care to children and young people who are unable to live with their birth families. Children and young people in foster care are far more likely to have significant behavioural difficulties, emotional and mental health needs than most children<sup>[3]</sup>, and the role of their carer is to provide a loving and supportive home environment that meets their social and emotional needs.

Victoria again had the highest number of carers (596) exit the foster care system in Australia during 2019-20<sup>[4]</sup> and proportionally fewest commencing foster carers (354). This represents a net loss of 242 carers.

Research indicates 'adequate' financial support is a significant part of the support all carers require and financial strain is one reason carers cease fostering. Victorian carers currently receive an allowance that hasn't increased since 2016 and isn't indexed to inflation. As a result, it has decreased in real value by at least 10% at a time when the cost of living is increasing and incomes are stagnating. The basic Care Allowance in Victoria is significantly lower than NSW and lower when compared to most other states.

### Key points

The Victorian Care Allowance does not cover the costs of the day-to-day care of a child. The Department's *Victorian Home-based Carer Census*<sup>[2]</sup> shows that up to 59% of carers are financing the costs of care out of their own pocket.

Victoria's level 1 Care Allowance (for children aged 0-7) is \$418 per fortnight which is the second lowest of any state in Australia

A Victorian 6-year-old child's carer receives less care allowance than in most other states:

- \$159 less than in NSW per fortnight;
- \$127 less than in Qld per fortnight
- \$91 less than in WA per fortnight; and
- \$83 less than in Tasmania per fortnight.

### Recommendation

The Care Allowance should increase to cover the everyday costs of care. Increases should be benchmarked against like states such as NSW.

The FCAV recommends an immediate increase to the carer allowance and a review of the process and structure for ascertaining care allowance levels of each child. Resourcing should be provided for regular reviews of the carer allowance level based on the needs of the child. Set allowance levels should be aligned with key education life stages, pre-school (0-4), primary school (5-12) and secondary school (13-17) and with indexation applied year on year to keep pace with true costs of providing care.

## 2. Review expenses funding and reimbursements under the Client Support Funding Framework

The Client Support Funding Framework (CSFF) provides two sources of funding for children in out of home care:

- Client Expenses; and
- Placement Support.

Client Expenses covers costs not covered by the Care Allowance and is the key funding mechanism for getting access to medical, educational, therapeutic, respite, sports, school uniforms and additional travel supports for children in care.

The FCAV estimates that the Government has spent approximately \$23m on Client Expenses in each of the last two financial years. This covers all children under child protection watch which is approximately 20,000 children in any one year. This amounts to only \$1150 allocated per child. This is only enough to buy approximately seven counselling sessions per year, with no funding to cover other essential costs.

In view of inadequate funding it's no surprise that the 2021 *Victorian Home based Carer Census*<sup>[7]</sup> shows that up to 59% of carers are funding care related expenses out of their own pocket. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of Victorian carers are on level one care allowance which is one of the lowest care allowances in Australia (see above).

It is unacceptable that volunteer carers are funding access to support services from their own finances and the Government must provide additional funding to assist with access to counselling, educational interventions (speech therapy, occupational therapy, maths and English coaching) and recreational activities such as sporting club memberships

These will often include. These are known as client expenses.

### Recommendation

1. a substantial increase to the funding available for Client Expenses so that all children are able to access the support services they require to recover from, trauma and abuse;
2. a guaranteed amount of reimbursable funds be available for each child per annum which is managed by the Agency or independent contractor such as the FCAV, focused on fair and equitable expense reimbursement per placement.
3. Streamlining of the application process to provide timely and transparent decision making.
4. a review of the policies and procedures that outline the expenses that can be claimed within the CSFF and how this is facilitated, and to make this a consistent and transparent.

This would mean that there is greater certainty about funding which would assist in planning and management of funds by an organisation closer to the child and their carers, who can assist in more timely decision making with a better understanding of the needs of each child, thereby mitigating the need for carers to take on those costs or undertake lengthy administrative processes for reimbursement.

### **3. Re-establish and fund the roll out of the *Victorian Carer Strategy – Strong carers, stronger children***

The Government launched the *Carer Strategy*<sup>[8]</sup> in 2019 to address a wide range of carer concerns and to improve carer retention and reduce carer churn. However, it has failed to fund its implementation and the implementation working group has only met three times since 2019.

The Carer Strategy working group needs to be re-established comprising a small group of carers, peak body representatives and Department staff to oversee implementation, with an operational focus on measurable and deliverable outcomes including:

- Birth registration system review
- Carer Help Desk establishment
- Medicare access issues
- Carer research
- Care allowance/funding review
- CIMS process/support review
- Carer exit interviews
- Transport issues
- Client Expenses administration review

#### **Recommendation**

Appropriately fund the Carer Strategy and re-establish smaller carer strategy working groups. The FCAV recommends this streamlined approach with key stakeholders for a strong chance of successfully fulfilling the aims of the Strategy.

#### **4. Provide ongoing funding to support the FCAV to provide the Carer Assistance Program**

The CAP provides one on one counselling for carers for a limited number of sessions. The CAP was established after identifying that carers did not have access to a counselling service that understood carer roles and needs.

Foster carers require the additional support provided by the CAP to support them with their own mental health and wellbeing needs specific to their foster care role. The service requires sector specific knowledge and expertise in matters unique to foster carers, to deliver.

The CAP is delivered by FCAV staff who understand the child protection system and who have years of experience in supporting and advocating for carers. Because the counselling service is delivered online it has high usage from carers in regional and remote areas who struggle to access services in their location.

In the past, foster carers have had to seek mental health support from their GP to obtain a mental health plan and access a generic therapeutic support service usually at their own cost, and without the benefit of the service having sector specific knowledge of issues that arise from their foster caring role. The CAP overcomes these issues and any stigma associated with accessing mental health services for carers, by providing a free, foster care specific, self-referral program with no time delays or costs to the carer.

The FCAV recommends the Department commit to ongoing funding of the CAP in order to capitalise on the economies of scale and processes in place within the FCAV, carer stakeholders, agencies and the sector which is now familiar with the service as the only dedicated therapeutic referral service for foster carers in Victoria.

The CAP evaluation data indicates that carers find the program highly valuable and a significant majority of carers (75%) accessing the service had two to three counselling sessions, which is consistent with the intended model of delivery; that is, short term, solution-focused therapy. The CAP is delivered online and data shows that more regional carers have accessed the CAP by proportion of population, suggesting that it fills a gap in a strong underlying need for support services for rural and remote carers.

#### **Recommendation**

That the Department provides ongoing funding for the CAP to support the mental health and wellbeing of foster carers and prospective foster carers all over Victoria.

## 5. Fund a Carer Help Desk at the Department

The FCAV recommends the establishment of a carer help desk to address delays in administrative decision making caused by bottlenecks and under-resourcing. A help desk would give carers and agency staff an alternative decision-making route for the acquisition of essential documents and provide many other placement and administrative benefits.

Carers and agency staff often struggle to obtain key documents or permissions essential for the ongoing stability of a placement in a timely manner. These can include:

- Medicare cards/number (for access to universal health services);
- birth certificates;
- vaccination certificates;
- passports; and
- Centrelink customer numbers.

These documents are necessary for access to a range of essential services including:

- universal health services;
- childcare and kindergarten;
- School enrolment
- Centrelink family payments; and
- travel.

Without these essential documents, placements can come under significant stress because carers are unable to access childcare/kindergarten/school (which can affect their capacity to work) or may have to pay for expensive health services or other living expenses out of their own pocket. While refunds are available, these can also take months to action.

Delays occur for several reasons including:

- children are often removed at short notice and the required documents are unavailable at the time of removal;
- children may not be registered for birth certificates or Medicare numbers; and
- registering a birth or obtaining a Medicare number, passport or vaccination certificate can be very resource intensive.

Currently all applications must be approved by the assigned Child Protection worker which is a significant bottleneck and key impediment to timely decision making. The decision-making bottleneck occurs because the relevant worker may not have the time (because they are responding to emergency situations) to obtain the necessary documents or information to complete an application. Passport applications require considerable experience that most Child Protection workers don't have.

The cost to the Child Protection system of delayed decision making and/or the failure to provide essential documents at the commencement of a placement is considerable because it increases carer frustration and stress and can lead to increased placement breakdown and carer churn.

The benefit of a help desk would be numerous including:

- staff gain high levels of expertise in specialised application processes which will improve efficiency;
- staff can troubleshoot an application to ensure it is complete when it is lodged which is likely to mean it will be approved in a minimum time;
- staff can establish back channels to key organisations such as Centrelink, Medicare, Passports and Births Deaths and Marriages to assist with liaison, problem solving and timely decision making;
- providing both carers and agencies with a contact point within Child Protection to provide essential documents will not only assist child protection workers but will also prevent relatively minor and solvable problems from becoming critical problems; and
- having a contact point to assist carers and agencies will reduce sector frustration and improve carer retention.

Establishment of a Carer Help Desk replicates the approach taken by some other organisations. For example, Centrelink has a Grandparent and Carer Advisory link which can be contacted to address difficulties carers experience with Centrelink application processes. Centrelink staff can identify and rectify application problems from the back end which means that carers don't have to use myGov or the Centrelink call centre which can be very time consuming and frustrating.

Targeted and accessible administrative expertise at a Carer Help Desk would relieve administrative delays and burdens across the child protection sector and ensure carers are able to access information, documents, funds and services for the children and young people in their care more efficiently.

### **Recommendation**

Fund and appropriately resource the establishment of a carer helpdesk in the Department.

## Subsidiary Recommendations

### Cost of providing care - Victorian Women

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) recognises that the women who have provided foster care over the last two years have borne an even higher social and economic cost because of the impacts of the pandemic on top of existing stressors in the home-based care system.

It is well established that women deliver the bulk of paid and voluntary care services in Victoria, including foster care.

We commend the Victorian Government on producing the Department's Home-based Carer Census in 2021<sup>[9],[10]</sup> which shows the disproportionate representation of women providing foster, kinship and permanent care. Across all care categories, women overwhelmingly accounted for most carers in these roles, for instance, women accounted for 83% of foster carers. Alarming, the largest household income group within that category was under \$40,000 and only 19% were in full-time work. These findings have implications for financial strain on households providing care.

Women provide the majority of volunteer foster care in Victoria. Volunteering for foster care frequently requires women to work part-time on a reduced salary, accept lower paying jobs to ensure they have the flexibility to support the placement of high needs children or, cease paid work altogether. Workplace supports such as childcare are frequently unavailable or difficult to access making work force participation even more challenging. This impacts women carers in the short and long term with reduced household budgets, lack of superannuation, reduced lifetime earnings, fewer holiday and long service leave entitlements as well as implications for their ability to secure a deposit for a home or pay off a mortgage and save for retirement.

Evidence shows that the sectors that were hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions included the education, health and hospitality sectors which all have high levels of female employment and have been impacted most by unemployment due to the pandemic.

#### **Recommendation:**

The FCAV recommends increased placement allowances via a streamlined care allowance structure and clarity on the CSFF. The FCAV recommends ongoing funding is provided for the CAP therapeutic support to women carers.

## Client Incident Management

The Client Incident Management System (CIMS Investigations) needs review to properly support carers through an investigation process by improvements in:

- investigation timeliness including measurable milestones;
- procedural fairness,
- integration with other reporting schemes to prevent multiple investigations for the same incident; and
- establishment of an independent carer advice and support service.

One of the aims at the launch of CIMS was that foster carers be afforded a fairer, rights-based approach giving them confidence in the investigation process. FCAV's experience with carers under investigation is that this process is not achieving those aims. Where the intention is on procedural fairness, unfortunately the system often fails to comply with its own framework.

Carers are experiencing significant time lags between notification of an investigation and their interviews. Carers frequently don't get notification of allegations in writing until shortly before interviews (sometimes the day before), limiting their understanding of the implications of any allegations and limiting their ability to seek legal advice about their options.

These problems are exacerbated by concurrent delays in police investigations due to competing priorities and investigations left "on hold" while police are on leave. Additionally, police request that carers not be advised of allegation details until police decide whether to interview at all.

Once carers' interviews are concluded, delays occur in the provision of transcripts for carer sign off, hence delaying the completion and submission of investigation reports to the Department for endorsement. Delays are also experienced between investigation report submission and Departmental endorsement.

There is little acknowledgement, or support, of carers affected by ongoing issues following investigations, particularly those who have had children removed or been deregistered. Carers report experiences of poor mental health, grief and loss and detrimental effects on their own children's wellbeing. Agencies are ill equipped to support carers through these experiences.

Due to the extent of disempowerment experienced through the CIMS process, more carers are seeking legal advice and representation, incurring high financial costs, to ensure their rights are observed through procedural fairness. Of particular concern to carers is the potential loss of their Working with Children Checks and the implications of this for their employment and community activities such as sports coaching, school volunteering and the like.

Carers report that they are leaving the foster care system directly following CIMS investigations, regardless of substantiation, citing a lack of perceived fairness, a lack of effective support from their agencies and an unwillingness to subject themselves and their families to any future investigations. The implications of this for carer retention across Victoria are obvious and concerning in an already under-resourced system.

The FCAV has also experienced a significant increase in requests from carers for support since the introduction of CIMS in January 2018. They turn to the FCAV for support due to delays in process and length of time investigations take, to clarify roles and process and the impact on their mental health and well-being of the investigations. The FCAV is not funded to provide this necessary support, which equates to hundreds of hours a year of individual support and requires core funding to continue to provide this necessary service.

### Recommendations:

1. Increased funding to ensure investigation resources are sufficient to meet the required investigation timeframes – in both the Community Service Organisations responsible for investigations and Departmental staff within the Child Safeguarding / Human Service Regulation unit.
2. Financial assistance be provided to foster carers for costs when seeking legal advice regarding their rights during an investigation and accessing legal representation in Suitability Panel Hearings.

3. Establishment of a carer advice and support service to assist carers through the long and stressful process of an investigation; and
4. CIMS should be reviewed to ensure that it is consistent and integrated with related investigation schemes such as the Reportable Conduct Scheme and Suitability Panel process to ensure that multiple investigations are not required for the same incident..

## Carer Advisory Group

Carer Advisory Group (CAGs) facilitation was decentralised in 2018 to be managed in the four Departmental divisions with no central oversight. This has meant a lack of coordination between CAGs regarding the development of work programs and no centralised approach to addressing the common issues that they raise. A centralised carer update is no longer provided meaning that CAGs operate in a closed loop with no mechanism for updating the broader foster care community as a representative mechanism.

### Recommendation

The FCAV recommends that the purpose of the CAGs be refocused so that they operate as a forum for identifying issues which are addressed through a departmental work program. This should include re-instigating the process of combined minutes of each meeting as an official communique from the Department to be circulated with a focus on themes arising from each division for review. Continue to promote CAG contacts within the divisions, invite EOs from the larger carer cohort as tenures lapse and host an annual Joint Carer Advisory Group meeting with an informed agenda and attended by key staff at the Department and the Minister, all carer co-chairs and CAG members.

## Handbook Update and Administration

The Victorian Carer Handbook was launched in 2016 with intention and commitment to retaining its relevance and applicability as a reference bible for foster care by way of live updates to the material managed by the department for the reference of all Victorian foster carers. The Handbook is currently static with material falling out of date which inevitably leads to a lack of adherence to the policies within and redundancy of the document overall, including the Foster Care Charter.

### Recommendation

The FCAV recommends a project for a review and refresh of the advice within the Victorian Carer Handbook and committed resources to provide consistent updates as they occur. This would identify any lapsed or missing information with a process to ensure the relevance and accuracy of the handbook year on year with an address by the current Minister for Child Protection and Carers, reiterating the commitments within the Charter.

---

[1] AIHW Child Protection Report 2019-20, [Child protection Australia 2019–20 \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2019-20)

[2] [Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf \(dhhs.vic.gov.au\): https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report_2021.pdf)

[3] Fergeus, J, Humphreys, C, Harvey C, and Herrman, H. (2017) Assisting carers to respond to the mental health needs of children. *Children Australia*. 42 (1). p. 30-37.

[4] AIHW Child Protection Report 2019-20, [Child protection Australia 2019–20 \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2019-20)

[5] Care allowance structure and payment rates 2021-2022 <https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/support-home-based-carers-victoria>

[6] [https://www.fcav.org.au/images/media/Marilyn-McHugh\\_FosterKinship-Conference-Melbourne-2017.pdf](https://www.fcav.org.au/images/media/Marilyn-McHugh_FosterKinship-Conference-Melbourne-2017.pdf)

[7] [Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf \(dhhs.vic.gov.au\): https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report_2021.pdf)

[8] [Department of Health and Human Services Victoria | Strong carers, stronger children \(dhhs.vic.gov.au\): https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/strong-carers-stronger-children](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/strong-carers-stronger-children)

[9] [Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf \(dhhs.vic.gov.au\): https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report_2021.pdf)

[10] [Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf \(dhhs.vic.gov.au\): https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202107/Carer-census-report_2021.pdf)

---