

# WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

On the eve of Canada's 100th Birthday, Chief Dan George, hereditary Chief of the Coast Salish tribe and honorary Chief of the Squamish tribe in British Columbia spoke to an assembly in Vancouver. The following is an extract from that address —

*"When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage. When I neither understood nor welcomed this way of life, I was called lazy. When I tried to rule my people, I was stripped of my authority.*

*My nation was ignored in your history textbooks — they were little more important in the history of Canada than the buffalo that ranged the plains. I was ridiculed in your plays and motion pictures — when I drank your fire-water — I got drunk — very, very drunk — AND I FORGOT.*

*Oh Canada, how can I celebrate with you this Century — this hundred years? Shall I thank you for the reserves that are left to me of my beautiful forests? For the canned fish of my rivers? For the loss of my pride and authority, even among my own people? For the lack of my will to fight back? No! I must forget what's past and gone.*

*Oh God in Heaven! Give me back the courage of the olden Chiefs. Let me wrestle with my surroundings. Let me again as in the days of old, dominate my environment. Let me humbly accept this new culture and through it, rise up and go on" . . .*

The above sounds synonymous with the situation confronting many of the descendants of Australia's original inhabitants who are mourning the death of their traditional way of life whilst other Australians prepare to celebrate the country's 200th 'birthday'. During these 200 years, we have seen our freedom disappear and a strange new way of life forced upon us, until we were barely able to breathe.

The destructive forces which our families have been exposed to since colonisation have taken a terrible toll.



Photograph courtesy of the Canberra Times.

**Mollie Dyer** was formerly Program Director of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (ACCA). The basic premise on which ACCA is established is the need to involve Aboriginals in child and family welfare matters. One of its major aims is to reverse the removal of Aboriginal children from their Kinship system. ACCA is funded under the Children's Services Program

Amongst the effects there has been disruption in the tribal and family structure. Whilst such impact of the 'conquering' group on the 'conquered' is an age old phenomenon, the significant difference in Australia has been —

- the degree of acculturation varies greatly from area to area;
- final submission to the 'dominant' society has never been totally accomplished, and hopefully, never will;
- there has been a rebirth of Aboriginal pride and a striving to retain (and regain) lost heritage and culture;
- the Aboriginal population of Australia is now increasing steadily.

Nevertheless, the tragic outcome of past turmoil is evident in the well known high alcoholism, poor health and infant mortality rate. Less well known is the toll on CHILDREN AND FAMILIES caused by removal policies and the practice of placing our children outside their own families under circumstances where quite often, the placement was avoidable or could have been effected with greater cultural relevance for the sake of the child.

Aboriginal children were being lost to their families, interned in institutions or placed in unsuitable foster and adoptive situations which invariably broke down. As a result, a generation of disenfranchised, alienated Aboriginal adolescents were appearing as a disproportionate percentage of the juveniles in state

corrective institutions. In addition, the cycle of institutionalised recidivism stretching into adult life cast a gloomy shadow over the future of each new Aboriginal child born in Australia.

Those with responsibilities in this area had become increasingly aware of the failure of white services and institutions to respond appropriately to the specific needs of the Aboriginal people. The lack of sensitized policies on the part of housing, health, education and welfare authorities has resulted in nothing less than the break-up of traditional Aboriginal family life. White intervention has caused social dislocation and alienation of Aboriginal people from their own culture, as well as from the dominant white culture of Australian society.

During the past decade, changing world opinion on human rights and minorities focused attention on Australia and gave Aborigines the forum to speak with effect. We had been vocal about our deprivation and the effects of deprivation on our children. I do not propose to dwell on the form and extent of our deprivation — that has all been said before.

In 1974 the estimated rate of Aboriginal juvenile admissions to State care was 18-20 times greater than non-Aboriginal. In 1977, just prior to the formal establishment of the Aboriginal Child Care Agency, a survey indicated that the number of Aboriginal Wards in the State of Victoria was 504 — some 4-4½% of the



total Victorian Aboriginal population, indicating that the estimated rate of admission to care of Aboriginal children had increased to 26 times that of the non-Aboriginal admissions.

Aboriginal people had become increasingly concerned about the plight of their children. This has led to initiatives coming from the communities which have sought to establish family and child support services which are Aboriginal in nature — rather than white. One of these initiatives is the VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD CARE AGENCY CO-OPERATIVE LIMITED.

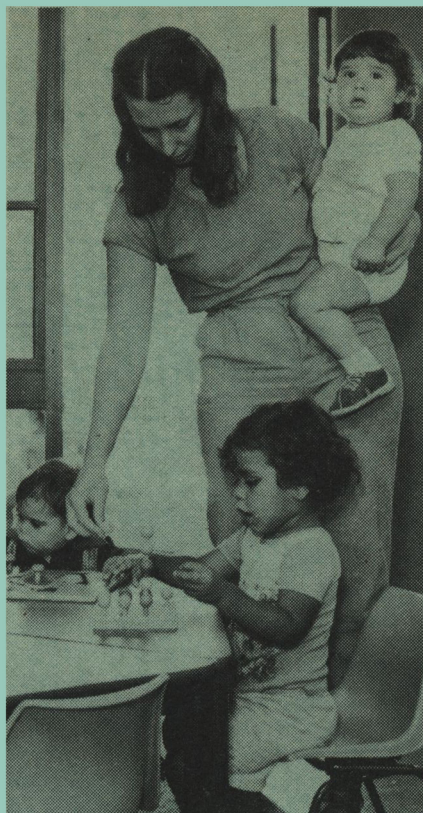
The reader may question the need for separate or specific services for Aboriginal families and/or their children when their *own* perceptions of the existing Statutory and voluntary services appear to be adequate. However, from the Aboriginal viewpoint, which has gained increasing support, those services have never met the needs of the Aboriginal community. The full extent of the "decimation" of Aboriginal families and communities is borne out in the statistics from research into the disproportionate over-representation of Aboriginal families and children in —

- the welfare system;
- the legal system (prisons, detention centres, etc.);
- inappropriate, inadequate and overcrowded housing situations (many Aborigines have no permanent place of abode);
- suffering from bad health — malnutrition, diabetes, heart disease, trachoma, and the infant mortality rate several times higher than any other group of people in Australia;
- included in the drop-out rate in the Education system;
- living in poverty.

These factors show the extreme disadvantage of Aborigines in the many facets of Australian society and the difficulties confronting them in their efforts to negotiate the normal Statutory/voluntary services available.

An organisation which is working to overcome many of these problems is the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (A.C.C.A.) which was formally established in January 1978 with the help of a grant from the Office of Child Care.

In order to understand how the A.C.C.A. has pursued its objectives, it is necessary to examine its



beginnings in more detail, and also to look at the manner in which the Agency staff now conduct the day-to-day operation of the program.

Let's look now at the initial structure, development and growth rate during the past two and a half years, following the groundwork by the first Steering Committee established in 1976 and the Registration of the Agency as a Community Advancement Society in 1977.

When the A.C.C.A. was formally established in January 1978, the staff then consisted of five full-time and one part-time employees: a Program Director, Social Worker, Welfare Officer, Field Officer, Receptionist/Typist and part-time Book-keeper.

Immediately following the establishment of the Agency, there was a constant demand for our services by Aboriginal people; statutory and voluntary Agencies; Aboriginal organisations — metropolitan and country based; Education Departments — Federal and State; police; hospitals, etcetra.

It soon became clear that A.C.C.A.'s staffing and structure were inadequate to effectively carry out the work expected by users of the service. In addition, the Department of

Community Welfare Services (at that time — the Social Welfare Department) issued directives throughout its regional offices which, whilst they gave us status and recognition in creating a formal consultancy role between A.C.C.A. and the Department, contributed considerably to the increasing work load of the A.C.C.A. staff. Basically, the directives stated —

- there was to be no further placement of Aboriginal children by the Department of Community Welfare Services in Victoria without prior consultation and negotiation with A.C.C.A.;

- progress reports by case-workers in the Department of Community Welfare Services of all Aboriginal children currently in foster-care, were to be discussed with A.C.C.A. case-workers.

Parallel to the limited staffing problems, was limited funding which needed to be increased in order to employ additional staff. Within the limits of the initial funding, it would have been impossible to carry out the increasing amount of work expected of us and at the same time, maintain effective credibility. Therefore, a special submission was prepared for additional funding and to employ additional staff. This submission was substantiated in that we had submitted to the Office of Child Care, regular quarterly statistical information which indicated —

- the type of work being undertaken by A.C.C.A.;

- the amount of work being done by A.C.C.A.;

- our increasing involvement in country areas;

- the increasing use of and support from statutory and voluntary agencies drawing upon our limited resources.

Our submission for increased funding was approved and extra staff employed. However it soon became apparent that the role of A.C.C.A. was expanding further. Considerable time was being spent by the social worker, welfare officers and field officers in areas of home management and budgeting, hygiene and preparation of nutritional meals and associated matters, indicating a need to include a Family Aide program. Yet another



submission was prepared for funding. This was approved and the Family Aide program was established with the employment of a Co-ordinator and two Family Aides on a part-time basis.

A.C.C.A. is utilised by the three metropolitan Universities as a training facility for social worker students; since its inception, it has accepted 15 students on placement ranging from two-week observational stints to four-month practical work experience. The Universities continue to request that we take students on placement.

#### **RANGE OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY A.C.C.A. STAFF**

A.C.C.A. provides a multiple and varied range of services. Some of the major services provided are as follows:

- Temporary (1-4 weeks); short term (1-3 months), and long term (over 3 months) placement of children in times of crises/emergency;
- Ongoing counselling and support to Aboriginal families and/or children;
- Locating Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families prior to the inception of A.C.C.A.;
- Attending case planning meetings with the Department of Community Welfare Services;
- Intervention in custody disputes;
- Referring, encouraging and assisting clients to use other existing services and resources;
- Court advocacy and intervention;
- Supervision of probation/bond;
- Assisting in arranging, supporting and encouraging access between Aboriginal children in care and their family/kin;
- Giving pregnancy support and after-care;
- Co-ordinating work being done by other agencies involved with Aboriginal children/families;
- Where appropriate, working with families towards home-release of Aboriginal children in institutions or where children need an alternative to their existing placement.

#### **OPERATION OF THE SERVICE**

The general focus of service is in the area of case-work. However, this should not be seen solely as "traditional" case-work as has been portrayed in the typical social work delivery system. Case-work is seen largely as a means towards a much broader goal of Aboriginal

community development. That is to say, case-work is not an end in itself.

With regard to Aboriginal community development, this involves the staff in contacting and linking Aboriginal people with the appropriate local services and resources. Staff actively encourage Aboriginal people to develop their own self-confidence to a point where they are comfortable in using those services and resources. A.C.C.A. staff are critically aware of their own role and influence, so they endeavour to avoid the creation of the client's dependence on the case-worker's involvement. A spin-off from this approach is that it allows the case-worker the necessary time to concentrate on those families in need of more intensive support.

Aboriginal workers are sensitized to the needs of their own people and are aware of the background to their client's problems.

Similar agencies and services have now been established in most Australian states. While it is acknowledged that our Aboriginal communities throughout Australia have vastly differing needs, the aims and objectives of A.C.C.A. are so basic that they can be adapted to meet the needs of not only Aboriginal communities, but also any other community.

A.C.C.A.'s basic principles and philosophy are —

1. To reduce the loss of children from the Aboriginal Community and provide them with both cultural and self-identity;
2. The re-affirmation of the Aboriginal extended family in the nurturing and caring of youth. The prevention of family break-up and thus the preservation of the family group;
3. The involvement of Aboriginal adults and youth in traditional "helping" roles;
4. Recognising that the problems identified and dealt with in adolescence will inhibit delinquency and the over-representation of Aborigines in the prison population. (A.C.C.A. gives priority to children who are under 14 years of age.)

In August 1979, just 20 months after A.C.C.A.'s formal establishment, the Department of Community Welfare Services announced that the numbers of Aboriginal wards in the State of Victoria had dropped from

504 in September 1977 to 273 in August 1979 — a decrease of 47%. A.C.C.A. does not claim total credit for this significant decrease, but considers it has made a major contribution along with the Aboriginal Youth Support Unit and other Aboriginal organisations and services which have assisted in preventing the haphazard breakup of our Aboriginal families.

There are a number of reasons for the successful growth and development of A.C.C.A. However it should be stated here that the support given by the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services and the consistency with which the Office of Child Care has continued to encourage the growth and development with direct funding, speaks well of the effect A.C.C.A. is having. The Office of Child Care's support has issued a fresh relationship between Aboriginal agencies and the Federal Government. The direct funding of Aboriginal agencies and the autonomy of development and expansion of such services to Australia as a whole may well set guidelines for development in other Aboriginal welfare areas crying out for funds.

The initiatives already taken by A.C.C.A. are milestones in the practice of Welfare, transcending the previous attempts of white welfare agencies to come to terms with problems they had known to exist for years. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency has proven that Aboriginal people can provide services for their own people more effectively than has ever been done in the past, given that adequate and direct funding is made available and equally important, that the statutory and voluntary welfare agencies are willing to establish co-operative working relationships with us.

Credit for the success of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-operative Limited must be shared with the Office of Child Care and the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services. Given the same support by local State authorities responsible for welfare services, similar agencies in all Australian states would jointly have an incredible impact in reducing the disproportionate numbers of our Aboriginal families so institutionalised in the welfare syndrome.