

REPORT ON THE COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY INTO RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by Rev. Len Smith

Mr. Len Smith has provided this summary on the main findings of the Residential Child Care Enquiry in Western Australia.

Mr. Smith has been the Director of the Methodist Homes for Children in Western Australia for the past fifteen years.

He was the Chairman of the W.A.C.O.S.S. Standing Committee on Child and Family Welfare for nine years and is currently a member of the W.A.C.O.S.S. Executive.

He was also a member of the Committee of Inquiry into Residential Care in Western Australia.

A very brief commentary on the main findings of the Committee of Inquiry into Residential Child Care in Western Australia.

Can this report, just released to the public, quietly achieve most of the objectives of statutory and non-statutory residential child care organisations?

Is the hard work of over ten years of striving for better conditions, higher standards and more equitable funding, at last to bear fruit?

Can our main co-ordinating committee, so often disappointed by the relatively small hard-won gains of the past, take solace in the belief that at least it has produced a climate of understanding and acceptability favourable to the Inquiry Committee's work?

Will the State Government accept most of the recommendations?

Together with so many others asking these vital and important questions I believe we can, with a reasonable degree of confidence, predict affirmative answers.

Because the report was completed just prior to Budget discussions, agreement has been foreshadowed on many important new funding principles such as:

- (i) State Government Subsidisation should include all children, i.e. private cases as well as State wards.
- (ii) Salaries of child care workers plus one administrator per organisation, should be subsidised by the State Government. It is recommended this should commence at fifty per cent.
- (iii) Funding should be reviewed annually and adjusted in accordance with cost of living movements.
- (iv) Such reviews and recommendations to the Minister should be made by an independent Consultative Committee, yet to be formed.

In addition the State Government has acknowledged that past financial stringency has caused deferment of essential maintenance and renovations. To offset the very serious cumulative effect of this it has made available in its recent Budget a once only grant of \$250,000.

However, at this point, to maintain a true perspective of the Inquiry Committee's Report it must be stressed that by far the greatest part of the report is taken up with matters other than funding, and after some preliminary comments on the work of the Committee these will be dealt with under subject headings and, where possible, quoted direct from the report.

MAIN ACTIVITIES OF INQUIRY COMMITTEE

Perhaps the easiest method of advising this would be to quote a few statistics.

The Inquiry Committee —

- (a) Advertised its objectives by public notice through several newspapers and held two public meetings.
- (b) Visited every institution covered by the report, and in doing so travelled approximately 4,500 kilometres.
- (c) Received forty seven written submissions.
- (d) Interviewed fifty three people from a wide range of child care interests — Members of Parliament to members of the public; professors to practitioners; consultants to clients; — and three who had spent their childhood in children's homes.
- (e) Packed all this into six months of intensive work culminating in a 104 page Report to the State Government.

DO WE STILL NEED RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE?

After the welter of preventive care promotions — even ‘anti-institution’ attitudes — of the past two years, it was perhaps a little surprising that the committee had to report:

“All were of the opinion that our society today still needs residential child care, provided by the non-statutory organisations. They were also emphatic that this care must be in partnership with the Government Department and not in any form of competition.”

However, to ensure we maintain a reasonably balanced perspective, perhaps we should quote the final paragraph of this section of the report —

“Along with representatives of both the non-statutory and the statutory organisations, the Committee adhered to the principle that every child should have the right

‘to grow up in an atmosphere of affection and security and, wherever possible, in the care and under the responsibility of his parents’.

With this philosophy, the Committee studied residential child care as a means of caring for children only when the family home or a substitute family home is unavailable.”

HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE HIGHER STANDARDS?

The Committee did a lot of work on this subject. Perhaps some might criticise it on the score of inadequate detail and depth, but as a good, general, working statement on the subject as considered necessary for a report that **should be read** — and over-detailed ones aren’t! — it is probably the best prepared and best stated section in the report.

It contains some criticism of such matters as:-

- (a) inadequate admission criteria,

- (b) insufficient reviews of children’s progress, and

- (c) lack of full and adequate preparation in discharge procedures,

and saw fit to underline one paragraph which reads as follows:-

“This Committee believes that each facility should clearly state its goals and spell out its particular admission criteria . . .”

However it will please those administering residential child care to find that the other underlined paragraph in this section reads,

“The Committee believes there is an impression in the Community that residential care institutions in Western Australia are outmoded and ‘Victorian’ (era). This impression should be relegated to history.

The Committee did not find this to be the case in 1976, and we were impressed by the willingness of administrators, social workers and other staff to receive our inquiries. We were also encouraged by the fact that they would welcome monitoring of their work at all times.”

“The Committee believes there is an impression in the community that residential care institutions in Western Australia are outmoded and Victorian (era). This impression should be relegated to history.”

SUMMARY

A detailed listing of all the main funding recommendations has been avoided deliberately as the Committee has repeatedly emphasised its belief that funding and standards must go hand in hand.

Perhaps the most important recommendation therefore is the last one in the report. It reads as follows:

“The Government establish without delay a Consultative Committee on Residential Child Care as an active working body with the functions as outlined in this report.”

Briefly the main function of such a body would be to ensure standards are such that quality care is given to children, and finance provided to enable such standards to be maintained.

An appropriate ending to a report that could be the greatest single happening in Western Australian residential child care.

POSTSCRIPT

I have just re-read the foregoing and have an uneasy feeling that I have inadequately ‘reported on the report’. You can help me out by obtaining a copy for \$2.50 from The Government Printer, St. George’s Terrace, Perth, and reading it yourself.

