



19 December 2016

FACS

PSA meets with Minister Hazzard

Departmental Chair Brendan McMenamim, delegates Heather Shields (Central Coast), Patti Davidson (Hunter) and Allison Corrigan (Helpline) Troy Wright (Assistant General Secretary) and Carmel McKeough (Industrial Officer) met with the Hon. Brad Hazzard, Minister for Family and Community Services on Tuesday, 13 December 2016.

The PSA advised Minister Hazzard that while we have our differences there is common ground in terms of our commitment to supporting vulnerable children and their families. However systemic issues within the Department of Family and Community Services continue to impact on the capacity of our members to manage increasingly large and complex caseloads. Minister Hazzard acknowledged the number of children in Out of Home Care (OOHC) has virtually doubled in the past 10 years.

The following issues were discussed:

Practice First

The PSA advised Practice First was supported by child protection staff and had helped to build and sustain relationships with families. We expressed our concerns that implementation appears to have stalled. The PSA stressed the importance of rolling out Practice First to all CSCs and that the implementation is properly resourced (admin, casework specialists and psychologists) and supported through comprehensive training.

The PSA was informed the Department is now

considering a Consolidated Practice Framework, which includes elements of Practice First. The PSA will be seeking more information as we believe it is important to build on the momentum of Practice First and allow casework staff the opportunity to undertake effective relationship based casework with children and families. The PSA recognises the Practice First Model, when properly implemented and supported, will allow caseworkers to work more effectively. The PSA advised Minister Hazzard that Practice First needs to be seen as a long-term strategy, which will change casework culture, reduce re-reporting and the number of children entering OOHC. The Department however still has to simplify processes and reduce the burdensome administrative demands on casework staff to allow Practice First to be effective.

Workload and administrative burden on caseworkers

The PSA raised the excessive workloads staff are expected to manage and gave specific examples of individual caseworkers having caseloads in excess of 20. The PSA also referred to the focus on benchmarks and statistics which erodes caseworkers' ability to undertake quality casework as they struggle to meet the demands of excessive caseloads and casework deadlines.

The PSA advised the Minister that providing basic needs for at-risk children such as buying them a meal is made more difficult because of the Department's cumbersome policies and procedures and impractical financial delegations.

The Minister agreed with the PSA that caseworkers should not be buried in paperwork and gave an undertaking to simplify policies and procedures for frontline staff so that first and foremost they can do their jobs as caseworkers.

Out of Home Care

The PSA discussed our continuing concerns about the privatisation of OOHHC. We spoke about the difficulties of finding suitable placements and the increasing incidence of children living in motels, the increasing numbers of Aboriginal children in care and the failure of NGOs to place them with Aboriginal carers.

Recruitment of carers

The PSA argued priority needs to be given to recruiting suitable carers. This is too important to be left to NGOs and FACS should take a lead role. The PSA highlighted the fact that funding for the recruitment and training of new foster carers was allocated to the NGO sector several years ago. Due to NGOs not having enough carers and placements, many Districts have since been forced to begin directly recruiting new carers, despite no longer having the funding. The PSA stressed that Community Services was very effective in recruiting carers and should be funded to do so again.

NGOs

The PSA referred to serious concerns with NGO service delivery in OOHHC. As highlighted in recent media coverage, there is no effective monitoring and oversight to ensure NGOs' primary use of the funding received goes to support children and carers. Once again the PSA requested the Minister's consideration of an independent audit.

The Minister advised contracts were due for renewal on 1 July 2017 and he is looking at major changes to ensure contracts are outcomes focussed

with greater transparency, increased restorations and permanent placements when children need to be removed from their families.

The PSA welcomes the commitment to greater transparency and accountability. We will continue to seek an independent audit and will be requesting more information from the Minister about the new contracts, the systems that will be in place to monitor compliance and the capacity to act in the event of NGOs not meeting their contractual obligations.

Resources

The PSA argued the level of resources allocated to Community Services was completely inadequate to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families in NSW. The Minister did not accept this point and referred to budget increases. The PSA pointed out that the vast majority of budget increases were in the NGO sector and not our own frontline staff. The PSA again referred to the escalating pressures our members are experiencing on a daily basis which clearly demonstrate that resources for frontline services are not sufficient to meet demand.

The meeting concluded with Minister Hazzard committing to further meetings with the PSA.

The PSA will be writing to the Minister and providing further details about the concerns we raised at the meeting. Our letter will also request the Minister to provide us with a full copy of the recent review into Out of Home Care (the Tune Report).

