

CHILD PROTECTION

Five deaths in one month: case workers left reeling

Anna Patty

Workplace editor

The smell is the first thing that hits her – an acrid stench of human and animal waste.

There are open methadone bottles on a table and the kitchen is full of filthy dishes and left-over meals.

“The most striking and lingering vision is the small streak of blood across the pillow where this little one’s life ended. It’s haunting,” says a former child protection case worker of 12 years.

The union which represents child protection workers in NSW is fighting to get better support to protect them from psychological injuries. Last week, the NSW Industrial Relations Commission started hearing a case for the state government to do more to prevent stress-related injuries including trauma and anxiety.

The former child protection worker said the “worst bits are when you lay in bed with your head playing reruns of the day. Sometimes I wish it was just the sights that return, but it’s not. The smells, the sounds, the feelings come too. It can be overwhelming.

“Over a period of about three weeks I went out as first [Department of Family and Community Services] response to five child death matters. I was not offered any professional debrief after any of those call-outs.”

Another senior case worker who has been in the job for 14 years said two case workers she had worked with died by suicide in the past three years. Public Service Association general secretary Stewart Little said what child protection workers deal with daily “would make most of us hide under the couch. Just terrible, terrible things that no one should have to face. But

they do.” They are exposed to trauma on the same scale as first responders, like paramedics and police, but this is not acknowledged by the government.

The union is arguing child protection workers have unmanageable workloads and that because they are emotionally committed to their jobs, routinely go beyond the call of duty.

This had created unsustainable pressure.

A FACS health and safety representative in Wollongong has lodged a statutory safety notice (Provisional Improvement Notice) with the Industrial Relations Commission in response to co-workers being medically retired with post traumatic stress disorder.

In the 2016-17 financial year, the Department of Family and Community Services [FACS] reported that claims for psychological injuries cost the department \$5.6 million, more than double the \$2.7 million it paid for physical stress claims. A FACS spokeswoman said the total number of psychological injuries has fallen 38 per cent from 2013-14 to 2017-18.

There were 183 workers’ compensation claims by caseworkers for psychological injury in 2013-14, 197 in 2014-15, 204 in 2015-16, 181 in 2016-17 and 113 in 2017-18.

A spokeswoman for FACS said it is aware of a hearing before the commission and was unable to comment on the specific case.

Pru Goward, the NSW Minister for Family and Community Services, said: “Our wonderful front-line case workers are seeing more children reported at risk of significant harm than ever before and the case worker vacancy rate is currently three per cent, the lowest ever recorded.”

The department regularly reviewed workloads.