



Public Service Association of NSW

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In reply, please quote: TW:vv

8 September, 2023

The Hon. Kate Washington, MP
Minister for Families and Communities, and Minister for Disability Inclusion
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

By email: Kate.washington@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Minister,

Re: National Child Protection Workforce Plan

As your first Child Protection Week as Minister draws to a close, the Association wants to thank you for the fresh perspective and enthusiasm you have already brought to the portfolio.

You have already receptively received our feedback on a number of the issues that concern our members in community services, including the outsourcing of out-of-home care, the excessive workloads and the apparent contradictory disconnection between KPIs and resource allocation. We look forward to working with you in the coming months and years on reforms to the system that hopefully both improve the outcomes for children in it and make our members working lives more manageable.

Another issue that is omnipotent through the Department and severely hampers its effectiveness is in relation to the recruitment and retention of caseworkers.

You may be aware that the Association is meeting next week with relevant decision-makers from within the Department to attempt to identify and implement some solutions.

But what has become apparent to the Association through its national federation is that this is not an exclusive problem for NSW, but rather Australia-wide. The Productivity Commission demonstrates the slide and impact on service delivery in their Report on Government Services (ROGS) here:

<https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/community-services/child-protection>

As such, part of the solution must be through an increased Commonwealth Government role to address child protection workforce issues through the development of a National Child Protection Workforce Plan.

A National Child Protection Workforce Plan should:

- Prioritise skilled migration for qualified social workers and psychologists to address immediate workforce shortfalls;
- Promote educational pathways to careers in Child Protection through measures such as course fee reductions, increased Commonwealth Supported Places, better recognition of prior learning and the provision of bursaries;
- Incentivise skilled, experienced workers to remain in Child Protection, including in the regions, through a range of tax incentives and cost of living measures; and
- Establish a data-driven national picture of the current and projected demand for Child Protection services and workforce supply to inform ongoing workforce development and planning.

The Association through our federal union, the CPSU, has drafted a draft National Child Protection Workforce Plan (attached). The PSA NSW and the CPSU submit that this could be the basis of a national approach, if raised and agreed at a Commonwealth Community Services Ministerial Council meeting.

Unfortunately, Safe and Supported only marginally deals with statutory workforce and in many instances works to indirectly divert workers from the statutory Child Protection workforce.

We would like to see NSW be one of the states that raises this initiative at the next Ministerial Council.

If you seek further information on the Plan, please do not hesitate to contact Thane Pearce 0408223276 tpearce@psa.asn.au Industrial Manager, PSA NSW, or Shay Deguara 0409743251 sdeguara@psa.asn.au National Industrial and Research Officer, CPSU NSW to progress this matter.

Yours sincerely



Troy Wright
A/General Secretary

CC: Liesel Tesch , Parliamentary Secretary for Families and Communities
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Child Protection Workforce Strategy

There is currently a shortage of Child Protection workers across Australia. In some states, up to 25% of Child Protection positions are vacant.

The alarming proportion of hard-to-fill vacancies exists due to staff burnout and high turnover (up to 70% in a two year period in some jurisdictions). The Child Protection workforce has not grown at the pace required to keep up with the number of children requiring assessments, care and support. Most jurisdictions do not have a demand model for staffing and, where they do, they are opaque, outdated, and of limited efficacy. presently has a demand-based model of staffing that is being implemented and managed effectively.

Excessive workloads are driving dedicated staff away from Child Protection work, leading to a bigger problem for those remaining and leaving more children at risk. The result is a large volume of cases not being investigated in a timely manner, with many children at risk going without the early intervention they so desperately need and ending up in care. Nationally, we have more children in care than at any time in the last 15 years and the Close the Gap targets for Aboriginal children in care are not being achieved, with some jurisdictions reporting up to 1 in 11 Aboriginal children in care. Safe Out of Home Care is becoming increasingly rare as foster carer numbers are inadequate and many jurisdictions have divested themselves from residential accommodation.

Australia needs a National Child Protection Workforce Plan for the development, recruitment and retention of skilled staff to meet current and future need for the critically important work you do with children and families.

Summary of key actions

Statutory Child Protection Workforce Strategy	
1. Address the Immediate Nation-wide skilled labour shortage in Child Protection	
Objective: To address in the short term the immediate Nation-wide skilled labour shortage in Statutory Child Protection	
Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>1. Prioritise visa processing for qualified social workers and psychologists and prioritise social workers and psychologists from State and Territory nominated visa allocations and a pathway to permanency.</p> <p>At the Jobs and Skills Summit, the Australian Government expanded Australia’s permanent Migration Program from 160,000 to 195,000 places. This includes 31,000 in State and Territory nominated visa categories and 34,000 places for regional visas, which can be allocated according to jurisdictions priorities.</p> <p>The Australian Government will work with State and Territory governments to make sure this information points to opportunities in their jurisdictions and includes increased Child Protection intake.</p> <p>The Department of Home Affairs continues will provide priority processing for skilled visa applications in the social worker occupation.</p> <p>Jurisdictions will also work with relevant regulators to streamline overseas skills recognition and consider how to expedite permanent visas for social workers already in Australia.</p>	<p>The Australian Government Minister for Social Services will continue to work with jurisdictions, sectors, and the Minister for Home Affairs from 2023 on facilitating swift skilled migration options and report progress to Community Service Ministers in mid-2023.</p>

Statutory Child Protection Workforce Strategy

1. Address the Immediate Nation-wide skilled labour shortage in Child Protection

Objective: To address in the **short term** the immediate Nation-wide skilled labour shortage in Statutory Child Protection

Actions	Timing and key next steps
Commonwealth Government to explore with state governments options to reduce cost, administrative burden and requirements to break service and connection with families in their care for skilled social workers and psychologists before being considered for permanent residency.	
2. State and Territories will work with the Public Safety and Government Skills Council to get the induction program Child Protection workers recognised to enable mobility between states.	
3. States and territories to work with Home Affairs and Education Departments to identify the need and processes to support emerging migrant communities (such as East Africa, Middle East and refugee communities) becoming social workers and psychologists.	

2. Promote Pathways into Statutory Child Protection Casework

Objective: To increase numbers of workers entering into Statutory Child Protection through the education

Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>1. Re-classification of Social Work and Psychology Studies (course fees)</p> <p>The previous government re categorised social work and psychology streams so that they almost doubled in cost for prospective students. ⁱ</p> <p>When compared to nursing the cost of a social work or psychology degree is now almost doubled for social work qualifications. ^{ii iii}</p> <p>This is despite careers requiring a social work degree have not seen equivalent increases in remuneration.</p>	
<p>2. Targeting Additional CSPs towards Social Work as a national priority.</p> <p>A proportion of the additional Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) should be apportioned to social work and psychology degrees to enable greater provision of appropriately qualified staff into Child Protection and other disciplines.</p> <p>The Australian Government will invest \$485.5 million to support a one-off boost of 20,000 commencing Commonwealth supported places (CSPs) in 2023 and 2024. The additional places will provide more opportunities for Australians to enrol to study in areas of national priority.</p>	<p>Additional CSPs will be provided in 2024 and 2025 targeting social work and psychology.</p>
<p>3. 2,000 bursaries worth up to \$40,000 each to help attract high quality candidates to the Child Protection profession.</p> <p>The Australian Government will provide \$20 million per year to offer bursaries of \$40,000 per student for undergraduate social work students (four-year qualification at \$10,000 per year) and \$20,000 for postgraduate social work students (or \$10,000 per year for two years postgraduate studies).</p> <p>The Australian Government will also explore the application of a ‘commitment to work in Child Protection’ requirement for students who accept a bursary.</p> <p>The bursaries are expected to be offered in 2024 for students enrolling in an initial social work course in 2024 and will be targeted at high achieving school leavers, mid-career professionals, First Nations people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and other</p>	<p>The Australian Government will develop the program in 2023, including program design (including Consultation with the Union for Child Protection Workers the CPSU and relevant state branches). and work to reduce overlap with existing state and territory scholarships), engagement of providers to administer the program and marketing activities.</p> <p>A humane approach to capturing the “commitment to work in child protection” will be formulated.</p>

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Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>underrepresented communities to encourage them to choose social work as a profession. Students who undertake placements in remote areas will be eligible for a top-up payment of \$2,000.</p> <p>It will provide continuity and support for Indigenous students in very remote areas where there are difficulties in attracting and retaining high quality social workers.</p> <p>The Government to finalise a commitment model that those benefitting from the CSP and bursary will need to sign on to a minimum of 2-5 years working in a state Child Protection system.</p>	
<p>4. Aboriginal Scholarships</p> <p>Over the next three years, the Commonwealth Government will support achieving the Closing the Gap target 12 and enshrining the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, by the provision of 1000 scholarships for Aboriginal workers to study as a social worker for statutory Child Protection. The states will provide suitable positions and flexibility for the students to work and study and the Commonwealth will provide HECS free scholarships with \$10000 scholarship for each completed Full Time year of study additional to other support.</p>	
<p>5. State and Territories will work with Education to enable an improved Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process to enable staff who work in Child Protection support roles to have the knowledge and experience gained in the field accelerate their achievement of qualifications in social work and psychology.</p>	

3. Keeping the Child Protection workers we have

Objective: To improve retention by increasing support for Child Protection workers, by reducing the opportunity cost of working in statutory Child Protection and assisting Child Protection workers to better support First Nations children.

Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>1. The Commonwealth will change the FBT status of statutory Child Protection workers as occupations so that they attract the comparatively more attractive FBT exemption status and can benefit from salary packaging. Other areas of government with similar access include Health.</p> <p><i>See- Pursuant to Section 57A of the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act 1986 (“FBT Act”) government employees whose duties are performed exclusively in or in connection with a public hospital, or employees who are predominantly involved in connection with the provision of ambulance services are eligible to be provided with fringe benefits which are exempt from FBT up to a threshold cap (“the exemption status”).</i></p>	
<p>2. - Commonwealth income subsidies and tax incentives to support Child Protection Professionals work in regional areas with a proven inability to recruit and retain adequately trained staff. Jurisdictions will work with Commonwealth to provide evidence of difficult areas to recruit and retain Child Protection workers in consultation with the CPSU.</p> <p>The Commonwealth will rezone Child Protection work in postcodes with a proven difficulty to attract and retain Child Protection workers, as Tax Offset Zone A for these occupations. The minimum residency period will be changed to apply for the time the Child Protection worker is undertaking work at the location.</p>	
<p>3. Improve access to high-quality First Nations’ cultural responsiveness resources to ensure all Child Protection workers are better prepared to work with First Nations peoples in culturally safe ways.</p>	

4. Workforce Planning and Research

Objective: Establish a national picture of current and projected demand for Statutory Child Protection services and workforce supply to inform ongoing workforce development and planning.

Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>1. The Commonwealth will undertake an inquiry with the states into future demand for Child Protection services, including on a regional basis.</p>	
<p>2. Develop and publish nationally consistent Child Protection workforce (social work and psychology) projections based on consistent standards, disaggregated at a regional level to enable a national understanding of social worker and psychologist demand.</p> <p>These projections will be developed and published in partnership with jurisdictions, sectors, and unions.</p>	
<p>3. Develop and publish nationally consistent Child Protection graduate supply data to enable a national understanding of Child Protection worker supply.</p> <p>This data will be developed and published in partnership with jurisdictions, sectors, higher education providers and unions and will also consider attrition rates and why students are leaving Child Protection courses (social work and psychology)</p>	
<p>4. Data should be used to set national standards of best practice for case management in child protection consulted with the jurisdictions and the CPSU Child Protection Union.</p>	
<p>5. Inquire, develop and support career pathways which value Aboriginal Child Protection workers.</p> <p>Jurisdictions will work with Education, and Aboriginal Affairs to inquire into obstacles to Aboriginal Case Workers remaining in statutory Child Protection, and why Aboriginal Child Protection workers are under-represented in the management grades of statutory Child Protection services.</p> <p>The jurisdictions and Commonwealth will look into bridging courses that support Aboriginal Child Protection workers become supervisors and managers.</p>	

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Actions	Timing and key next steps
<p>6. Develop and publish data about Child Protection worker wellbeing and career intentions.</p> <p>Research has already commenced in this area on a longitudinal basis in several jurisdictions and comparable occupations including in Child Protection through Charles Sturt University ^{iv v vi}.</p>	

ⁱ Australian Government, Study Assist Website, <https://www.studyassist.gov.au/help-loans-commonwealth-supported-places-csps/student-contribution-amounts>

ⁱⁱ Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/i-m-now-thinking-of-retraining-uni-fee-hike-could-see-social-worker-exodus-20200803-p55hz3.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Melbourne Website, <https://study.unimelb.edu.au/how-to-apply/fees/student-contribution-amounts>

^{iv} Roberts R, Dwivedi A, Bamberry L, Neher A, Jenkins S, Sutton C, Frost M, O'Meara P, Wong, A. (2021) The mental health, wellbeing and work impacts of COVID-19 on first responders and frontline workers in Australia. Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW.

^v Bamberry, L., Roberts, R., Rossiter, R., Cumming, T., Ceric, A., Kulmar, C., Greig, J., Sowden, J., Droulers, M., Hodgins, G., Nikidehaghani, M., & Sutton, C. (2018). *Workforce Wellbeing in Family and Community Services: Understanding the context – a literature review*. NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

^{vi} Bamberry, L., Roberts, R., Rossiter, R., & Droulers, M. (2019). Worker wellbeing in a risk-averse, compliance-based workplace culture. Abstract from Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.