

UNION PROUD

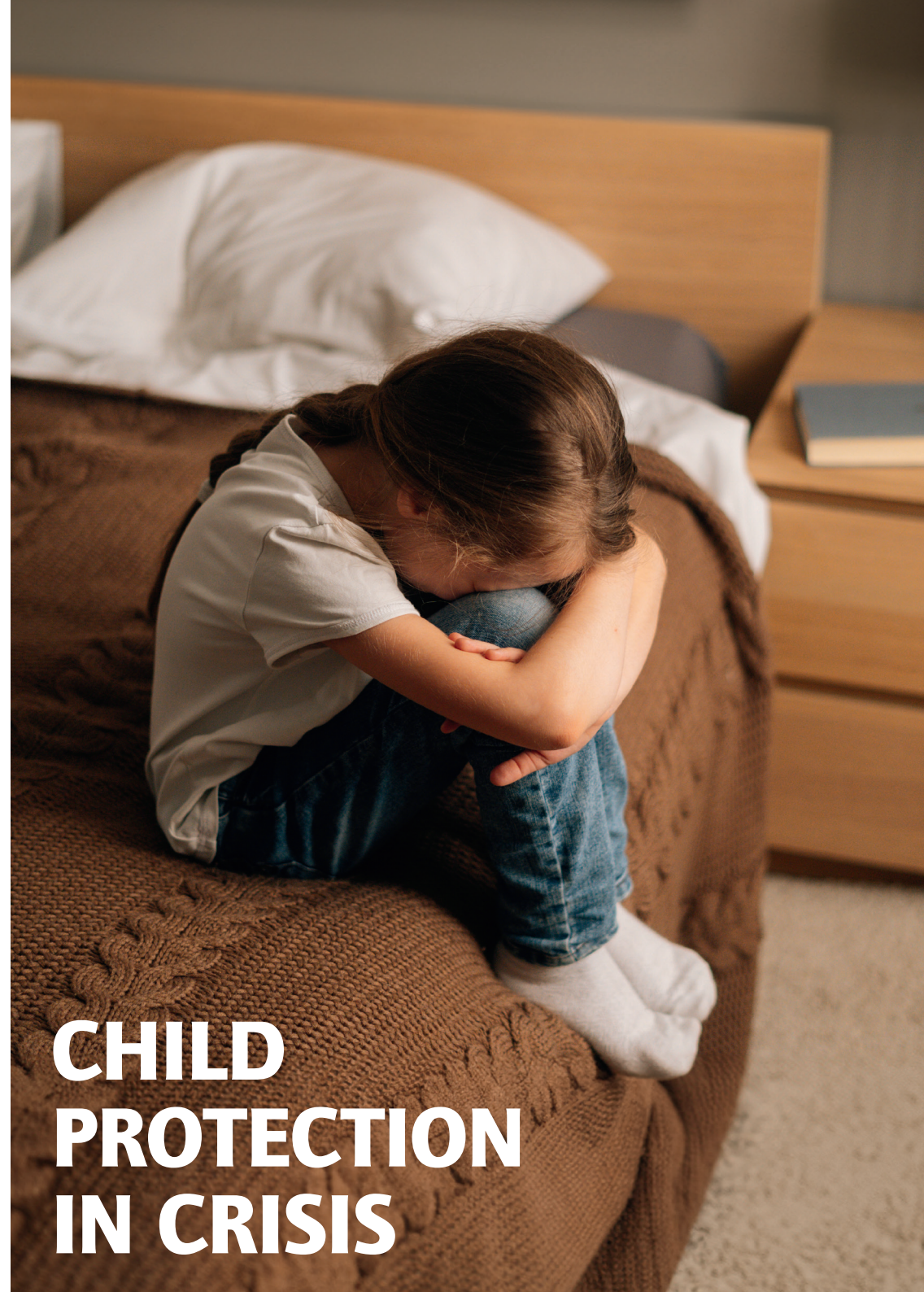
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CHILD PROTECTION IN CRISIS

PRIVATISATION HAS FAILED OUR CHILDREN IN NSW

The NSW child protection system is in crisis. There are too many children in need and not enough staff to provide support for them. Add in a failed experiment in offloading foster care to non-government organisations (NGOs) and you have a disaster.

Out Of Home Care (OOHC) has been outsourced to NGOs by Labor and Coalition governments over the past 20 years, resulting in the quality of services plummeting and the costs to run them spiraling out of control.

Whereas once the Department of Community Services was responsible for the recruitment, training and supervision of foster carers in the community, this critically important function is now undertaken wholly by NGOs.

In NSW, about 500 children are cared for under “High Cost Emergency Arrangements” in facilities such as serviced apartments, hotels and caravan parks at enormous cost. Children are supervised round the clock by labour-hire workers, many of whom are inexperienced.

These children make up about 2 to 3 per cent of children in OOHC, yet the Government paid private providers half a billion dollars over the past two years to care for them.

It is vital the OOHC system is returned to government control.

A lot of these large NGOs use a subcontracting model which has led to a situation where babies are looked after by labour-hire staff who often lacking appropriate experience and oversight.

Non-government providers are able to pick and choose children, often refusing to accept responsibility for the most traumatised children. Contracts between providers and the Department have historically been poorly negotiated and even more poorly enforced, meaning performance and outcomes are not demanded or incentivised.

Child protection Caseworkers say they are being pressured by management to put pressure on extended family members to take on children in need, particularly children with high needs, regardless of whether this is a suitable outcome.

The Community Services Departmental Committee has called on the Minister, Kate Washington, to do more.

Better pay and more staff

In the past 18 months, the vacancy rate for Caseworkers has increased more than 500 per cent, with 270 vacancies reported in September 2023. The Department of Communities and Justice is losing more Caseworkers than it is employing, with a net loss in 2022-23 of 22 Caseworkers. Aboriginal staff are leaving at a higher rate, a crisis when their cultural knowledge is so vital to a community so heavily involved in the Child Protection system.

The result is a workforce of relatively inexperienced Caseworkers, with more than a quarter still in their first two years of employment with the Department.

A report found low staffing numbers are believed to be among of the reasons for some of the deaths of children known to child protection in 2022.

Caseworker grading is woefully outdated and failing to keep pace with similar roles across the public and private sectors.

The starting wage of a Child Protection Caseworker with Community Services is \$75,992. In comparison, the average starting wage of staff doing similar work in the private sector is \$88,000.

The PSA has written to the Government demanding higher band levels for workers starting careers in the Child Protection system.

The Child Protection system has seen an increase in Level One cases, which require investigation within 24 hours. For example, this could be a response to sexual assault allegations. However, the system simply does not have the staff to deal with this explosion in numbers.

Currently the average Caseworker quits after 18 months on the job.

THERE ARE TOO MANY CHILDREN IN NEED AND NOT ENOUGH STAFF TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR THEM

There is a real risk that Community Services is becoming something akin to the fifth year of a Social Work degree. Evidence suggests caseworkers are leaving for better-paid jobs elsewhere and the Department is forced to spend additional money training new staff.