

The Esther Centre facilitated the gathering of data, analysis and preparation of this submission for the Historic Abuse Network and supports the views and recommendations put forward by HAN members.

In addition the Esther Centre would like to provide further information for consideration in relation to

- Addressing the issue of abuse of power by professionals and carers
- Appropriate intervention when abuse occurs and
- Support and advocacy for those who have experienced abuse both historic and current.
- Abuse prevention and training.

Over the past few years Queenslanders have been left with no doubt those children in the care of the church or state were, and possible still are, vulnerable to abuse.

Reports and media coverage have demonstrated that many adults as children experienced almost unbelievable acts of abuse by people whom the community has held in high esteem. Priests, social workers, coaches, scout leaders, foster carers, politicians.

Whilst this current Inquiry is into foster carers, it has also come to the attention of the staff of the Esther Centre that children are vulnerable to exploitation by professionals such as Child Care Officers, Social Workers and youth workers, in government, community and church settings. This exploitation has ranged from:

- inappropriate professional practices eg supplying and smoking marijuana with children/young people
- inappropriate boundaries in attempts to develop rapport, such as including children or young people in inappropriate social settings
- sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse

There is considerable under-reporting of abuse and exploitation by professionals and carers. Currently there are insufficient accountability mechanisms to address these issues. The Ombudsman Office and the Children's Commission do not cover all human services which children and young people access in the non government sector.

The Esther Centre has not undertaken a formal study of these issues however staff have heard people's experiences of abuse and the circumstances which enabled abuse to occur. These personal stories demonstrate that there is a problem in human service communities, religious communities and youth networks which requires more attention.

The impact of sexual violence and abuse on the lives of people in Queensland is constantly being highlighted in reports from media about the extent of sexual abuse in faith communities, service clubs, the police service, charitable organisations, foster and out of home care for children and institutions for people with a disability.

Across all these areas it is clear that as a society Queensland is only in the beginning of working towards creating a society in which a culture of accountability exists and intolerance for sexual abuse and all forms of abuse of children, and vulnerable adults, is the norm.

For too long too many people in positions of considerable influence and status have believed that they would not be held accountable, that children would not be believed and that they had the power to silence. It is all Queenslanders responsibility to redress this imbalance so that children and vulnerable adults will know that they can speak to a trusted person and that people will be held accountable.

In order to do this the system needs to have:

- clear accountability mechanisms for all government and non government service providers. Currently there are gaps in the system for many services funded by government; consistent approaches across government need to be developed.
- clear reporting and investigation of reported allegations of abuse, which is not simply hidden in a complaints process. Any investigation needs to be independent of the government department and/or community agency responsible for service provision or funding of services.
- a statutory body with the responsibility for having an overview of the issues as they present across government, churches/religious communities and community base organisations and initiatives. Such a body should be a resource to the community in developing effective child protection policies, abuse prevention strategies, and appropriate intervention when abuse occurs. Monitoring of the implementation and effectiveness of strategies also requires attention.
- A public education campaign addressing the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse by professionals and carers, and other people who hold positions of trust in the community.

Recommendations

1. That the training of foster carers, departmental officers and workers in community based organisations incorporate conceptual frameworks which acknowledge the “*power*” given to the role being undertaken and address the issues of “*abuse of power*”. Many foster carers report that they feel powerless, due to their position in the system. However in the eyes and reality of the children who are placed with them, they have enormous power and influence on the lives of children as highlighted in feedback from those who have experienced abuse.
2. Public education about child abuse needs to include abuse by people in positions of trust and not limited to identifying abuse in the family. The evidence is clear about the extent of abuse by scout leaders, religious, community leaders, social workers, and carers. This information should be available to all children in care and the general community.
3. That a Queensland Taskforce be established to identify, monitor and evaluate carers and appropriate intervention when abuse has occurred across all human service departments, religious institutions and community organisations. (See submission to Crimes Commission).
4. Review of existing statutory roles and responsibilities in relation to the reporting of abuse by professionals and carers recognising the impact of the position of power for a child or young person wanting to report abuse. **The principle of self-policing has been proven to be ineffective and inadequate in responding to allegations of sexual abuse within human services and faith communities and statutory organisations.** The Department of Families should investigate abuse within families, another statutory body should be responsible for investigation of abuse by foster carers, departmental employees, professionals and community and church based workers.
5. Promotion to children and young people of the appropriate body to report abuse and/or inappropriate behaviour of professionals and carers.
6. More services are required in order to address the impact of sexual violence on adults who were abused as children. Currently the sexual violence service system for adults is very under-resourced. Services for addressing the impact of sexual violence need to be designed to meet the needs of men, women and children in relation to both current and historic abuse.
7. The need to address the length of time that currently is required for complaints to police to be processed. Funding for increase in staff capacity, advocates to support people make complaints and more appropriate time frames for progressing through the criminal justice system.

8. Re-establishment of a victim support unit within the Justice Department to support people who are able to proceed through the criminal justice system. Many people have dropped out because they have not felt “strong enough” to endure the lengthy process of getting to trial. Several people who have recently come forward regarding historic abuse have previously started the process of reporting to the police but withdrew due to the demand on them and lack of support. Many people reporting abuse by professionals or carers have an enhanced sense of fear about what the offender will do when they find out about the disclosure. Whilst fear and anxiety are present for people when processing a complaint against a family members often the position, power and status of the offender exacerbates this fear and anxiety.
9. Better co-ordination of services for people who have experienced historic abuse in foster care. The recent hotline demonstrated how separately agencies worked with very few referrals being made between the 1800 line and the organisations able to provide support.
10. Administrative procedures for the recruitment of staff in human service professions should be considered. Simply relying on criminal checks is inadequate. Many offenders have breached policies, procedures and boundaries with clients without a criminal offence being reported. Many victims have not disclosed. (See Photocopy: Chapter: Administrative Safeguards. Gary Schoener: Psychotherapist Sexual Involvement with Clients. Intervention and Prevention)
Exploring processes for the linkages between authorities, their ethical standards and recruitment is critical. Offenders find ways of re-creating themselves and finding organisations, which may not be very resourced and require volunteers or workers desperately and do not enforce recruitment standards.
11. A statutory body be assigned to collect data from government department, religious institutions, community organisations, professional bodies on:
 - the extent of allegations of abuse against employees and carers
 - the development of abuse prevention policy and procedures.
 - Co-ordination of information about the assessment undertaken of carers or professionals
 - appropriate intervention when complaints and allegations have been made for both offenders and victims.