



To Victoria's Ministers and Members of Parliament,

We are writing to you as a non-profit organisation advocating on behalf of children in out of home care and their foster and kinship carers.

We are calling for greater scrutiny of mental health supports in the out of home care system in Victoria, noting a significant lack of specialised trauma and mental health support for Victorian children in care, particularly in regional areas. While the 2021-22 Victorian State Budget's response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System¹ are very welcome, there are several barriers to accessing mental health care for children and youth in out of home care which must be addressed in order for the budget investments to be effective.

These are:

- The difficulty of obtaining permission to treat, and mental health funding support for children in out of home care from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- The lack of a standard practice to undertake a mental health assessment for all children entering out of home care
- Children who are not on permanent care orders or whose placement is not considered by DFFH to be a 'long-term stable placement' are not receiving treatment when they need it, as permission to treat and or funding is not being provided by DFFH.

The findings of the recently released Strong Carers, Stronger Children – Victorian Carers Strategy's *Findings of the Home-based carer census – Final Report to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing* have confirmed the high need for mental health supports. The census showed that of the children in out of home care in Victoria, 69% have a history of trauma, 56% have behavioural issues, 44% have attachment issues and 40% have identified mental health difficulties. The majority of carers were using their own funds to pay for medical, dental and therapy costs, dipping into their savings or even borrowing from family and friends². The report also found that close to a third of carers

¹ <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health/mental-health-reform/vic-state-budget-mental-health-highlights-2021-22>

² EY Sweeney. 2021. Strong Carers, Stronger Children – Victorian Carer Strategy. Findings of the Home-based carer census – Final Report to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.





had ended a placement due to behavioural and mental health issues or for anger and violent behaviours of the child.

Without the right financial and mental health supports, these statistics will mean foster carers will continue to leave the Victorian out of home care system more quickly than new carers sign on³.

Findings from research by Emerging Minds showed that: **the support available to carers in supporting the mental health of children in their care was inconsistent, not offered at all, or was only being accessed with great difficulty, and the “mental health needs of children were disregarded by the statutory system.”**⁴

In our own research⁵, carers have told us that they have been unable to get mental health care support for children in their care because they were not considered to be in ‘long-term stable placements’. As we have noted in a previous letter to Victorian MPs, there are loopholes in the reforms which introduced a two-year period in which to achieve reunification with birth families, which allows parents to seek an extension of 12 months before permanent alternative care options are sought, if there is an observed improvement in the issues or behaviours that led to their child being removed. This can be extended indefinitely. **This may mean that children who are not on permanent care orders are unable to receive mental health support and treatment, despite the fact that they are dealing with ongoing uncertainty and may be moved between placements, impacting on their ability to create a stable bond, and retraumatising them.**

“...basically in my 6+ years of fostering no child gets the therapeutic support they are supposed to as their circumstances are never classified as stable. They might be with us for years but as court and restoration stuff takes ages to get sorted kids get ignored and excluded from therapeutic supports.” – Carer, A Better Life For Foster Kids survey.

³ See <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-10/foster-care-shortage-regional-victoria/10986016> and <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-05/victorian-foster-carers-under-financial-pressure-/100433444>

⁴ Fergeus, J. 2018. The importance of supporting foster and kinship carers in promoting children’s mental health. Emerging Minds. <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/the-importance-of-supporting-foster-and-kinship-carers-in-promoting-childrens-mental-health/>

⁵ 2021 Survey of Carers undertaken by A Better Life For Foster Kids, with responses from 44 foster and kinship carers.





When most children are placed into care, they have access to assessments such as optical and general medical, but a mental health plan is not a standard part of the assessment procedure for all children.

Suicidal behaviour is 4.9 times more likely in children and young people in out of home care than their peers.⁶ On a daily basis in our organization, we hear about the worst cases of children – even children under 5 years old – having severe reactions to their traumatic experiences – and the carer is unable to get permission or funding from the department. Those are just the severe cases. Every child who enters out of home care has had some terrible experiences that are likely to need help dealing with over their lifetime. Even if carers are able to get Department permission to treat the child’s mental health, and are able to pay for private therapy or counselling out of their own pocket, COVID has made it much more difficult to find available spots with mental health specialists.

Removing barriers to accessing early mental health care treatment and support for children and young people in out of home care will save lives, create better life outcomes for children, young people and their carers, and reduce the number of carers who are leaving the system.

We call upon you to advocate on the behalf of children in OOHC, by voicing our concerns and joining us in calling for the following reforms to the OOHC system:

- Make a mental health care assessment standard practice for all children entering within the first two weeks of entering out of home care, regardless of the care order the child is on.
- Provide clearer information on the steps carers need to take to seek permission and funding for mental health treatment for children in their care and streamline the processes to apply for permission and funding support for mental health treatment.
- Include foster and kinship carers, and young people in out of home care and care leavers in consultations about mental health care reform in Victoria.
- Increase the funding available to carers for medical treatment of children in their care, including mental health care treatment.

⁶ Institute of Child Protection Studies. (2020) Effective interventions to reduce suicidal thoughts and behaviours among children in contact with child protection and out-of-home care systems – a rapid evidence review. Australian Catholic University.





Carers do everything they can, but this isn't something a carer can fix –we need government departments and agencies to work with carers and kids, the mental health care system and foster care organisations to find a solution.

Yours in the hope of OOHC system reforms that place the child's wellbeing first,

Heather Baird,

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