Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Media Release

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Commission for Children and Young People *"…as a good parent would…"* Inquiry Report

The Commission for Children and Young People has today released a disturbing report of its inquiry into services to children and young people who have been subjected to sexual exploitation or sexual abuse whilst residing in residential care.

'The Commission's report provides vital information on areas that must be urgently improved to ensure all children in residential care are safe and supported. It is undeniable that some of the photographs and the sad, despairing words from children in the report are confronting and deeply concerning,' said Ms Tsorbaris, CEO.

There are over 8,000 children in out of home care on any one night and of these, 500 children are placed in residential care.

'Most children in residential care have experienced multiple care arrangements, either with their extended family or with foster carers, but sadly these have not been able to meet their needs. For these children, who exhibit all the known serious impacts of harmful abuse and neglect, residential care is currently the only remaining option to provide for their care,' said Ms Tsorbaris, CEO.

All of the 500 children in Victorian residential care have experienced serious abuse and neglect in their past and many are still dealing with the consequences. These children were removed from their family's care through a decision of the Children's Court.

'Over a year ago the Centre for Excellence wrote to the then Minister and Premier saying that feedback from our members on residential care could not be clearer*: 'there was a regrettable but direct link between the lack of adequate placement capacity and the sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable children in care.'*

The Commission's report also found that *"…children are poorly matched to placements and placement decisions are often based on where there is an available bed, rather than on the needs of the child."*

'Clearly placing four children together in the same residential home without adequate planning is a recipe for the poor outcomes so graphically described in the Commission's report,' said Ms Tsorbaris.

The Commission's report has confirmed the Centre's assessment, as well as the findings of the Victorian Auditor-General, who observed in his 2014 report that*: 'DHS and all CSOs visited during the audit identified poor placement matching as the greatest risk to the safety of children in residential care.*'

'All the evidence points to the need for much better planning and greater flexibility so that there are more home-based care options to meet these children's needs. We need more foster care tailored to each individual child, rather than the current one size fits all approach. I particularly want to appeal to the community to think seriously about becoming a foster carer.'

'We also need to do much more to meet the cultural needs and cultural connectedness of Aboriginal children in residential care and the Centre supports a much stronger role for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in the provision of out of home care', said Ms Tsorbaris.

The Commission's report found that the living environment and maintenance standards in some homes were poor.

'Some staffing structures and turnover can have a negative impact on children and this must be urgently addressed. Many staff responsible for the care of children are dedicated, committed and do their best. Some children do very well and residential care may be the first home where they have experienced stability and consistent care for many years.

I welcome the Andrews Government's announcement today of an immediate $1 million 'blitz' on home maintenance to address these critical issues', said Ms Tsorbaris.

The Andrews Government has in its first year of office invested significant new money to improve the safety of children in residential care. This includes $16 million to improve staffing levels in residential care, $43 million to move children from residential care to foster homes, $31.3 million to improve financial support for foster and kinship carers and reviewing the system to make it simpler and $7.5 million to design and renovate out of home care properties.

'These are important initiatives and will help reduce the pressures on residential care homes,' said Ms Tsorbaris.

The report also highlights the pervasive impact of social media and pornography on all children in the community and the potential for particularly harmful effects on vulnerable children in residential care.

'The Centre strongly supports the Commission's calls for better sexual health and well-being education by skilled professionals for children in residential care. Such education could operate as a powerful protective factor for vulnerable children,' said Ms Tsorbaris.

'This report sets out the challenges and accurately describes the actions that need to be taken to ensure all children are safe and cared for. We must ensure children's needs are properly assessed and matched to a care arrangement that is right for them. All children have a right to a safe and stable home,' said Ms Tsorbaris.

The Centre notes the Commission's call for significant reform of the residential care sector. This raises the important issue of how the Commission's recommendations will be monitored. The Centre considers the recommendations should form part of a report card that can be reviewed regularly to monitor progress.

The Centre for Excellence and our members are committed to working with the Government, the Commission and the community to improve the support to children and young people in residential care and to ensure more home-based care options are available.

The Andrews Government decision to develop a comprehensive *Roadmap for Reform* and to accept in principle all the Commission's recommendations represents clear agreement on what needs to be done to ensure that vulnerable children are central to the Government and community's agenda and their voices are heard', said Ms Tsorbaris.

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