Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Media release

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Children's safety must come before good numbers

The Ombudsman's report on child protection in the Loddon Mallee region tabled in Parliament today sends a stark warning to the State Government that the pressure to produce acceptable numbers in reports is coming before the safety of children in Victoria's child protection system.

The Ombudsman raises serious questions as to whether the Department of Human Services has sought to minimise the number of unallocated cases – where children at risk do not have a child protection worker assigned to them – by resorting to measures that may have placed children at significantly increased risk of harm.

The Ombudsman investigated 59 cases as a result of a whistleblower report made out of concern that reports of suspected child abuse or neglect were not being properly investigated by the Department, were being closed prematurely, and were being assigned to staff not normally tasked with frontline child protection work.

"This report would suggest that a system built on crisis responses is not always in the best interests of children. We will never stem the tide of cases flowing into child protection unless we turn things around to stop children getting there in the first place," said Dr Lynette Buoy, chief executive of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, today.

"The need for genuine early intervention and prevention has been a repeated message from the community services sector, and recently from coroner John Olle in his findings in the inquest of Hayley, a toddler known to child protection who died from head injuries in August 2009," Dr Buoy said.

A system of family support services – separate but linked to child protection – is already in place, can deal with family difficulties at a much earlier stage, and prevent the need for child protection involvement.

The Cummins child protection inquiry has consistently heard that those services are not funded sufficiently to do the early intervention work they need to do in the community when concerns are first raised.

“There is much more to early intervention and prevention than removing children just before they are harmed, or worse. We need to act much, much earlier,” Dr Buoy said.

She said the fact that the Ombudsman’s investigation had resulted from a whistleblower’s report highlighted the vital importance of the freedom to speak out on issues affecting the safety and wellbeing of children.

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