Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Media release

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Volunteers subsidise cost of caring for vulnerable children

A forum will today hear that volunteers who house and care for thousands of Victoria's vulnerable children and young people are subsidising the real costs of care due to inadequate government reimbursement.

Carer reimbursements by the Victorian Government are lower than the national average, and fall well below the true costs of foster care for different age groups, according to recent estimates from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. Home-based carers care for at least 90 per cent of children and young people in the Victorian State care system.

The shortfall is undermining both the quality of care and the chances of maintaining the stable placements children and young people need to overcome the abuse and neglect that led to removal from their own families.

"We're not talking about paid carers, but fair reimbursement to volunteers for the direct costs they've already paid out to ensure that children and young people in their care have the basics that parents typically provide for their own children.

"We're talking about necessity, not luxury," said Dr Lynette Buoy, chief executive of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, today.

Dr Marilyn McHugh of the Social Policy Research Centre will tell the forum that Australian & UK studies suggest that keeping foster carers fostering requires "well-managed payment systems, which ensure that they get paid on time".

In its submission to the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, the Centre has proposed that carer reimbursements be increased to at least the national average, with further adjustments to reflect CPI.

The more detailed proposals to be considered at the forum will form part of an issues paper the Centre will also submit to the Inquiry.

"When you have an under-funded system with poor support for carers, you just don't have the placement options or the flexibility to address the specific needs of vulnerable children and young people.

"We see too often the consequences of bad placements, or placements that cannot be sustained. They only add to the trauma that children and young people have already experienced, and that's a sad indictment of the State care system as it stands," Dr Buoy said.

The forum will consider both financial and non-financial supports for carers. It will also hear about therapeutic approaches in residential care that have proved successful in pilots and need to be made broadly available.

The forum will be held from 9.00am–1.00pm today, Wednesday 24 August 2011, in the Waratah Room of St Michaels, 120 Collins Street, Melbourne.

Media are welcome. Dr Marilyn McHugh and Dr Lynette Buoy will be available for interview.

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