

## **Adoption, fostering, permanent care and beyond: Re-thinking policy and practice on out-of-home care for children in Australia**

A symposium convened by the Department of Human Services, Victoria and the School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University

**26 and 27 November 2009**

City Location to be confirmed

### **Rationale**

In May 2009, The Hon Lisa Neville Minister for Community Services, launched the *Directions for out-of-home care* which outlines that over the next twelve months the Department of Human Services (DHS) will be working closely with their partners in the community sector to implement an agreed reform agenda consistent with the Victorian Government's vision for a *Fairer Victoria* where all members of the Victorian community can prosper.

While much has been achieved already, there is still more to be done if all Victorian children and young people are to have the same choices and opportunities to succeed. Children and young people are staying significantly longer in care and outcomes for these children, in relation to their wellbeing, development and future opportunities, are still lower than their peers in the general population.

One key aspect of the reform is to re-design care services to deliver greater placement choice and enable children and young people to be better matched to placements. Care services are having difficulty keeping pace with both growing demand and the increasingly complex needs of children in care. The increase in the overall number of children in care is not due to more children entering care – the numbers are decreasing – but because the average length of stay in the system is increasing.

In advancing the new reform agenda, there will be extensive dialogue and forums to ensure communication and consultation with stakeholders is ongoing. This symposium is one of many opportunities afforded to stakeholder communication. The focus of this symposium is the 'stability' debate particularly on the long-term out-of-home care continuum. Within this focus, particular attention will be paid to adoption and permanent care.

Recent debates have again directed attention to adoption as a mechanism for the permanent placement and care of vulnerable children in Australia. At the same time, resistance to adoption persists in many sections of the Australian community and many child welfare professionals are actively exploring alternatives to adoption for the permanent care of children. These alternatives to adoption, however, remain little understood in the community at large, particularly among the growing numbers of couples and individuals looking to intercountry adoption for the purposes of family formation. In addition to these challenges, in Australia we must deal with the complexities produced by our federation and its multiple jurisdictions, and within each state and territory, multiple pieces of legislation and administrations which regulate different forms of out-of-home care for children. One response to this challenge is for sustained dialogue on child welfare matters across all levels of government, between professionals engaged in different forms of care provision for children, and between those in government and agencies and researchers.

The aim of this symposium is to gather together a focused group of policy makers, child placement professionals and researchers to explore the future directions for child-focused permanent care and permanency planning for children in Australia, including children born overseas.

To achieve the cross-sectional and interdisciplinary aims of the event, the organisers hope to bring together individuals with expertise in the full range of child placement options – permanent care, foster-care and local and intercountry adoption – with backgrounds in government, the non-government sector and the academy for engaged dialogue and exchange.

We hope that this event will signal an important step in securing better outcomes for children.

## **Vision**

The outcomes sought out of this symposium include:

- To raise the profile of children in care and their 'stability' needs;
- To begin to establish research-based evidence to achieve best outcomes for these children;
- To support the willingness to explore all options of the delivery of such care;
- A clearer vision of how best to balance the identity issues of children with their need for stability issues within a practice and legal framework.