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Improving child protection responses

The NSW Ombudsman Bruce Barbour has tabled a special report to Parliament this morning titled: 'Keep Them Safe?'

The report draws on extensive work by the Ombudsman since 2002, which has identified serious concerns about the capacity of the child protection system to adequately protect children from harm.

Keep Them Safe: a shared approach to child wellbeing is the action plan to implement the recommendations of the 2008 Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW.

The inquiry proposed a complete overhaul of the child protection system and laid down a blueprint for improving the way early intervention, child protection and out of home care services are delivered in NSW.

The reforms included lifting the threshold for reports about children to risk of significant harm, and added educational neglect and cumulative harm to the statutory grounds for reporting.

"Based on information obtained by my office for this report, it is inconceivable that a strong and integrated child protection system will be able to be delivered in the near future. It is now time to take stock of the reform program and establish clear priorities for prompt action", Mr Barbour said."

Data for the first 12 months of the new system shows a 33 per cent drop in reports to the Community Services Helpline, compared with the period before the 2008 inquiry. In addition, the overall number of reports referred to Community Service Centres dropped by over 50 per cent (from 201,208 to 95,491).

"Despite a very significant drop in demand, the reported data indicates that fewer children and families are receiving face to face assessments under the new system," Mr Barbour said.

The data from 24 January to 31 December 2010 also shows that:

- 25 per cent of all reports assessed by Community Services as indicating risk of significant harm were closed without any further assessment
- There has been a 55 per cent drop in the number of reports recorded as resulting in a face to face assessment

“On any measure, it is unacceptable that 25 per cent of all reports assessed by Community Services as requiring some intervention received no response in the first 12 months of Keep Them Safe,” Mr Barbour said. **“These children, at the very least, need Community Services to check on their circumstances and when required, intervene to protect them.**

“It is also concerning that my office has identified that certain types of reports receive a very low level of response, including reports about high risk older children and adolescents, and reports about habitual school absenteeism,” he said.

For example, in 2010, just under half of all educational neglect reports assessed as meeting the risk of significant harm threshold were closed without any action by Community Services. Less than 10 per cent of these reports were recorded as resulting in a comprehensive face to face assessment.

The report also identifies specific concerns about child protection capacity in regional and remote parts of the state as a result of chronic staff shortages.

In commenting on his findings, the Ombudsman said:

“The overall solution is not simply to call for more resources. In order to address capacity shortcomings, there is a need to examine ways to enhance productivity and use existing resources more effectively.

During our inquiry into this matter, Community Services advised that it is committed to implementing a range of initiatives designed to increase productivity. Our report identifies other initiatives that should be employed, including moving towards intelligence-driven child protection practice and specific IT enhancements.

The report’s recommendations also include the need for ongoing consideration of which agencies are best placed to respond to particular types of child protection matters, and to fully explore the role the non-government sector might play.

I welcome Community Services’ commitment to improving productivity. However, it is essential that there is accountability through public reporting about how well we are delivering on the overall vision that was outlined by Justice Wood.”