

**Public Advocate of the ACT Response  
Nobody's Children  
Inquiry into the early intervention and care of vulnerable infants  
in the ACT.**

*The role of the Public Advocate is to protect and promote the rights and interests of our vulnerable citizens in partnership with the ACT community.*

## **1. Introduction**

The Public Advocate of the ACT (PA ACT) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry into the early intervention and care of vulnerable infants in the ACT.

The functions of the PA ACT require that it act as advocate for the rights of children and young people and as part of acting as advocate for those rights undertake the following:

- (i) fostering the provision of services and facilities for children and young people;
- (ii) supporting the establishment of organisations that support children and young people
- (iii) promoting the protection of children and young people from abuse and exploitation.

The PA ACT in addition also monitors the provision of services for the protection of children and young people. In light of these functions and the Terms of Reference for the Committee of Inquiry, the following analysis and comments are presented.

## **2. PA ACT Analysis of Emergency Actions**

As required under the Children and Young People Act 1999 (Section 226), the Public Advocate of the ACT is to be given notice of Emergency Action taken on a child or young person.



This applies if the Chief Executive or a Police Officer reasonably believes that a child or young person is in immediate need of care and protection or would be so in need, if immediate care and protection were not provided.

In gathering data regarding the significance of drug use and domestic violence as reasons for Emergency Action, the PA ACT undertook an analysis of the Notice of Emergency Actions received from 1 July 2007 through to end April 2008.

From the 57 notices received, *26 notices concerned infants aged 0-2 years (46%)*. Twenty two (22) of the 26 notices (85%) related to children of drug affected parents coupled with a reported domestic violence in 16 matters (73%). Four (4) infants were reported as being born drug affected and four (4) notices indicated there where physical abuse and neglect issues.

In regard to antenatal and post natal care and support services only two notices referred to these services, although it is acknowledged that the involvement of these services may not have been known by the Chief Executive at the time emergency action was taken. Two (2) mother's were on Psychiatric Treatment Orders when Emergency Action was taken. Three (3) mothers were reported to be involved with the methadone program. The PA ACT is not provided with details on the cultural background of the child as part of the notice received, further detailed case study and file analysis would be required in providing this information.

### **3. Enhancement of early intervention and prevention services and engagement of families where infants are most at risk**

From the analysis undertaken by the PA ACT on notices of Emergency Action, early intervention and prevention services need to be further enhanced to ensure services reach and target those parents and families requiring assistance, particularly focusing on risk issues relating to drug use, domestic violence and mental health.

Research and practice highlight the challenges, at times, of engaging parents and families where child protection risk factors exist. The service system in the ACT therefore must be able to target and provide more intensive support services in cases where infants/children are most vulnerable. Strategies to engage these parents and families are also necessary.

The PA ACT considers that the establishment of Child and Family Centres in Tuggeranong and Gungahlin was a key development towards having a more holistic and universal approach to infant support services and in improving the wellbeing and health of infants.



The PA ACT acknowledges the work already undertaken through these centres particularly the multidisciplinary needs led approach. Parenting classes, play groups, paint and play groups, new parent groups, programs to engage dads, drop in services etc are positive initiatives in supporting infants across the ACT.

The PA ACT encourages the further development of these centres in other parts of the ACT (Belconnen) to ensure equity of access across the region. Support is also given to the ongoing enhancement and funding of programs, in particular outreach programs for parents and specialist targeted intensive support services for families where child protection risk factors exist. Maintaining a strengths-based and both a child-centred and family focused approach needs to underpin ongoing program development.

#### **4. Service integration, interagency guidelines and partnerships**

Best practice and reform guidelines for vulnerable infants and children in other Australian jurisdictions and overseas reinforce the need for building effective partnerships between agency's and families so that timely and effective support services can be provided. The development of an integrated service system where different services are effectively coordinated needs to underpin policy frameworks generally. Adopting an inclusive approach with families and facilitating their participation and engagement with services also are significant.

Whilst the PA ACT understands that agencies in the ACT are to prioritise working in collaboration, further work could be undertaken to improve interagency relationships regarding the early intervention and care of vulnerable infants. It is the PA ACT experience that at times agencies do not sufficiently work in partnership and communication barriers still exist, which can result in service fragmentation and families not receiving the support they require. In cases where effective service outcomes have been achieved it is the PA ACT understanding that agencies involved had been well coordinated and equally involved in the development of support plans.

Due to the complexity of issues faced by some families, multiple agencies can have a role in providing support and care services. It is therefore imperative that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined across the broader service system and that a lead agency is identified to ensure coordination and integration of a support plan. There is a need for strong leadership in case coordination in the ACT to ensure this occurs.

The PA ACT would support the continued development of interagency case coordination structures for vulnerable infants. In addition, common assessment frameworks and working protocols across agencies would assist in this process. Policy and legislative reforms undertaken in other jurisdictions regarding interagency service frameworks and guidelines could be considered by the ACT in strengthening partnerships.



## **5. Implementation of the Government's Response to Murray-Mackie Study**

The PA ACT seeks to ensure the Government's Response 2006 to the Murray-Mackie Study has been implemented, in particular the Child Death Review Team (recommendation 1.1-1.2) and the role and relationships between Child Protection Services and ACT Health (recommendation 2.1 & 2.2).

In monitoring services for the protection of children in the ACT, the PA ACT also wants to be certain that current risk assessment frameworks utilised in the territory, adequately prioritise vulnerable infants (recommendation 4.1 of the Murray-Mackie Study). The PA ACT will be undertaking further analysis regarding the risk assessment of infants and is currently scoping a project which would review this more fully.

## **6. Benchmarking against international best-practice and research**

In developing an effective policy and service framework in the ACT it is imperative that the ACT closely review international developments in early intervention and prevention taking on board, where this is appropriate, the lessons learned and experience in other jurisdictions. For example research and practice in early intervention highlights that strategies need to be employed to facilitate the engagement of families and their uptake of supports, particularly where children are most at risk. Developing realistic service strategies so that families do not feel stigmatised and fearful of engaging with services is therefore paramount in ensuring the welfare, wellbeing and protection of infants.

Additionally the PA ACT supports further evidence-based policy and service reforms to ensure early intervention, prevention and support services for vulnerable infants and their families are adequately targeting those families most in need or at risk. Consideration could be given to funding or sponsoring research and service evaluations to ensure the quality of outcomes are assessed and that services are effectively meeting the needs of vulnerable infants in the ACT.

If the Committee seeks further information from the PA ACT in regard to this response, please do not hesitate to contact myself or Ms Trish Mackey, Principal Advocate on telephone 62070707.



**Anita Phillips**  
**Public Advocate of the ACT**  
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