



OUTLINE OF EVIDENCE OF STACEY BROWN AND KIMBERLY DO (YAPPERA)

DECEMBER HEARINGS 2022 (CHILD PROTECTION)

8 DECEMBER 2022

I BACKGROUND

1. Stacey Brown is Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Warrung, and is the CEO of Yappera. Stacey has been working in the early years sector for 28 years and has had extensive involvement with Child Protection including participation in Care Team meetings, Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making (**AFLDM**) participation, specific case involvement and also experiences where she has been required to support staff that have been subpoenaed to court to provide evidence. Stacey is also a mandated reporter as a legislative requirement. Stacey was also a panel participant on the Taskforce 1000 launched by the commission to investigate the rapid rise of numbers of children in out of home care in Victoria.
2. Kimberly Do is Yamatji, Noongar, and is a Family Support Worker at Yappera. Kim started in the Education sector 14 years ago in the Primary School sector and moved into Early Years for the last 11 years. During this period Kim worked in various roles in regard to child protection, this includes supporting children during access with parents, participation in care team meetings, AFLDM's, support for carers, supporting children's developmental needs and referrals and been a voice for the child.

II ABOUT YAPPERA

3. Yappera opened in 1981, providing high quality, culturally grounded and holistic health, wellbeing education and care programs. Yappera is a not-for-profit, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (**ACCO**). We offer education and care/support services, as well as a range of health and wellbeing programs and services for children and families. This includes:
 - long day care;
 - kinder; and
 - wrap around holistic services supports models responsive to child, family and community needs including:
 - art, music and dance;
 - bush kinder;
 - school readiness;
 - onsite specialist services (e.g. audiology, optometry, dental checks, immunisations, speech therapy, and maternal and child health); and
 - family & Community wellness programs & activities (hosting family and community events).

4. Yappera has capacity to support 60 Aboriginal children and their families every weekday. Yappera was established as an education and care setting in 1981 to support Aboriginal children and families – in particular, vulnerable children and families with the intention of a holistic wrap around service model that is flexible, adaptable, responsive and supports children and families in the early years and assists with school readiness. The philosophy, vision, purpose and values remain the same in 2022.
5. Yappera continue to allocate a number of placements to vulnerable families and children in care for the purpose of child protection intervention prevention but also to maintain connection to family, culture and Community.

III THE PRESSURES ON YAPPERA – PERFORMING SERVICES THAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GOVERNMENT

6. There are some circumstances where Yappera performs functions that are beyond its scope, that we consider should be performed by Government. For example:
 - We frequently have requests from Government agencies for visits at Yappera (e.g. child welfare checks, or to host parent visits of their child). This puts additional pressure on our staff.
 - We provide holistic services to support kinship carers that should be provided by the Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (**DFFH**) (e.g. providing food, vouchers, taxi vouchers, clothing, and making appointments for the child).
 - In many cases, DFFH do not conduct appropriate genealogy searches to identify a child's family. As a result, we run these searches – which takes significant time and resources (which should be spent focused on Yappera's core business).
 - Child protection does not assess the child's wellbeing appropriately. In one case, we had the Child Protection officer 'sight' the sleeping child and leave. There was no engagement at all with the child.
7. We often advocate to child protection on behalf of the carers knowing what supports they need so that they are adequately able to care for the children (e.g. transport, respite, etc).

IV INADEQUATE INFORMATION ABOUT CHILDREN IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

8. In some circumstances, we do not have enough information about the children that are in the child protection system. For example, there may be no birth certificate, not enough details about children with specific or additional health needs, inadequate information about past traumas, and no cultural support plans.
9. The expectation is that children commence at Yappera without required documentation that the service needs under regulations. Sometimes we have to request the same document numerous times e.g. Court orders.
10. There is not enough information provided to register the child for a childcare subsidy and the task falls on Yappera to assist carers to register through MyGov so that the child can attend.
11. This has significant consequences for Yappera, in having to conduct genealogy searches etc. to understand the child's background. Further, this also creates other difficulties – for example, we were

aware of a child that was not Aboriginal (and we therefore could not offer a placement). However, the mother insisted the child was Aboriginal – the Department accepted this at face value – which creates issues for us. There is not enough information about the child to make an objective assessment as to eligibility for placements at Yappera.

12. Related to the above, in many instances children are in the child protection system for extended periods of time without having their identity confirmed. In other cases, children have been falsely identified as Aboriginal. This can be detrimental to a child's development; it can cause a false sense of identity or a child feeling lost as they don't know their links to their mobs.

V LACK OF ADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN IN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM TO MAINTAIN CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

13. There is a lack of appropriate referrals to ACCO support services for children with health, disability, or social and emotional wellbeing issues.
14. There are children that have been in out of home placements for a long period of time with no cultural support plans.
15. Child protection enrol children in Aboriginal services as their way of cultural connection, in most cases no other cultural connection practises are attempted.
16. Children are placed with carers that have no cultural awareness.

VI CHALLENGES FACED BY KINSHIP CARERS

17. Kinship carers have given everything to raise children – and the system has not been good to them. There is no financial aid for kinship carers, or support, aid or referrals for those carers to deal with their own grief and trauma.
18. In some instances, kinship carers cannot attend work due to having to care for the child, and suffer mortgage/rent stress to provide care.
19. There are also difficulties caring for children on account of unresolved trauma and their own experiences of child protection.
20. Kinship carers are not given any direction on how long placements may be, and constantly told that they are not privy to information.
21. Kinship carers feel like a glorified babysitter.

VII CHANGE AND REFORM

22. In order to improve the services available in child protection, we consider that the following changes should be made:
 - Early identification of Aboriginality once the child enters the system;
 - Comprehensive portfolio outlining the child's identity, brief on child (family) as well as the child's strengths, interests and needs;

- Strengthen the child information sharing scheme so that information shared by all professionals who are working with the child and family is consistent and there is no overlap in services or supports;
- Ensure all professionals are informed about the MARAM reforms and how these are interrelated which are integral to reducing family violence and promoting child safety and wellbeing; and
- Support for parents and children that are reunified, to strengthen the possibility of children ending up back in out-of-home care.

VIII CASE STUDIES

Case study 1: John

23. John has down syndrome and was placed with elderly non-Aboriginal carers. John has been in out-of-home-care since birth. The carers have made a real effort to care for John, they love him and his wellbeing is nurtured. It was meant to be short term care, but has now been four years. The carers maintain connection to community (and John's siblings) and culture through Yappera. However, the carers are too elderly to continue, and it is difficult to find a new placement for John that is safe.

Case study 2: Claire

24. Claire is in kinship care. The carer is a single mother with four children. DFFH requested that parents have access visits at Yappera. However, there has been limited engagement with DFFH over the past year, and Claire was not allocated a Child Protection worker. The carer has also been supporting the parent and sibling – all residing at their house. The turnover of case workers has caused confusion and frustration. This varied from a recommendation for a permanent care order, to a new case worker recommending reunification – which has brought up trauma for the carer.
25. The carer requested assistance to have her car fixed (to get her children to school, and travel on weekends to provide access for the mother of Claire to visit), which was made difficult for her. In contrast, we also see families with high-levels of income getting vehicles purchased for them. It is not clear if this turns on the child protection worker or their advocacy.

Case study 3: Michael

26. Child protection intervention was initiated by a family member to protect Michael and his sibling, where the parent suffers from mental health issues. Michael and his sibling are staying with their maternal grandmother who was placed in her care by an interim accommodation order without any financial resources to clothe and feed the children.
27. It has been difficult for the grandparents to support Michael due to the lack of financial support – having to take unpaid leave from work exceeding 10 weeks, the mortgage payments fell 10 weeks behind, and no emergency relief was offered when caring for the unwell children. The grandmother, also a single parent, had only commenced a new job one week prior to the children being placed in her care. Recently, the grandparent lost their employment as they did not meet the KPI's for the role during the probation period due to the amount of time she was required to take carers leave.

28. The carer and extended family had to buy clothes for Michael and his sibling. DFFH expected the grandparent to travel into the city weekly to take Michael to care and his sibling to school in Collingwood, which was totally unrealistic given the grandparent lives in Regional Victoria.