



press clip

Foster care fails young

Children at mercy of criminals

Stephen McMahon
and Matt Johnston

VIOLENT criminals have exploited an under-financed and badly managed foster care system to abuse the state's most vulnerable children.

Systemic flaws left some children in the care of drug dealers and turning to prostitution, according to a shocking Ombudsman's report.

One child was left in the care of family friends with violent pasts who had been the subject of 19 previous child protection reports.

Both carers went on to sexually abuse the child.

The report also found carers had broken children's limbs or knocked them unconscious.

Ombudsman George Brouwer highlighted the cases of three teenage girls who turned to prostitution and drug abuse while in care.

The report said failures within Department of Human Services systems and procedures had directly resulted in children being harmed.

Child Safety Commissioner Bernie Geary called aspects of the report "appalling", saying more resources were needed.

"I never believe young people in these situations receive adequate resources," he said.

"We make decisions ... that are sometimes connected to resources, and when that happens young people suffer."

The Opposition has called for Community Services Minister Lisa Neville to be sacked.

Premier John Brumby, who has backed the minister, told Parliament yesterday the system would never be perfect.

The Ombudsman was scathing of the department's failure to check that foster or kinship carers were properly screened in all cases, saying: "Further harm may have been avoided if adequate screening and assessment of their carers had occurred."

Allegations of sexual or physical assault by staff, or relating to death or serious injury, concerned almost 600 children last year. These included 73 prostitution incidents, 21 of which involved underage boys or girls.

More than 5000 children are being cared for by foster parents or extended family, or in residential homes in Victoria.

Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said there was a lack of transparency in child protection services and the State Government had been "asleep at the wheel".

"They have known about the problems for a decade," Mr Tucci said.

Ms Neville said eight carers had either been deregistered or sacked because of physical or sexual abuse.

"The care of young Victorians who can no longer live with their parents is my top priority — and we will continue to provide record funding and support," she said.

Ms Neville rejected Mr Brouwer's warning that the system was underfinanced.

But there are fears that by 2013-14, more than 1000 children may be missing out on state care.

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'They have known
about the problems
for a decade'**

— JOE TUCCI

Australian Childhood



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Far from ideal: children were left in the care of people who'd not been properly screened