2018: A year in review for Kinship Carers.

By Sue Erben

December 2017 saw the release of the investigation the Victorian Ombudsman completed into the financial support provided to kinship carers in Victoria. To say it was scathing of the Department of Health and Human Services is an understatement, but I encourage everyone to read it. 


Having said that, the department (DHHS) “accepted all seven recommendations of the report, and indicated it remains committed to improving supports for kinship carers through a number of initiatives”.

On 24 November 2017, a new Manual for Kinship Carers was launched for distribution to all kinship carers state wide.

In October 2018, I had a conversation with a Maternal Child Health Nurse who requested the above-mentioned Kinship Manuals as I had spoken with her earlier and as they are one service that comes into contact with new Kinship carers initially, I thought it would be beneficial for her to have them to pass on. The MCHN was told bluntly when requesting the books, that they were not available for her service to have. On top of that, many kinship carers both old and new to caring remain unaware such resources are available. Indeed, many DHHS personal remain unaware such books exist.

My question is, why not? Does DHHS not want all Kinship carers to know their rights and the departments responsibilities? This is one of many areas where the Government departments talk the talk, but when it comes to putting actions in place they are sadly failing. Over 12 months on from the Ombudsman’s report and many of the recommendations are yet to be implemented and the ones that have been are done local to Melbourne. The ones that work and help kinship carers are refined or terminated.

May 31st 2018 saw kinship carers Australia wide peacefully protest/gather on the lawn out the front of parliament house in Canberra and lay close to 3000 flowers. Each flower represented either a Kinship carer (purple flowers) or a child in our care (yellow flowers) and also a separate purple and white wreath to signify all the kinship carers and children who have died due largely to departmental inaction. It was a great way to get our numbers and concerns across as many carers are unable to travel to attend such an event. While we received no traditional media coverage, we were mentioned on a number of parliamentarians face book pages which have thousands of followers, so overall it was a good first attempt.

Other members of our site [Australian Grandparent/kinship carers] also held events in Melbourne, Sydney & Brisbane and while smaller were still noticed and acknowledged.

August 23rd saw a National forum run by the ACWA titled “Critical Gathering Signals It’s Time for National Action on Kinship Care”.


I was fortunate enough to attend this event thanks to the efforts of one of Australia’s greatest researcher’s and advocates for kinship care Meredith Kiraly. I was both surprised and delighted to hear that the issues they discussed were spot on to what 95% of kinship carers are living. Slide 15 in Dr Kiraly’s report gives weight to our groups determination to be heard and to bring well overdue changes while also covering the key issues in kinship care.

I was however dismayed to realise that there were only four kinship carers present and while I understand the need to have employees from organisations present, I don't think those there realise the value that could be added by actual carers also being invited. Just as with employees not all kinship carers could attend however there are a few around the country doing great work bringing kinship care to the forefront of social opinions.

Kinship placement is the preferred option if we look at the best interests of the child, but it also seems the preferred option from the governments point of view because kinship care is......wait for it..... A FAMILY ARRANGEMENT! Even though the children are removed by DHHS and police, handed to the family member or significant other with no prior warning and coerced into caring (if you don’t they'll go to foster care, they'll be split up etc) for them, usually until ‘things work out for the parents’ which can end often take till the 12th of never, however being a family arrangement means they are not on any statistics which keeps the figure of out of home care kids within the socially acceptable limit, give the appearance of solutions working and relieves society of any accountability. The fact is “out of home care” is growing exponentially mainly due to the lack of mental health services and drug taking. Even Non-Government Agencies are now realising that the actual figures may be 4 to 5 times greater than reported, I myself think that they are 8 to 9 times greater while still being conservative.

Another way the government is doctoring their figures is rushing through the NSW legislation regarding adoption. While we can all agree a child needs stability, is adoption the right way to go? Against all advice, including from their own funded agencies, the government thinks it is, I’m wondering if this could be mainly due to the fact that once a child is adopted, they are no longer counted in data or supported by services. In fact, if what I have heard is true there are no checks and balances after the adoption process goes through. Another stolen generation in the making, one wonders what it will take for those in power to learn from their past mistakes.


So, at the conclusion to a year that saw many ‘apparent’ leaps forward in support and care of both out of home carers and the children they care for, in fact very little change has been seen at ground level. The Child Protection system remains crisis driven, and there is still no consistency between jurisdiction areas or even within offices. We continue to wear the brunt of social misinformation and a lack of understanding of our role or what we actually do. We have seen some success stories where appropriate reunification has happened, grandparents have returned to their grand parenting role, and life is as it should be. This is our dream. The flip side has seen already traumatised kids prematurely forced to return to their parent’s full-time care, only to last a few weeks before they are removed again. We have seen some children and carers too, grow their angel wings and leave the hurt and heartache behind.

Hopefully 2019 will see actual change occur, steps taken to remedy the system as we know it and society become informed about who we are and what we do.