



## **PCA Families Victorian State Budget Submission 2022-23**

### **Who are PCA Families?**

Permanent Care and Adoptive (PCA) Families is a not-for-profit member-based organisation representing families formed by permanent care, kinship care and adoption in Victoria. Established by parents from this community in 2003, we continue to be guided by the lived experience of our members. We take a child-centered and family-focused approach to supporting strong and stable families.

As the representative body for permanent care, kinship care, and adoptive families in Victoria, PCA Families seeks to amplify the voices and faithfully represent the experiences of children and families in order to promote and support the best possible outcomes.

We deliver peer support, therapeutic programs and advocacy, informed by lived experience and research. We run a free Helpline for families which provides independent and confidential short-term support, practical information, advocacy and referrals to other services. We also distribute Government funding to eligible families to help meet the needs of a children in their care.

The strategic focus for PCA Families is:

- Vision: That every child who cannot live permanently with their birth parents thrives in a strong, stable, and permanent family.
- Our purpose: Permanent care, kinship care and adoptive families have committed to helping their children thrive and we are committed to helping them do it.
- Our mission: We advocate on behalf of and deliver peer support and other trauma informed services for permanent care, kinship and adoptive families. We inform, up-skill and empower our parents/carers to advocate strategically for the services and support their children and our communities need. Our independent support is trusted by our families and often critical to their success.

### **2021-22 Victorian State Budget Initiatives**

PCA Families had worked for inclusions in the 2021-22 Victorian State Budget which were funded by the Victorian Government. Of particular note was ongoing funding for the PCA Families Helpline; the Flexible Funding Program for permanent care; and the extension of the Better Futures and Home Stretch programs to young people subject to permanent care orders from 1 July 2022.

The 2021-22 State Budget also included the expansion of Carer KaFE to include permanent carers. Carer KaFE provides learning and development opportunities for carers and is often a central requirement in ensuring carers feel confident and supported to undertake their caring role.

These initiatives will be important in achieving stability in the lives of vulnerable children and young people unable to live with their birth parents. This leads to long-term benefits for those children, their carers and the wider community. In some cases, this represents significant future cost savings on mental health, housing and welfare related services.

## Recommended Initiatives for the 2022-23 Victorian State Budget

PCA Families recommends that the following initiatives are required in the 2022-23 State Budget in order to build on the initiatives from 2020-21 and to improve the understanding both within the sector and government of the situation for permanent care and adoptive families.

These key initiatives are:

| Initiative  | Budget Impact   |
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| <p>1. Review the DFFH <i>Carer Entitlement Financial Policy</i> to create equity for carers, so that services are based on a child's needs and not the type of care order. All children would be assessed against the same <i>Child and Family Support Framework</i>.</p>   | <p>Will be budget impacts – would need to be determined as a part of a review process conducted by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH).</p> |
| <p>2. DFFH determine a process, in consultation with the sector, to make available and report on data in a form that reflects Victoria's Children's Court orders, including how each order maps with national definitions and categories and AIHW data sets to transparently report the number of children in out of home care for more than 2 years who are not on Orders that provide them with a specified carer until at least 18. The number of permanent carers and foster carers, including kinship carers, should also be reported transparently annually, along with key metrics about number of children cared for and demographic information.</p> | <p>This data should be available and therefore could be conducted within DFFH resources as a part of existing data collection processes.</p>                    |
| <p>3. Fund targeted, longitudinal research to understand the nature of support needed to address barriers to entering permanent care arrangements and addressing both existing levels of trauma and the ongoing impact of trauma, noting that while permanent arrangements help ameliorate the impact of trauma, some children and young people will need support to deal with it from time to time throughout their lives.</p>   | <p>Longitudinal research funded by the Victorian Government could be overseen by an agency such as the Commission for Children and Young People.</p>            |
| <p>4. The development of a framework and accompanying manual for all types of care outlining areas such as support available, processes involved in progressing different care orders, and circumstances where each type of care is likely to be the best option, would provide a resource for carers and associated stakeholders including service providers and government agencies. Implement a training program across all relevant child protection and placement agency staff to support implementation of the framework.</p>   | <p>Approximate cost of framework and manual - \$100,000</p> <p>Approximate cost of training – could be incorporated in existing training programs.</p>          |
| <p>5. Involve carers in Court proceedings including providing the carers the automatic right to attend and have a say in relevant legal proceedings for the child in their care and provide carers with their own legal advice in proceedings. As a start, amend Court Preparation Checklist to specifically mention carers' rights to attend. This is also a Carer Strategy goal.</p>  | <p>Approximate cost \$600,000 - would provide legal assistance to approximately 400 families/year.</p>  |

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| 6. Permanent carers and all home-based carers be included as a focus group in the inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women, given the significant representation of women in permanent and other home-based care.                                       | No cost                                       |
| 7. The funding of a project to develop a peer support framework co-designed with carers and young people. This would build the area of peer support in the out of home care sector and be made available to other organisations to implement a similar project. | Approximately \$500,000 in total over 3 years |

## 2022-2023 Victorian State Budget – what needs to be included for permanent care and adoptive families

### The situation for permanent care and adoption in Victoria

PCA Families commissioned a research report into the current state of permanent care and adoption in Victoria to understand:

- Why children in out-of-home care are not moving to stable, permanent arrangements in a timely manner when they are unable to be re-unified with birth parents;
- The consequences for children the longer they remain in the out-of-home care system;
- The support children in permanency arrangements need in order to recover from the accumulated harm, identity, and developmental issues; and
- What children and permanent care families require to create and sustain a stable environment that improves life opportunities and outcomes.

At June 2020, some 4356 Victorian children had been in care for more than 2 years.<sup>1</sup> Every new placement creates further disruption to a child’s life and increases the risk of life-long impacts.<sup>2</sup> Some 70% of children who exited out-of-home care in Victoria during 2019-2020 who had spent more than 2 years in care, had more than one placement.<sup>3</sup> File reviews conducted by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) reported in 2019 that over 403 children and young people had experienced 10 or more placements over the duration of their time in care. Of these, a disproportionate number were Aboriginal (33%).<sup>4</sup> The majority (65%) of the 4,356 Victorian children in out-of-home care for more than 2 years are between 5-14 years of age. With every placement disruption, these school-aged children may be forced to move to a different suburb, a new school, and potentially sever ties with friends, family and other trusted adults.

The key findings from the research were:

- Stability is key for children to recover from the significant disruption in their lives - Research has clearly shown that ‘drifting’ in the care system and multiple placements are strongly correlated with negative life outcomes for children. The earlier children find themselves in a permanent arrangement, the more likely they are to effectively start the recovery journey.
- Victorian permanency legislation has not been implemented as expected. While more children are coming into out of home care for longer, the most common form of permanency order is not adoption or permanent care. The national data reported by the Australian Institute of Health &

<sup>1</sup> Source: Adapted from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Data tables: Child Protection Australia 2019-20*, (Canberra: AIHW, 2021), table S5.14, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2019-20/data>.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Rubin et al., “The Impact of Placement Stability on Behavioural Well-Being for Children in Foster Care,” *Paediatrics* 119, no. 2 (2007): 336-338, doi: 10.1542/peds.2006-1995.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Data from The Productivity Commission, *Child protection services – Data tables*, (2021), table 16A.15, <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2021/community-services/child-protection>.

<sup>4</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, ‘In our own words’: Systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system (Melbourne: Commission for Children and Young People, 2019), 144, <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/CCYP-In-Our-Own-Words.pdf>.

Welfare (AIHW) suggests that 2000 children in Victoria in 2019-2020 were placed on long-term guardianship and custody orders and permanent care orders. However, the vast majority (67%) were on orders that were for two years or less.

- Very few adoption orders were made. Further the Victorian Children’s Court data for 2019-20 shows that only 376 orders were made transferring parental responsibility to families offering permanent care with long-term stability and certainty for the children in their care. Another 277 orders were made for long-term out-of-home care where parental responsibility for the child is retained by the Secretary of DFFH, but with a specified carer until the child is 18.
- Inequity and systemic barriers to permanency require urgent attention - a major barrier for carers agreeing to move to Permanent Care Orders is the inconsistent support for children and carers. There is inconsistent communication about permanency options in order to assist carers in making informed choices about entering into permanency care arrangements.
- Aboriginal self-determination must drive all decisions and solutions for Aboriginal children - Limited Aboriginal-led research is available to understand the degree to which the legislated Aboriginal placement and self-determination principles are being applied to, and post, permanency decisions and the suitability and impact of current arrangements for Aboriginal children, carers and families.
- Only with sustained support will outcomes change - Support not only needs to be timely, but those delivering the support require an understanding of the unique journey of children who have been in out-of-home care and are now growing up and adjusting to life in permanent families. Without this timely support, the long-term outcomes for children who have been in the care system are likely to be compromised.

In order to address these challenges and ensure the best long-term outcomes for Victorian children, the report identified areas where work needs to occur which included:

- **Equity of financial and other support**

PCA Families has long argued for services to be based on a child’s needs and not the type of care order. This would involve a process of reviewing the DFFH *Carer Entitlement Financial* policy to create equity for all carers with consideration to known physical, mental health, and developmental challenges of the child; carer disadvantage, respite needs and other circumstances of the family; long-term recovery issues; and changing needs over time. This implies all children and carers are assessed against the same *Child and Family Support Framework*, and the starting financial entitlement and subsequent changes, are determined for a child and carer irrespective of order or carer type (foster, kinship, permanent care or adoption).

- **Publishing Victorian data sets and research findings**

Data needs to be made available in a form that reflects Victoria’s Children’s Court orders, including how each order maps with national definitions and categories and AIHW data sets. AIHW data for Victoria needs to reflect Long Term Care orders separately to other Care by Secretary orders, particularly the number of children in care for more than 2 years and not on formal Long-term Care or permanent care orders. PCA Families asserts that currently the actual state of permanency in Victoria is not transparent and that there should be data collated and reported on each type of order.

- **Developing the permanency knowledge base**

There is a need for more targeted, longitudinal research to understand the nature of support needed to both address the barriers to entering permanency and heal existing trauma once a permanent arrangement can be found. Understanding the changing needs of children and carers in permanent families will help to inform the support required for children to recover, heal and thrive, and the ongoing needs of permanent carers to create a nurturing, stable environment, particularly as children develop.

There needs to be specific work supported for Aboriginal community-led and controlled research to bring the unique lens of Aboriginal self-determination and connection with community, culture and country, to the permanency journey of Aboriginal children, their carers, family and community.

Longitudinal research funded by the Victorian Government could be overseen by an agency such as the Commission for Children and Young People.

- **Improve permanency planning**

Providing clear and accessible information on the nature and implications of each care order available, across foster, kinship and permanent care, would be a simple way to assist carers to make informed decisions. Ideally the development of a framework and accompanying manual for all types of care outlining support available and processes involved in progressing different care orders would provide a resource for carers and associated stakeholders including service providers and government agencies. This should include adoption, permanent care, Long-term Care order, Care by Secretary order, and in one, central accessible resource.

- **Carer involvement in Court proceedings**

Carers and children need to be given the opportunity to have their voice heard when decisions are being made that impact their lives, whether that be the choice of permanency pathway or the ongoing decisions about support, needs and life expectations. Involvement in Court proceedings is a key avenue where this principle needs to apply. This includes expanding the Court Preparation Checklist and legislation to grant carers the automatic right to attend and have input in relevant legal proceedings for the child in their care. In addition, providing carers with independent legal advice in proceedings so that they can make an informed decision about the proposed options, for example Long Term Care orders or Permanent Care.

**Recommended initiatives:**

1. Review the DFFH *Carer Entitlement Financial Policy* to create equity for carers, so that services are based on a child’s needs and not the type of care order. All children would be assessed against the same *Child and Family Support Framework*.
2. DFFH determine a process, in consultation with the sector, to make available and report on data in a form that reflects Victoria’s care and protection orders, including how each order maps with national definitions and categories and AIHW data sets to transparently report the number of children in out of home care for more than 2 years who are not on Orders that provide them with a specified carer until at least 18 including the reasons why not.
3. Fund targeted, longitudinal research to understand the nature of support needed to address barriers to entering permanency and addressing existing trauma when permanent arrangements are found.
4. Develop a framework and accompanying manual for all types of care outlining areas such as support available, and processes involved in progressing different care orders as a resource for carers and associated stakeholders including service providers and government agencies. Implement a training program across all relevant child protection and placement agency staff to support implementation of the framework.
5. Involve carers in Court proceedings including expanding the Court Preparation Checklist and legislation to grant carers the automatic right to attend and have input in relevant legal proceedings for the child in their care; and provide carers with their own legal advice in proceedings.

## Carers Census and Permanent Care

DFFH undertook the Home-based Carers Census in 2019. Key findings include:

- While most carers felt confident in their ability to provide care, many felt challenged by the system and the lack of information. Over half of respondents stated they were unaware of support but those who had accessed support felt it helped them.
- Support and training had a positive effect on carers. When accessed, the majority of carers agreed that each support or training had helped them be a better carer.
- The census provided an indication of the impact of caring on the carers themselves and the need for assistance and support for carers themselves. Support and training were shown to have a positive effect on carers.
- Carers indicated that they used their personal finances to cover their caring responsibilities.

The results of the Carer Census support many of the issues PCA Families has identified as core for supporting families to maintain permanency including:

- the provision of clear and accessible information on what supports are available and what is involved;
- investment in developing peer support models to support and provide carers with the ability and skills to advocate on their own behalf;
- financial and other support to be based on need and not the type of care arrangement; and
- the need for mental health and well-being support for carers.

A stand-out finding from the census was the significant representation of women who are permanent carers. Across all care categories, women overwhelmingly accounted for carers in these roles. For permanent care, women accounted for 89.7% of permanent carers. The largest household income group was under \$40,000 and 19% were in full-time work. These findings have implications regarding financial stress.

PCA Families commends the Victorian Government for including permanent carers in the Home-based Carer Census. It marks a further recognition by the Government that permanent care is an area where monitoring and improved information is required, and we would urge the Government to conduct further analysis on the census findings to ensure this informs policy and program development. A number of findings from the recent Home-based Carer Census are relevant for consideration in The Victorian Government Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women. It will be important that issues for carers in home-based care are considered in this inquiry given women's prevalence as providers of this type of care. The Census makes it clear that they are a group who are economically impacted by the work they are undertaking on behalf of the community in looking after children requiring permanent care, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would be concerned if our community of carers was not included in the inquiry's consideration, along with the support they need.

### ***Recommended initiative:***

6. Permanent carers and all home-based carers be included as a focus group in the inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women, given the significant representation of women in permanent and other home-based care.



## Developing a Peer Support Framework

Extensive studies have highlighted the need for more appropriate support and training for carers of children who are currently in out of home care, permanent care and adoption as they have a far greater likelihood of experiencing mental, physical and social complexities that require specialised support. As noted earlier, this was a finding from the Victorian Home-based Carer Census. Carers have limited avenues to receive support services and training that can equip them to give children in their care the best possible chance to thrive and protect the longevity of the care placement. Lack of support also discourages people who might otherwise become carers, further reducing stable, family-based care options for vulnerable children.

A review of 33 research studies post-2000 across the UK, Ireland, North America and Australasia, identified the value of carer peer support, particularly in terms of learning from others and sharing one's own story. Peer support was identified as the most helpful type of support made available in one study and in another study, carers felt more supported by other carers than any other source. (Palacios et al., 2019; Luke & Sebba, 2013; Ivanova & Brown, 2010; Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare, 2019) Further, research has shown it is not just the person receiving the support who benefits, but peer support has positive impacts on the lives of those doing the supporting too (Burke et al., 2018).

A best-practice peer support model that recognises families are the experts in their own lives can support the empowerment and self-efficacy of carers. This in turn, can safeguard placement longevity and ensure children in care experience stable, family-based care settings, protection from institutional care or repeat foster care experiences, resulting ultimately in positive life outcomes for these children.

PCA Families has for some time called for the development of a structured model of peer support to address the unmet support needs of carers once a child is placed in their care and in order to maintain permanency for the children in their care.

Peer support is increasingly being recognised as a means by which peers, who have lived experience and knowledge, can provide unique non-judgmental support and assist others who are experiencing the same issues as they have. It is more developed in some areas, such as mental health, but less so in areas such as support and placement for children. PCA Families advocates that the development of a framework to build peer support in the out of home care sector, would be both a significant innovation in the types of support that is offered to families and carers, and significantly increase carer confidence that they will be well supported in the role.

We propose research be conducted into existing peer support models and programs, and this knowledge base utilised along with qualitative work with carers, young people and other stakeholders, to develop a co-designed peer support program framework and model. The framework would be trialed and evaluated and made available to for all interested parties to utilise the evidence-based program and its evaluation and recommendations to enable other organisations to implement a project that is tailored to meet the needs of their client base.

### ***Recommended initiative:***

7. Funding of a project to develop a peer support framework co-designed with carers and young people. This would build the area of peer support in the out of home care sector and be made available to other organisations to implement similar initiatives.