

Submission by

Centacare – SCOPE

**The Regional Domestic and Family Violence Resource
Service**

Sunshine & Cooloola Coast

To the

Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry

September 2012

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The Domestic and Family Violence program of Centacare is welcoming the opportunity to have input into the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry. We are hopeful that any positive changes resulting from this inquiry will benefit women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Domestic Violence is strongly intertwined in the Child Protection system and plays a large role in many women initially entering the Child Protection system. We acknowledge the quantitative study into the impact of Child protection intervention on mothers conducted by H. Douglas (2009).

Our Service

SCOPE (Suncoast, Cooloola, Outreach, Prevention and Education) is funded as a program of Centacare by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services.

SCOPE is part of a network of regional services that work with women and children affected by domestic violence. Within the Sunshine and Cooloola coast we offer services in 5 locations. The services we provide are predominantly counselling to women and children, court support for aggrieved seeking a Domestic Violence Protection Order and community education, support and liaison to other agencies in the area. Additionally we offer early intervention through educational programs in primary and high schools.

SCOPE is also providing information and referral for respondents (pre-dominantly male) in court and a Perpetrator Behaviour Change Program.

Our engagement with the Department of Child Safety and the Child Protection System

The Department refers women to us who have experienced or are still experiencing domestic and/or family violence for counselling and safety planning. There is often an emphasis on the inclusion of an educational component about the dynamics of abuse in sessions with women. The Department also refers children and adolescents to us for counselling if they have experienced or witnessed abuse in the family. Centacare operates under

clear guidelines about notification to the departments if there are concerns of child abuse.

Difficulties with the current Child Protection System

We maintain a good working relationship with the Department of Child Safety service centres on the Sunshine Coast and Gympie; however we have concerns about some of the practices employed under the child protection system. We feel that these practices work against the best outcomes for women and children affected by domestic and family violence.

Centacare – SCOPE has identified the following concerns with the QLD Child Protection System:

- There seems to be an apparent philosophy of using an authoritarian way of working with women who have come to the Department's attention because of domestic and family violence. The referral process used by the Department does not involve consultation with our agency, but requires women to attend our service for counselling, often without specific goals stated. The Department often attempts to obtain assessment of their progress toward meeting the unstated outcomes of the Child Safety Officers.
- SCOPE has had reports from clients of women being given an ultimatum by the Department to leave their abusive relationships, or their children will be removed. If women adhere to the Department's request and leave their homes and relationship, it is often the first step towards homelessness for women and children in QLD.
- Child Protection workers have at times attempted to gain information over the phone directly from workers about a mutual client, beyond general information on clients' attendance and engagement with our service.
- Child Safety does not pursue consultation with Non-Government Agencies in planning for the best interest of the family unit, although NGO's have often been key supports for the family and/or family members before notification is investigated.
- SCOPE is concerned about the apparent lack of consideration given to the provision of interpreters for clients who are deaf or from a non-

English speaking background. This is a highly vulnerable client group in the community.

- Women are referred to our service when alternative services would be more appropriate. Women have expressed that they often feel pressured to attend or continue counselling, due to their fear that the Department will take their non-attendance as a reflection of their ability to care for their children. We understand that at times it may be inappropriate for them to continue. Counselling for various reasons and not simply due to lack of insight or lack of compliance in adhering to a case plan.
- In our experience, the phenomenon of 'mother blame' is frequently not understood well by many Child Safety Officers. Men who are abusive may accuse an aggrieved partner of any number of misdemeanours concerning a child. The mother is then put in a position of having to defend herself when she is the victim of abuse, not the perpetrator.
- Another point of concern is the lack of understanding by Child Safety officers about how the Family Law system is affecting Women and Children in the Child Safety system. Even if women want to leave an abusive relationship and have obtained protection orders, they are forced through orders made by the Family Law Court to send a child to contact visits.
- Child Protection workers need to understand how Family Law ties the woman to the aggressor, even if she wants to have no further contact.
- Referrals to SCOPE to vary current DV orders; the court may not grant a variation to the existing order if there has not been a recent incident of DFV. The women might then be held responsible by Child Safety workers for not protecting their children.

We submit that:

- Child Protection workers and managers must possess Social Work, Community Welfare, Psychology or Human Services degrees at a

minimum of a Bachelor level. The current academic requirements for employment are too broad. This affects the values base and ethical practice of Child Protection Workers and therefore the quality of care provided to consumers. As stated by the Australian Association of Social Workers, (2008), p1; "No other discipline is so immersed in the areas of knowledge that are essential for quality relationship based child protection practice, As a result, Social Workers are recognised throughout the world as the core professional group in child protection policy, management and practice.

- Child Protection workers and Managers should attend compulsory specialised training in the dynamics of domestic and family violence covering the following issues:
 - Recognising and responding to domestic and family violence
 - Referring appropriately in response to domestic and family violence
 - Reflecting on Work Practice when responding to domestic and family violence.
- Those notifications of abuse are given equal consideration when made against both parents and equal action is taken in response.
- That confidentiality is respected by Child Protection workers when referring a client to a support service.
- Those women who have escaped domestic violence are not ordered to leave their residential area in order to be allowed to keep their children. The person responsible for the abuse should be ordered to leave the area, as this is less disruptive for a family and the healthier psychological development and wellbeing of children.
- That communication between Child Safety agencies and other agencies should be established and maintained, and a more supportive case management approach be utilised with a focus on client safety.
- It is acknowledged that the current changes to the Family Law Act are attempting to provide more consideration of issues of violence but we submit that this should be monitored with stakeholders and interest groups for interpretation, implementation and outcomes.

References

Australian Association of Social Workers, 11 September 2008, Media Release;
Social Workers at the heart of child protection.

<http://www.childprotectioninquiry.qld.gov.au/>

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<http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/childsafety/practice-manual>

Douglas, H., T. Walsh & K. Blore, 2009, Mothers and the Child Protection System'
The University of QLD,

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