



DOCS Helpline: Key Findings of NGO Survey

The DOCS Helpline is an integral part of the child protection system in NSW. It is a crucial resource for receiving, assessing and planning action for children and young people at risk of harm. It is essential to the success of the DOCS Helpline that all those involved, both government and non-government agencies continue to improve and review its functioning and effectiveness in a spirit of openness and co-operation.

As a result, a sample of member agencies of the Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies and the Family Support Services Association has provided an assessment of the Helpline's functioning. Between 5 March and 2 April 2001 one hundred and nineteen (119) survey forms were completed, each regarding a report made to the Helpline about a child or children at risk.

Key findings from the survey

- All reports made were **serious**. The majority related to (in order): risk of physical or sexual abuse or maltreatment (45%), neglect of physical or emotional needs (41%) and serious physical or psychological harm arising from domestic violence (20%). More than one quarter of the reports related to two of these categories
- Average waiting time to speak to a caseworker was **43 minutes**. This had not significantly reduced since the implementation of service improvements as announced by the Director-General in April 2001
- Only 60% of callers (66) were able to contact the Helpline when they needed to. **This meant that due to extensive delays, 40% of reports were not made directly to a Helpline caseworker.** Of the callers:
 - 30% tried to contact the Helpline again
 - 25% sent a report by fax
 - 17% contacted their local Community Service Centre and

- 27% used other strategies (after service improvements, these included leaving a message for a caseworker to call them back and in one case, physically attending the local CSC to deal with an emergency)
 - 23% tried two or more strategies to ensure that the report was made (usually faxing and contacting the local CSC)
- Of those who did get through, only half were given a report number at the time of the call
 - The majority of cases that did get through to the Helpline felt the new risk assessment process was adequate or better
 - **Almost half of the cases could not even get through to the Helpline to access the new risk assessment process at all.** This means that well over half the children of this sample remained at risk because the assessment process was unknown or unsatisfactory
 - Information regarding feedback to reporters was not collected in the survey, but will be included in the next analysis in June 2001

Recommendations

It is acknowledged that improvements are still being made to the Helpline. Clearly there is room for further significant improvement. Priorities for action are:

- Faster access to Helpline casework staff and centralised risk assessment processes
- Departmental data on the Helpline publicly released to clarify where issues are arising and give a full picture of the state of the Helpline
- Clear guidelines on how reports that are faxed through to the Helpline or made to local Community Service Centres are assessed and how these can be followed up
- Full implementation and distribution to all stakeholders of the Helpline Consumer Charter and an early review of this document
- Written notification of action within 24 hours as promised by the Director General in her letter dated April 2001.

ACWA and FSSA member agencies will continue to monitor the work of the Helpline, with a focus on feedback to reporters and action on reports. A further analysis will be undertaken at the end of June 2001.

30 April 2001