

FINAL REPORT OF THE
NON GOVERNMENT COMMUNITY SECTOR
CHILDREN AT RISK REPORTS
CHILD PROTECTION SERVICE SURVEY 3

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CHILDREN AT RISK SURVEY 3 REPORT

MAY - JULY 2002

PREAMBLE

In 2001 a coalition of child and family agencies and peak welfare organisations, lead by *UnitingCare* Burnside (Burnside) and the Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies (ACWA), conducted two surveys into the NSW Department of Community Services' new system for reporting children at risk of harm. Responses were sought from services through ACWA, Youth Accommodation Association (YAA), Burnside, Family Support Services Association (FSSA) and the Women's Refuge Movement (WRM).

Concerns had been raised by community services frontline workers about significant problems with the new system. The results of the 2001 surveys substantiated these concerns. Now in 2002 this same coalition of child and family agencies and peak organisations, with the addition of Adolescent Family Counselling Services, has commissioned a third survey. The intent of the survey is to help inform the development of a more responsive child protection system in NSW.

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SURVEY DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this final survey was to gather information about:

- What action is taken once the report is made
- The level and quality of feedback received after making a report
- Whether the problems identified in previous surveys continue to exist

The survey was conducted over a three month period from May 6 – July 31 2002

The auspicing organisations were:

- Uniting*Care* Burnside
- ACWA
- FSSA
- WRM
- NCOSS
- YAA

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. Action Taken Once the Report is Made

It was found that there are still significant issues relating to action taken once a report was made. These included:

- Helpline waiting times
- Receiving feedback from Community Service Centres (CSC)
- Disparity between Helpline and CSC assessments of reports
- Problems with system processes such as failure to provide faxed acknowledgements and report numbers

These issues make it difficult for direct service workers to track their report once it is in the DoCS 'system'.

2. The Level and Quality of Feedback Received After Making a Report

In this survey, as in previous surveys, the level and quality of feedback from both the Helpline and Community Service Centres (CSC) was found to be problematic. These issues included:

- Making contact with a Helpline caseworker
- Receiving contact from a CSC caseworkers
- Assessment of Helpline and/or CSC caseworkers differing significantly from that of the NGO service provider

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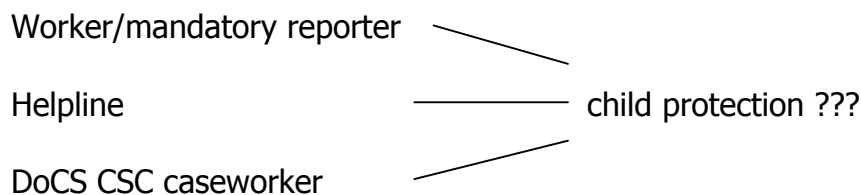
- Reporter resorting to alternative ways of getting action because the established system for making a report had failed e.g. going directly to a CSC, JIRT, re-reporting¹

3. Continuation of the problems identified in previous surveys

Overall the problems identified in previous surveys do still exist although there have been some system improvements such as reduced waiting times and the capacity to leave messages and receive a callback. However, fundamental issues around efficiency and effectiveness remain. Issues around the difficulties in working in partnership with the Department as colleagues and child protection experts were also raised.

CONCLUSION

- The child protection system has three tiers of assessment, all using different tools and different time frames



- The current reporting system does not relate back to the field, i.e. those who see and work directly with the most vulnerable on a daily basis and in range of capacities
- The survey revealed significant problems in the interagency work and collaboration between the three 'players': Helpline, CSCs and NGOs. These problems mean that it is difficult for the system to achieve its stated aim of protecting children. In particular NGOs are receiving conflicting messages about their role in the process.
- NGOs are integral to an effective and efficient child protection system but remain largely ignored in the child protection process as having a strategic role. Workers are placed in a difficult position as mandatory reporters and client advocates. For example, giving information to DoCS about people and then having no control or collaborative input and then often no knowledge over what is done with that information

¹ Respondents however saw re-reporting as a poor alternative because reporting hadn't worked the first time.

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- With the introduction of the Helpline some workers in the field have expressed concerns about the difficulties in establishing direct links with caseworkers in Community Service Centres. This was further highlighted by the expressed advantages of being able to resolve issues of child protection more quickly by services that are funded to work directly with CSC caseworkers and only receive referrals from CSC caseworkers.
- The establishment of Helpline doesn't appear to have 'helped'. Children too often remain in situations where they are at risk. This raises the question: *Is this a child protection system or information/"intelligence" gathering system?*

SURVEY ANALYSIS

General

Number of Surveys Analysed²

Youth Accommodation Association	32
Family Support Services Association	26
Burnside	52
ACWA	43
Womens Refuge Movement	67

Number of Surveys Analysed 220

Making a Report

Of the 220 surveys analysed:

Number of First reports	169	(76.8%)
Number of re-reports	39	(17.7%)
Not recorded	12	(5.5%)

Number of Children Involved

Children aged 5 or less	182
▪ Under 12 months	(39)
▪ 1 – 3 years	(89)
▪ 4 – 5 years	(54)
Children aged between 6-10	103
Children aged eleven plus	120
No stated ages	11
TOTAL	416

² Ten reports were unable to be used as they were filled in incorrectly/unreadable or the wrong survey was returned

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One hundred and twelve (50.9%) of the surveys analysed involved at least one child 5 years old and under.

Service Type³

▪ Emergency Accommodation	104
▪ Out of Home Care	32
▪ Family Support	70
▪ Youth Support	15
▪ Childrens Service ⁴	6
▪ Other ⁵	19

DoCS Region of Service

▪ Metro West	29
▪ Southern	22
▪ Western	21
▪ Hunter	15
▪ Metro South West	29
▪ Metro North	22
▪ Northern	59
▪ Metro South East	8

88 (40%) of surveys came from Sydney metropolitan DoCS regions and 117 (53%) came from rural/remote DoCS regions. Over one quarter (26.8%) of returned surveys came from DoCS Northern region alone. Given that this was such a large proportion of the survey sample some emphasis will be given in the discussion to survey particulars from this region.

To Whom Report was made^{6 7}

▪ Helpline	197
▪ Local DCS office	26
▪ Other DCS office	25

³ Some agencies and organisations used multiple descriptors

⁴ It is important to note that "childrens service" is more often defined as a childcare facility (i.e. preschool, long day care) hence fewer services involved in the survey identified themselves specifically as a "childrens service" even though many of the participating agencies and organisations have "children" in their service name or in their organisational charter.

⁵ Identified themselves as other – e.g. court support

⁶ Some workers went straight to a DoCS office while other workers reported to the Helpline and a DoCS

⁷ This breakdown is included to demonstrate whether reporters are using the system correctly. The figures indicate that the Helpline is the first port of call for reporting.

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Helpline Waiting Time⁸

Thirty minutes or less	101	(77.7%)
Greater than thirty minutes	29	(22.3%)

From the 130 surveys that answered this question, the average waiting time is just below 30 minutes (28.7 min). This is a definite improvement from the previous Helpline survey⁹ results of 48.92 and 40.01 minutes. In this survey the minimum time recorded was zero – reporter was referred straight away to a caseworker. The longest recorded wait was 240 minutes.

It must be noted that while getting average waiting times down is an important criteria in any type of reporting system it does not necessarily address the issue of prime importance – child protection.

In the survey that recorded a 240 minute wait the report involved two children aged 5 and 6 years. The issues being reported were children at risk of

- being physically abused or mistreated
- being sexually abused or mistreated
- suffering serious psychological harm and
- suffering serious harm arising from domestic violence

The report was assessed by the worker as requiring action within 24 hours. The Helpline indicated they would send the report on to the local DoCS CSC and a faxed receipt from Helpline was received. No contact however was received from the local CSC and after two days and the case was re-reported.

It is also worth noting that this report was in the Northern DoCS region which had the highest number of survey reports.

How Report was Made

▪ Phone	132
▪ Fax	44
▪ Both	22
▪ Not indicated	22

Of the surveys analysed ninety-nine (45%) were given a 'report' number, seventy (31.8%) were not given a report number and fifty-one (23.2%) surveys did not answer this question.

Given that a report number enables the reporter to track what has happened to their report this figure of 31.8% is very high and is a cause of concern.

⁸ 130 (59%) answered this question. The remainder either did not state how long they waited on the phone, or they left a message, called back later or faxed a report.

⁹ DoCS Helpline Feedback Faxback Stage 1 Report, April 2001

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Thirty-two (14.5%) workers indicated that they were unsuccessful in their first attempt to make a report. This was due mainly to long waiting times on the phone and the failure of the Helpline callback system.

Issues Being Reported¹⁰

▪ Basic physical/ psychological needs not being met	66
▪ Parents/care givers unable/unwilling to arrange necessary medical care	12
▪ Child/young person at risk of being physically abused or mistreated	78
▪ Child/young person at risk of being sexually abused or mistreated	26
▪ Serious harm arising from domestic violence	64
▪ Child/young Person at risk of suffering serious psychological harm	71
▪ Other ¹¹	68

System Response

Worker Assessment

▪ Requiring action in 24hrs	89
▪ Requiring action within a week	75
▪ Requiring action but can wait more than a week	40
▪ Not indicated	16

Requiring Action within 24hrs

CONTACTED BY DOCS

Of the 89 Reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 24 hours 40 (**44.9%**) indicated that contact was made by a CSC caseworker.

Of these 40 reports:

- 27 (67.5%) had a response within 24hours
- 13 (32.5%) had a response after 24 hours ranging from 2 days to 4 weeks.
(3 within 2 days; 4 within 4-7 days; 1 within 2 weeks and 1 within 4 weeks)

The latter report with the response time of 4 weeks involved three children aged 14, 15, and 1. The Family Support worker indicated that the children were at risk of being physically abused or mistreated, serious harm resulting from domestic violence and suffering serious psychological harm. This case was also re-reported in that time frame, indicating the serious concerns of the Family Support Worker. The DoCS caseworker told the Family Support Worker that they would visit the family but no alternative accommodation or foster care arrangements would be made by the Department.

¹⁰ Multiple issues were being reported

¹¹ Other issues included were missing person, threatened suicide, threatening behaviour toward others, caregiver unable to cope

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NOT CONTACTED BY DOCS

Of the 89 Reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 24 hours 31 (**34.9%**) indicated that there was no contact made by a CSC caseworker. 13 (42%) of these non-contacts came from the DoCS Northern Region.

Of these 31 reports:

- 20 (65%) had no contact with a caseworker and did not follow up the situation.
- 11 (35%) contacted DoCS again after they had not been contacted by a caseworker.

One of the reports concerned children aged 1½ and 3 years respectively who were assessed by the worker as not having their basic physical/psychological needs being met, and at risk of being physically abused or mistreated and possible serious harm arising from domestic violence.

NOT ANSWERED

Of the 89 Reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 24 hours 18 (**20.2%**) did not indicate whether they were contacted by DoCS or not.

Requiring Action within a week

CONTACTED BY DOCS

Of the 75 reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 1 week, 36 (**48%**) were contacted by a DoCS caseworker.

Of these 36 reports:

- 26 (72%) received a response from DoCS within 1 week
- 4 (11%) waited between 1 week and 3 ½ weeks for a response
- 6 (17%) did not indicate the timeframe in which contact occurred

NOT CONTACTED BY DOCS

Of the 75 reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 1 week, 26 (**35%**) were not contacted by a DoCS caseworker. 14 (54%) of these non-contacts came from the DoCS Northern Region.

One of these survey returns came from a womens refuge. It concerned a report about child three years old. The worker believed that the child was at risk of serious harm from domestic violence. The worker commented in the survey return "non action from DoCS generally happens in response to a domestic violence situation. Refuge workers are questioning 'why report?'. How does this impact on the clients? There aren't even faxed responses"

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NOT ANSWERED

Of the 75 Reports that indicated the worker believed action was required within 1 week 13 (**17.3%**) did not indicate whether they were contacted by DoCS or not

Summary of contact with CSC after reporting

- | | |
|--|------------|
| ▪ Contacted by a CSC since making the report | 91 (41.4%) |
| ▪ Made own contact with CSC | 23 (10.5%) |
| ▪ No contact with CSC | 64 (29%) |
| ▪ Unknown - not indicated on survey return | 42 (19.1%) |

Given details of planned action

We asked survey participants whether they were given details of any planned action by DoCS.

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| ▪ Yes | 70 |
| ▪ No | 57 |
| ▪ Did not indicate | 93 ¹² |

Agency continued involvement with the child/young person they had reported

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| ▪ Yes | 89 (40.5%) |
| ▪ No | 45 (20.5%) |
| ▪ Did not indicate | 86 (39%) ¹³ |

Comments on reporting process by participating survey respondents

There appears to be some discrepancy between NGO worker assessment, Helpline assessment and CSC assessment. NGO workers sometimes put this down to a lack of resources or options for Departmental staff, other times there are no suggested reasons for the discrepancy.

“DoCS workers are so stretched they often do not get the chance to follow up on specific reports. Informal discussions happen at local CAR meetings.”

¹² This figure is high for a number of reasons. Some survey returns did not state whether they were given any details, other survey returns could not fill out this section because they did not have any contact with a CSC

¹³ This figure is also high because many participating services were refuges and emergency/crisis intervention and ongoing work with some clients may be random and infrequent.

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"Lack of intervention. Children not interviewed. No AVO's for children. Non action responses to repeated request for assistance by refuge staff. No apparent partnership, follow up."
This report concerned four children aged 9, 8, 5, 3 years and assessed by worker as requiring action within 24 hours. Contact by a CSC caseworker was made 5 days after report was made to Helpline.

Improvements seemed to have occurred in the response time from the Helpline. However, waiting times can still be a significant problem. Also, the communication between the Helpline, CSC and referring agency/worker is still an issue as vulnerable children remain in situations where they are at risk.

"[Helpline] got back to us quickly. Noted as a 'priority one'". Reporter recorded that they believed action was needed within 24 hours. Contact with a CSC caseworker occurred one week after report was made to Helpline.
"Even though this was classed as 'priority one' the family were not contacted".
The worker was making a report on two children aged two and three. The issues of concern, the children were at risk of being physically abused or mistreated and at risk of serious harm arising from domestic violence.

No priority to case, no transport available by escort – worker reporting assessed this case as requiring action within 24hrs as it was a homeless young person with a mental illness

"Report would be referred to the local office however Helpline staff did not believe that the referral would receive any follow up action".
The worker assessed this report as requiring action but could wait longer than a week. The worker had assessed that the young person was at risk of being physically abused or mistreated

"No action would be taken, details taken, probably nothing would be done due to family already being involved with the service".
Worker assessment was that this report required action but could wait more than a week however the worker expressed concerns about the slowness of the response and the lack of [available] caseworkers able to address the situation and the perception that because the service was still involved no action would be taken.

"Satisfied with the action taken."
For many of the missing person reports action by the Helpline and CSC was timely and appropriate. Police were contacted and the service was informed of action.

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"I was told she [Helpline case worker] would speak to her team leader and it would be forwarded on within 24 hours."
This report concerned a family who was homeless – involving 4 children 3,2, 1 and newborn.
The worker making the report considered it be requiring action within 24 hours. Attempts over one week had been made to contact the family's caseworker with no response. The Report was made to the Helpline but no contact was received from a DoCS CSC caseworker until 13 days later. No contact had been made with the family and the file was being transferred to another CSC.

"It took three days for the Helpline to call me back and I had to leave three messages. Helpline takes several days to respond and then only passes it on to the local office who frequently don't call back or make contact."
The worker assessed this report as requiring action within a week [Helpline called back in three days]. The DoCs CSC called 10 days later.

"I left message and received no contact [from Helpline] until four days later than a fax ten days later. I have subsequently written a complaint letter to Helpline Manager and Local Office Manager."
The worker assessed this report as requiring action within 24 hrs as the young person (13 yrs) was at risk of being physically abused or mistreated.

It is also clear from the survey returns that NGO workers want to work in partnership. NGO workers do appreciate the exceptional efforts of Departmental staff but are also highly frustrated by inaction, lack of communication or repeated communication with no clear decision or action being taken as a result.

"Provided urgent attention as requested. Excellent categorising and local action."

"Concerns include slowness in reply and lack of caseworkers to be able to address the situation. Also attitude that because our service was already involved they probably wouldn't do anything."

"This was a second report made (the first being in February). There were still concerns as nothing had been done about the first [report]. Caseworker visited the carer but not the children concerned. I was worried the caseworker only spoke to the carer and not the children."

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"[Helpline] caseworker said he would give the information to his supervisor, he was sure action would be taken. He asked what was my local office." The following day the worker was contacted by CSC caseworker. "Said they would get back to us and let us know who the worker would be. **We** [NGO service] rang the office yesterday to see if a worker had been allocated and was told the case had been closed. They told us that they thought we were monitoring the case and ensuring child safety."

This particular survey return related to a report for four children aged 7, 6, 4 and 2 and their pregnant mother. The worker making the report believed it required action within a week.

"[Helpline] said they would send info directly to local office. Very satisfactory action by local office and Helpline (except long wait to answer phone)."

"I am concerned that the case is being juggled between two offices. I have not been given any feedback on any action being taken."

The D.O. (name withheld) is an excellent worker. There should be more of him.