

Vulnerable Children Bill 150-1

Oral Submission from the National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) to the Social Services Committee:

Chairperson: Peseta Sam Lotu-liga, National Maungakiekie; **(who left just before our turn and Melissa Lee took over)** Deputy-Chairperson: Melissa Lee, National Party List;
Members Present: Phil Heatley National Whangarei; Jan Logie Green List;
Sue Moroney Labour List; Alfred Ngaro National List; Ian Lees Galloway, Labour List; Mike Sabin: National Northland; Asenati Lole-Taylor, NZ First List; Claudette Hauiti, National, List.

Good morning, my name is Wendy Zemanek and my colleague is Dr Judy Whitcombe. We are both members of the National Council of Women Parliamentary Watch Committee.

The wellbeing of the child

Overall, the responses to this bill reflected out members' concern for the wellbeing of the child. This should be the focus of all laws and policies!

The lifestyle of the parent/s may involve addiction and the child may be suffering from: violence – sometimes alcohol fuelled; malnutrition; lack of stimulation, emotional closeness and warmth; inadequate clothing and shoes for winter weather, living in a cold house, poverty, witnessing violence.

Further comments from members addressed specific Parts of the Bill

Part 1 Clause 6 – The measures listed were supported.

One branch wrote: *“Vulnerable’ children is a very broad term. Research shows that 15% of children are consistent headliners – they should be in the priority group. The earlier you start working with them, the better chance there is of reducing damage.”*

Children’s Worker Safety Checking (Part 1 Sub Part 3)

Our members believe that all people working with vulnerable children should be trained to deal in an appropriate manner with children’s disclosures about their situation. One branch noted that “the most common complaint of abused children once they are adults, is that they tried to tell someone, but were not heard!”

Child care workers should be trained to look for signs of abuse: physical, psychological, sexual, financial, spiritual and neglect.

They wondered who decides that there is no realistic prospect that the child will be returned to family care? Decisions made by one social worker alone are not always appropriate, as at times the social worker and the parent may not see ‘eye to eye’!

Concern was also expressed regarding informal adoptions not overseen by agencies eg whangai – when families give away a child to someone else they know.

The behaviour of parent/s or those in ‘loco parentis.’ Section 110: Guardianship orders

Members supported the onus of proof being on the parent - rather than the social worker - as this would provide better protection for the child at risk. The chance to speak out would indicate whether the parent shows anger and resentment and would give a clearer picture of the home environment.

However, it was recognised that while some parents will be confident, others may feel vulnerable and find it difficult to verbalise their case. A particular issue is families who move around frequently and “fall off the radar”.

A suggestion for more regular checks on foster parents came from a young person who grew up in foster care and saw and suffered abuse. Our members recognise that foster carers may need extensive support and regular checks, as their job can be very difficult.

Social workers. Clause 123, Section 186 amended (reports by Social Workers)

There was strong concern that social workers should be registered. However, the requirements need to be stated clearly and they should not be so academically onerous that people with excellent 'people skills' are unable to achieve registration.

It is clear that more social workers are needed. Several of our branches wrote about them being seriously overloaded. Under-staffing and an excessive workload increased pressure. They should be trained in how to identify neglect and how to look for signs of abuse.

A suggestion for more regular checks on foster parents came from a young person who grew up in foster care and saw and suffered abuse. Our members recognise that foster carers may need extensive support and regular safety checks, as their job can be very difficult. Police vetting, references and checking with previous workplaces or agencies should be carried out in a careful and respectful way so that people are not deterred from providing beneficial care.

Change of Placement

Our members generally supported the statement that the onus should be on the carers to demonstrate that they meet the requirements. Criminal charges such as manslaughter, murder and infanticide should be reasons for a new placement. However this would need to be long term, to provide stability for the child and to enable bonding with the new carer/s.

Other comments

The Value of *Playcentre*

NCW endorses the *Playcentre* policy, which includes a statement of what staff should do if they suspect abuse. The procedure starts with reporting, writing notes and confirming fears. There is mandatory reporting when this reaches the point of reasonable suspicion.

In the Family

We were pleased to note that family group conferences were referred to 50 times in the bill. More effort and resources should be diverted towards the recognition that children can be in the greatest danger in their own home. Until someone is caught, no one knows that the children are being abused.

One of our branches expressed concern that there are too many organisations involved with children's health, welfare and education – ministries, government departments and agencies. The Action Paper in the *White Paper on Vulnerable Children* was endorsed.

A particular issue is tracking families who keep moving around and do not necessarily contact agencies when they have moved.

The comment of a member who was brought up in an orphanage was interesting. She wrote of the benefits. "One place to call home, no changing the place where you sleep, it becomes a family environment, children realise and understand that other kids have experienced as much pain or difficulty as they have, the way of life is structured and non-threatening."

Conclusion

NCWNZ supports the Bill and hopes that the agencies which will have responsibility for its implementation, will be adequately resourced to carry out their functions, so that the four proposed Acts can be set up satisfactorily.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these comments.

Notes: The CSU and PSA preceded us. Their concerns addressed the position and treatment of social workers in the field and the importance of consultation.

Questions to NCW Asenati Lole-Taylor- asked about tracking families who are on the move.

Sue Moroney Picked up on transient families and the difficulties of monitoring them.