

Child protection in the Northern Territory (Epilogue)

In October 2010, following the release of the Board of Inquiry's *Growing them Strong, Together* report, the Northern Territory Government announced the provision of \$130 million, over five years, to reform the child protection system.

Approximately six months after the release of the report, the Department of Children and Families (formerly known as Northern Territory Families and Children) released Volume 1 of its *Child Protection Reform: Progress Report*. This instalment focused on the 34 urgent recommendations made by the Board but also looked at progress towards the remaining 103 recommendations. The Board of Inquiry had given the Department an 18 month time limit to begin implementing all of the recommendations made. The next progress report was due in twelve months time. The major developments by April 2011 included:

- Recruitment of 42 additional Professional Stream care and protection staff
- Secondment of staff from New Zealand to reduce the backlog of 870 cases. Seventeen remained as at 14 April 2011
- Funding for the creation of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies in Darwin and Alice Springs and an Aboriginal Peak Body
- Funding to Northern Territory Council of Social Services (NTCOSS) to work with the Department of Children and Families to strengthen relationships with the non-government sector, and to implement recommendations.
- Approval for the introduction of child protection workers' caseload ratios:
 - Darwin – 1:15-20
 - Outer Darwin – 1:7-14
 - Supervision – 1:5
- Introduction of an incentives based package targeting remote staff, including a Relocation Allowance for Katherine and Alice Springs staff

This case was written by Marinella Padula, Australia and New Zealand School of Government for Professor John Alford as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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- A staff forum for 135 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to discuss their workforce planning needs, engagement strategies and consultation processes to improve their contribution to decision making
- Development of a model for inter-agency Community Child Safety and Wellbeing Teams
- An increase in the powers, functions and funding of the Children's Commissioner including:
 - Conferring an "own motion" investigation power
 - Extending the complaint management responsibilities of the Children's Commissioner
 - Expanding the Children's Commissioner's powers to obtain documents and information.¹

A website was also available to provide information for prospective staff

www.ntfccareers.nt.gov.au.

In May 2011, Clare Gardner-Barnes was appointed head of the new Department of Children and Families (DCF) when NTFC was split off from DHF. She had been Executive Director of NTFC since July 2010, three months before the release of the Inquiry report.

While the Department had plenty more work to do, the Northern Territory government announced an extra \$25.2 million in the 2011-12 Budget for the Department of Children and Families, taking its total funding to \$182 million. According to the Minister for Children and Families, Kon Vatskalis it was the single biggest increase in funding for children, youth and family services in the Northern Territory's history.²

¹ Adapted from 'Child Protection Reform: Progress Report Volume 1' Northern Territory Government, April 2011, pp. 2-3

² Northern Territory Government, Media Release: 'Budget 2011 Delivers Biggest Ever Investment for Child and Family Services' downloaded from <http://www.childrenandfamilies.nt.gov.au> on 30-6-2011