"The Legacy of Past Adoption Practices: Accessing Records and Support"

Submission to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Polices and Practices

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February 2011

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BACKGROUND

MacKillop Family Services was established in 1997 as a refounding of seven long established Catholic services. MacKillop is a specialised provider of child, youth and family services to some of the most marginalised families in Melbourne, Geelong, Western Sydney and Wollongong. Key areas of service delivery include home-based and residential care, disability services, youth support, education and training, family support and support to women and men who, who as children and mothers were in the care of our founding agencies. This work is coordinated across more than 30 sites and the efforts of over 450 staff and a further 400 volunteers. Much of our work is with children and young people who have been placed in Out-of-Home Care, either in home-based care or residential services.

The seven Catholic agencies that preceded MacKillop Family Services were:

- Mercy Family Care Centre, North Geelong
- St Anthony's Family Service, Footscray
- St Augustine's Adolescent and Family Services, Geelong
- St Joseph's Babies and Family Services, Glenroy
- St Joseph's Homes for Children, Flemington
- St Vincent's Boys Home, South Melbourne
- St Vincent de Paul Child and Family Service, Black Rock

These seven founding agencies were managed by three founding religious congregations: the Sisters of Mercy, the Christian Brothers, and the Sisters of St Joseph. These congregations themselves had evolved from much larger institutions with a long history of engagement in the care of children and young people in Victoria dating back to 1854.

In addition to caring for babies and children St Joseph's Babies Home in Broadmeadows and St Joseph's Receiving Home in Carlton provided accommodation for mothers. Between 1901 and 1975, more than 5000 mothers were housed at Broadmeadows and during 1906 and 1985 more than 7500 at Carlton. Most of these women were accommodated prior to and/or following the birth of their babies while others came for respite. The majority of mothers were single women and were referred to at the time as 'unmarried mothers.' Adoption was viewed as the most appropriate course of action to provide a solution to the 'problem' of being pregnant out of wedlock.

The Homes were not maternity hospitals. Mothers were transferred to hospital, usually the Women's Hospital in Carlton, at the time of giving birth. Of the babies born to the mothers who stayed at the Homes, some remained with their mothers, but a large number were placed for adoption and many other babies remained in institutional care. The arrangements for the adoption of babies appear to have been made by agencies of the Catholic Church, at first by the Sisters of St Joseph, and from the 1930s by the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau or by the Women's Hospital.

HERITAGE AND INFORMATION SERVICE

MacKillop's Heritage and Information Service manages more than 115,000 individual client records and more than 12,000 photographic images. The Service works to assist individuals and their families to access records relating to their time in care, to search for and reunite with separated family members, and to reconnect with other former residents. The Service also undertakes oral history projects and engages in research on the experiences and memories of being in care.

Throughout the work of the Heritage and Information Service in releasing records and supporting former residents of the original Homes, we have listened to the stories of both mothers and children. In doing so, we appreciate the diversity of experiences before and after adoption. Whether adoption was forced or willingly entered into, there have been long term consequences for the mothers, the adopted children and other family members.

In listening to the stories of mothers whose children were adopted, we have begun to understand the pain and suffering experienced by those whose children were separated from them at birth. We regularly hear of the experiences of the separation of mothers and their babies and the breaking of the mother-child relationship. We listen to the many stories of mothers whose children were adopted and the difficulties they experienced in searching for and reconnecting with their children and the long term consequences for mothers in terms of their own identity and self-esteem. Just as children who were adopted continue to search for meaning and identity, their mothers also search. Mothers, however, also struggle to complete their own stories: to correct the official historical record, to resolve their grief over the loss of their babies and to receive acknowledgment of the injustices they have experienced.

There are many unresolved issues for these mothers. For example, they speak of:

- Errors in the recording of information, in particular relating to the circumstances of conception and birth of the child. Mothers have a right to correct these details, and this is an important step in their reclamation of power over the recording and circumstances of their motherhood.

- Difficulties in accessing records and negotiating with the range of organisations that hold the records. There are separate procedures for accessing the actual adoption record and for accessing the record relating to accommodation prior to and post adoption.

- The lack of ongoing support to assist with searching for children who were adopted, and the lack of ongoing support for establishing and sustaining a relationship with children.

- The pain of learning many years later that their baby had died whilst in care awaiting adoption, and of not having been informed of this at the time of their baby's death.

- The pain of learning many years later that their baby had not been adopted but had remained in institutional care.

- Having unresolved issues of loss and grief, because they were not supported at the time of separation from their babies, which continue to affect mothers throughout their lives.

- Having unresolved issues related to shame for becoming pregnant outside marriage and having to have kept this a secret.

Mothers have the right for their anguish, pain and ongoing suffering to be heard, and are in need of support and acknowledgment. Their suffering will continue until it is acknowledged and addressed and adequate support services are in place. Medical and Social Work curriculums should provide training to develop specialists in an understanding of the implications of past adoption practices, and in particular for the support of mothers who continue to suffer grief and loss as a result of separation from their babies.