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Hon. Simon O'Brien MLC  
Chairman  
Standing Committee on Environment & Public Affairs  
Parliament House  
Perth 6000

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Dear Chairperson,

**Petition No. 132 - Oppose funding cuts to the Department of Child Protection and Family Support**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the above petition. I am pleased to respond on behalf of the principal petitioner, Craig Parr at the Community Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association. Below is a summary of issues that the CPSU/CSA has raised that will be of interest to your Committee for further investigation. The issues have not been raised with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations.

**Ensure every at-risk child has a dedicated caseworker**

*'Approximately 4500 children are currently wards of the state. It is an astonishing number and it places an enormous burden on personnel in the Department. The evidence and submission of the Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association indicated that an increasing number of children are, in weasel words, "monitored", which in fact means the opposite.'*<sup>i</sup>

Following the 2007 Strategy for Caseload Management, measures were put in place to ensure a Department of Child Protection and Family Support full-time case-worker could have no more than 15 cases at any time. Exceptional circumstances allowed a caseload of up to 18. Cases in excess were to be placed on a monitored list. The number of children in care has now increased by over 2,200 from 2007 to 2014<sup>ii</sup>, while 566 children are on the monitored list<sup>iii</sup>. Our members within the Department report persistent workload concerns. They are also influenced to misrepresent the number of at-risk cases and clients they support and protect each month.

To give an example, a new graduate full-time caseworker recently contacted the CPSU/CSA, explaining she held a caseload of 20. She had been directed to place five cases on the monitored list by selecting the five least at-risk clients. Clearly, vulnerable children are being placed at risk within the current approach.

Safety and Wellbeing Assessments (SWAs) are conducted by caseworkers to determine the risk to the child. They are required to be completed within 30 days to prevent any avoidable harm or neglect to the child<sup>iv</sup>. As of 30 November 2015, there were 692 SWAs open for more than 90 days within Western Australia<sup>v</sup>.

**Commitment to programs that prevent kids coming into care**

Early intervention programs reduce long-term costs and service demand for a number of community and governmental agencies, such as justice services, health services or further child protection and family support functions. To give an idea of the savings created by early intervention programs, a completed Responsible Parenting Services (RPS) Parent Support program will deliver a net benefit if it can prevent just 19 days spent in youth detention. This benefit is recorded even without considering benefits to the child such as reduced risk of drug use and criminality, improved physical and mental health and increased involvement in work, education and training.

One such successful example of early intervention policy has been the state government's RPS program. The program has recorded successes in assisting the most at-risk and hard to reach families in WA, as measured by Pricewaterhouse Coopers:

- The RPS program Best Beginnings handles 785 cases per year
- The RPS program Parent Support handles 1,662 cases per year (2014/2015)<sup>vi</sup>
- For every dollar spent on Best Beginnings, the evaluated saving is \$3.85
- For every dollar spent on Parent Support, the evaluated saving is \$7.22 (regional WA)<sup>vii</sup>

Despite the successes recorded, due to the 2016 budget cuts the program is set to close completely in 2017/18. This is a great loss and will no doubt create additional long-term costs for the state.

Funding support for child protection and family support remains reactive rather than preventative federally, with only \$719 million (16.6% of total child protection expenditure) invested in supporting families, compared to \$3.62 billion in child protection and out-of-home care in 2014-15<sup>viii</sup>.

**A safe, fair and reasonable workload**

*"At this point I have transitioned to the new team and already my workload has increased with numerous requests to support by way of transport, contact and supervision of client contacts. My current Team Leader is doing her best to manage the situation*

*and at this point my personal opinion supports the current view that the district is currently understaffed and overwhelmed with work overload."*

-CPSU/CSA Delegate, April 2016.

Between 2008 and 2015, Full Time Equivalent (FTE) caseworkers directly employed by the Department increased by 136 — from 631 to 767 FTE. At the same time, this period saw the number of children in care skyrocket by 50 per cent (3011 to 4548). Following recruitment freezes, closure and casualisation of support staff positions within the Department, more frontline caseworkers are expected to conduct duties previously undertaken by other staff in supporting roles in addition to their care and assessment responsibilities.

Policies such as sector-wide freezes on employment exacerbate the considerable workload of our members and the potential harm to the community. These concerns were raised in the recent findings of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee inquiry, 'Red Flags, White Flag Response':

*FINDING 4: 'Systemic issues, such as inadequate resources and excessive workloads, may have contributed to the outcome in the Bunbury case, although a direct link is not evident.'*

*FINDING 7: 'There is a direct nexus between the level of staffing resources and the capacity to monitor and supervise. Staffing at a sustainable level, along with appropriate practices, would help to prevent a similar death from occurring.'*

#### **End recruitment freezes and stop Department cuts**

The 2016 State Budget documents outlined cuts of \$40.876 million from Department services over three years with almost \$12 million cut from RPS<sup>ix</sup>. DCPFS Director General Emma White had previously written that RPS programs *"are the foundation from which we continue to build and grow as a Department"*<sup>x</sup>. These cuts mean the loss of 63 FTE from the Department, with many positions required to build capacity in rural and regional WA. It is important to note that the vast majority of NGO service providers do not find it cost-effective to provide coverage in remote and regional Western Australia, and as such do not offer child protection services there.

Consultations held by the CPSU/CSA with NGO child protection providers highlight a culture of increasingly competitive tenders. In this environment, long-term community resources are neglected in favour of fixed-term contracts and funding wasted on closing and reopening resources following the readjustments of public funds. In addition, there are concerns the tender processes favour larger providers over smaller NGO providers with a focus and experience within their local community.

#### **Child protection is government business**

Intelligent and properly resourced child protection and family support policy create benefits for the wider community, including governmental agencies. For instance, Amnesty International recently recommended the West Australian parliament immediately funds the Department to provide greater supported accommodation options and supervision to those released into their care on bail in order to address underlying causes of offending behaviour in WA<sup>xi</sup>. The work of the Department has substantial allied benefits for the fields of policing, corrective services, mental health, drug and alcohol services and education.

We would appreciate the opportunity to for a selection of our delegates to appear before the Committee as witnesses. I trust this information is of value to the Committee in its deliberations. Please do not hesitate to contact the CPSU/CSA should further information be required.

Yours sincerely

Toni Walkington  
Branch Secretary

<sup>i</sup> 'Red Flags, White Flag Response?' Community Development and Justice Standing Committee. Report No.11, 17 March 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Government of Western Australia, "2015-16 Government Mid-Year Financial Projections Statement", (2015): 49.

<sup>iii</sup> Workload Management CPSU/CSA Report. 5 August 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> 7.15 Safety and Wellbeing Assessment - Safety and Wellbeing Concerns Regarding Children in the Care of the CEO. Accessed 20 September 2016 at: <https://manuals.dcp.wa.gov.au/CPM/SitePages/Procedure.aspx?ProcedureId=173>

<sup>v</sup> West Australian Parliament. Question Time. Legislative Council. 24 March 2016., p.1894b - 1896a.

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Child Protection and Family Support, "Department of Child Protection and Family Support Annual Report 2014-2015", (2015): 39.

<sup>vii</sup> PWC report, Empowered Parents and Families. Evaluation of the Royalties for Regions Responsible Parenting Service Expansion.

<sup>viii</sup> Productivity Commission (2016) Report on Government Services 2016, Volume F: Community Services, available at: <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2016>

<sup>ix</sup> Department of Treasury, "2016-2017 Budget Paper No.2" 12 May 2016, page 868. Accessed 20 September 2016 at: <http://bit.ly/2buUaUX>

<sup>x</sup> Department of Child Protection and Family Support, "Department of Child Protection and Family Support Annual Report 2014-2015", (2015): 9.

<sup>xi</sup> Recommendation 14, There is always a brighter future: keeping indigenous kids in the community and out of detention in Western Australia. Amnesty International Australia. p.8. Accessed 20 September 2016 at: <http://bit.ly/Amnlntrecoms>