

“other children” apart from wards is a hopeful inclusion.

2. Registration and approval of voluntary organisations.

Undoubtedly there is some concern that different types of organisations are now operating in the child welfare field; notably organisations arranging temporary care. By and large there is little community recognition of their existence. The current approach to recognition and approval is unsuitable for such organisations.

The present approach to standards has emphasised physical conditions and health requirements. The obvious direction for standard setting is to more standard setting, by objectives and the capacity of staff to further those objectives. However a number of barriers exist to adopting this approach.

(i) If the State Government sets objectives, voluntary agencies quite reasonably expect that financial support will be available. A further issue arises because some voluntary agencies would be more able or more willing to raise standards than others. This would raise the sensitive issue of differential subsidies.

(ii) The question of what objectives ought to be set is by no means resolved and cannot be resolved quickly. It is to be hoped that the enquiry will bear in mind that there are two types of objectives—(a) the objectives of child welfare as a whole or, in the more formidable term of today, “system objectives”. (b) the objectives of particular programmes of child welfare.

These two types of objectives are intertwined. The objectives of child welfare as a whole must take into account what the programmes are and what they can achieve. On the other hand, to try to determine programme objectives as if they were separate from a governing philosophy and strategy is an exercise in futility. If the Children’s Welfare Association of Victoria might be criticised it is because it has given little attention to “system objectives”.

(iii) While the terms of reference in the enquiry refer to standards and registration “for voluntary organisations”, obviously the qualities of the standard setting body set limits to what standards can be set.

For a long time the level of performance in voluntary organisations was superior to that of the State. There are obvious problems in setting standards for voluntary organisations which the State programmes themselves do not meet. It will therefore be necessary to look at the standard setting and standard regulating machinery.

3. The nature and extent of preventive facilities . . . to avoid the need for children to be removed from parental care.

All will welcome the inclusion of this term of reference. It opens up the possibility of an enlarged philosophy of child welfare. In any child care crisis there are a number of potentials which ought to be explored. The admission of the child to wardship status smothers this difficulty. However the various potentials can be explored only within a responsible effort to provide practical solutions. Such efforts have received little encouragement in the past.

4. Procedures for admission.

This term of reference is tied to the previous term of reference. Unless there are “preventive” services available in the community, the procedures for admission are unlikely to change. However, the term of reference touches upon the case for an intermediate strategy in those cases where the community might be expected to maintain some authoritative interest in a child’s situation without terminating parental custody.

I am sure this is possible, but a precondition would be the need for responsible helping agencies possibly backed up by some system of repairing.

At present what might be recognised as temporary solutions become permanent solutions, with far too much emphasis put upon the physical care of the child and little or none upon his family situation as a whole. While there is no specific reference to families in the terms of reference, the idea that resources will be available to help the child and not his family is untenable in a progressive philosophy. I would hope in particular that a different strategy will be developed with respect to maintenance payments from parents. At the most these should be voluntary payments.

ENQUIRY INTO CHILD CARE SERVICES IN VICTORIA

Enquiries into child care in Victoria have rarely been as comprehensive as the present enquiry. It provides an opportunity for the Government and the community to set a more forward looking course for a field, which although studded with a number of particular innovations, is too firmly anchored in the past. The purpose of this brief comment is to draw attention to the seven terms of reference and to enter a plea that those interested in child welfare should not confine themselves narrowly to the special points of stress, but give attention to questions of structure and objectives.

The Enquiry lists seven terms of reference:

1. Facilities necessary for the care of wards and other children requiring full time care apart from their families. I would hope that this term of reference will allow for a development strategy.

It is widely known that services are inadequate for some categories of children, particularly for those with behavioural difficulties and various types of handicap. It is less well known what kinds of facilities might best serve the interests of these children. The desired principle is of course that children with different needs should receive a service appropriate to that need. The inclusion of

In considering the question of alternatives, I would hope that a "pusy-footing" attitude is avoided. Children "at risk" do not become so unless their families are in serious difficulties. The alternatives proposed, I would hope, are alternatives of some weight and substance.

5. Facilities, staffing and services for implementation.

Most enquiries tend to settle for a specification of facilities, staffing and services too early in the process and separated from objectives. I would suggest that the following questions be asked:

(i) In what ways, if any, does the present division of administration in the Social Welfare Department tend to distort the staffing and service issues

(ii) What sections of the Social Welfare Department are devoted to evaluating and refining care technology and developing alternatives?

(iii) What is currently being done about professional development within the Department?

These questions pose the need for structural changes as a step (but not an alternative) to providing answers to the questions about staffing, facilities and services. In my opinion far too much time is devoted to asking questions about the kinds of staff needed as if this were a separate question from "what functions ought to be performed?" If there is a doubt about the latter, as indeed there is, then staffing and structural patterns are required to try to determine the functions themselves.

It would be an unfortunate outcome if the enquiry should produce a staffing pattern which was satisfactory in every respect except in its capacity to determine objectives and to evaluate programmes and to develop alternatives.

6. Voluntary or Bureaucratic Programmes?

The terms of reference continually state the sixth term of reference as a choice between services operable by the Social Welfare Department and/or by voluntary organisations. This is a fundamental question, but I believe it is asked in the wrong position. It divides into two what perhaps is a unity. As a matter of policy, government at present

supports a child welfare system which includes the Social Welfare Department and voluntary organisations. They are part of one government policy.

To my mind the next question is about the degree of community involvement with child welfare. At present this is low, as both the Department and most voluntary organisations are rather too isolated from the community at large. I suspect, however, that the retention of the voluntary system is a better base for involving the community through its abandonment.

Currently the relationship between voluntary agencies and the Social Welfare Department is being oversimplified. The organisations are not really voluntary, say some departmental critics, as almost all of the revenues are from the government. We cannot innovate say voluntary organisations, because we are too dependent on the Social Welfare Department. I believe the voluntary agencies make an inadequate defense when they point to their considerably lower operational costs. This is an argument, but surely the voluntary agencies can see other potentials. I believe also that voluntary agencies must accept public accountability, but this does not mean absorption into the Social Welfare Department. I believe, too, that the time has passed when voluntary agencies could choose a small "piece" of child welfare and cultivate it in private, without regard to the child welfare system as a whole, or that the state should justify its actions on the basis of understanding whatever the voluntary agencies ignored.

If the voluntary agencies can be criticised in relation to their definition of goals, the Ministry of Social Welfare might ask itself questions about its own attitude to the voluntary agencies. Considering the large part of the child welfare field served by the voluntary sectors, where in the Department are there resources devoted to promoting better philosophies and priorities in voluntary welfare?

Potentially, this term of reference is the most important term of reference in the enquiry, because there is urgent need to re-define the role of voluntary agencies within the child welfare field. The move towards regularisation of services in any case must call for re-definition,

and voluntary agencies should re-examine their potential and suggest ways by which they can contribute to a dynamic and responsible child welfare policy. Fortunately, a number of voluntary agencies have begun to demonstrate the way in which greater community involvement can be achieved and the way in which new programmes can be implemented. Mercy Family Care and Grassmere spring into mind.

7. Priorities, Costs and Methods of Financing.

It is not always realised that by largely restricting its mandate to children committed by the courts, the State has been able to keep a firm brake on costs. Terms of reference which include "prevention", "other children" and "alternatives to wardship" must send cold shivers through the State Treasury Department. There is something sadly wrong in State/Federal relationships whereby the State must hedge its objectives in a field which ought to have the highest of priorities. There will be a temptation in this enquiry to look only at the problem of maintaining voluntary agencies, for there are urgent problems that must be solved, but if the concepts of alternatives and prevention are to have such meaning, new funds must be found. Who speaks for child welfare?

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