

Address to Launch of special issue of Parity on Leaving Care and Homelessness 24 August 2010 by Philip Mendes

It is very pleasing to see so many people here today. When I first began researching leaving care issues in 1998 there were only about ten people in the whole of Victoria who understood what leaving care was, and even less who wanted to be involved in advocacy for policy and practice reform. Today in contrast, leaving care is almost the flavour of the month. It is highlighted in the national child protection framework, the national out of home care standards, and the national homelessness strategy. We have made some serious progress, but still have a long way to go.

I am going to say a few things about leaving care generally, and then leave it to Guy Johnson to speak more specifically about the leaving care and housing debate. Earlier this year, I visited the UK and conducted interviews with representatives of the Department of Children, Schools and Families, National Care Advisory Service, and Camden Town local authority. The English system is far from perfect, and the local workers are the first to acknowledge that. But I nevertheless believe that the English model provides a best practice benchmark for us to follow. I would like to highlight three particular aspects of that model.

One is the Corporate Parenting Philosophy. This concept refers to the responsibility of state authorities to introduce policies, structures and roles that actively compensate children and young people in care for their traumatic pre-care experiences, and offer them the same ongoing nurturing and support as typically experienced by their peers who are not in care in order to maximize their ambitions and achievements. It emphasizes a shared responsibility between different departments such as education, health, and child welfare. This means in practice providing them with the best possible placement experiences in terms of stability and supportive relationships until their care order ends, and then continuing to take responsibility for their welfare until they are at least 21 years old. The term 'corporate' refers to the fact that organisations are involved in parenting children and young people in care, and the need to ensure that structures are in place to support the individual carers who parent within that system. In short, parenting is for life, and all of us involved in the out-of-home care system need to remember that.

Secondly, there is the value of a National Framework. A national leaving care framework similar to the UK would arguably address a number of key weaknesses of the existing Australian system such as the wide variation in policy and legislation between the states and territories, and the absence of support for young people who shift from one jurisdiction to another. It would also improve opportunities for national benchmarking, and place pressure on poorer services to improve their standards. It is also evident from the UK experience that national legislation is likely to increase the profile of leaving care, and drive improved resourcing and higher quality of service provision.

Thirdly, we urgently need a National Data Base similar to that of the UK accessible on the internet which will allow us to monitor care leavers; measure outcomes in key areas such as education, employment, health, housing, and involvement in crime; and analyse differences in

the effectiveness of various states and territories and NGO policies and programs.

Leaving Care Model: A Normative Commitment

So to summarize, care authorities should aim to approximate the ongoing and holistic support that responsible parents in the community typically provide to their children after they leave home till at least 25 years. This is not rocket science. Three key reforms are required to improve outcomes for care leavers: improving the quality of care, providing a more gradual and flexible transition from care, and more specialized after-care supports. On housing, we must ensure that all care leavers are offered stable and secure accommodation. There should never be an exit into homelessness, and we should urgently examine introducing here the "Staying Put" pilot schemes recently trialled in the UK that enable many young people at 18 years to remain with their foster parents.

One final comment: this is not just a government responsibility although they obviously need to provide adequate funding to support care leavers, and not just a responsibility of non-government agencies although they obviously need to provide quality services and supports. It is also a community responsibility. We need to not only hassle government to take action, we also need to reassure them that we are personally willing to make sacrifices in terms of paying higher taxes so that this group of young people get a fair go.