

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S CONTRIBUTION TO CHILD CARE: THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES PROGRAM

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There is a folk-tale about three blind men who were trying to picture what an elephant looked like. One felt the elephant's ears and said: 'An elephant is similar to a winnowing basket'. Another felt the strong legs of the elephant and thought that the elephant looked like a big, solid pillar. The third felt its tail and to him an elephant was akin to a riding crop.

The story illustrates the fact that our experiences shape our views of objects and situations. This is as true in the social service field as anywhere else. Service providers, funding organisations, administrators and consumers have, according to their own particular experience, their own views of a service. Often these views may be strikingly dissimilar because of a lack of communication between the groups.

As a small step in fostering communication in the child care sector, this article describes the Commonwealth Government framework — i.e. the structures and processes through which the national child care policies are formulated and administered, and the aims and objectives of these policies.

OFFICE OF CHILD CARE

The provision of large scale Commonwealth assistance in the child care sector commenced in 1972-73. The responsibility for child care shifted from one Department to another until June 1976 when the Office of Child Care was established within the Department of Social Security. The Office provides advice to the Minister for Social Security on matters relating to the provision of services for children and their families, and develops and administers a program of funding for a network of services throughout Australia, known as the Children's Services Program.

The Office of Child Care now has about forty staff in the Central office of the Department of Social Security and a total of some eighty people working on child care matters in the State and Territory headquarters of the Department, located in each of the capital cities.

The main functions of the Department's State and Territory offices in relation to child care are:

- * assisting organisations in applying for funds under the Children's Services Program;
- * assessing applications and providing reports on these applications to Central office; and
- * administration of approved grants, which includes tasks such as making payments, ensuring that the conditions of grant are complied with, etc.

Many projects that receive funding are required to have their activities reviewed after a certain time to determine if funding should be continued. These reviews are conducted by State offices. In addition, State offices research and monitor the child care needs of all areas in their State. They also advise organisations which have expressed interest in providing services or sponsoring projects, and assist funded services. In addition State offices liaise with State welfare departments in carrying out such activities as assessing the needs of an area, allocating ranking to applications for assistance, or in the administration of grants which are paid to organisations through the State departments.

The Office of Child Care in Central office is divided into two main functional branches; they are —

- (a) Policy, Research and Development Branch, and
- (b) Project Administration Branch

The first of these is responsible for:

- * the development and formulation of policy advice to the Minister on services to children and their families;
- * examining the efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of projects and schemes funded under the Children's Services Program;
- * planning and undertaking research and evaluation of matters relating to the Program; the management of contracted research; the maintenance of a national data base of pre-school and day care services, and small area needs analysis.

The Project Administration Branch is involved in the actual management and operation of the Program on a day to day level. Some of its functions are:

- * preparing financial estimates for the Program.
- * preparing submissions to the Minister on new grants or variations to existing ones
- * developing and monitoring operational procedures for the administration of grants.

Applications for assistance are carefully considered at three levels — by the State office, by Central office and by the Minister — before a decision is taken. In assessing applications, consideration is always given to the needs of a geographic area and the availability of services in that area.

A 'planning' model is being developed as the basis for the future allocation of funds, to assist in the identification of areas having greatest relative need for children's services. This model will be based on the analysis of data on supply and demand by local government area. In addition, consultations at State and local levels will be held to establish needs and priorities in child care in an area and to develop proposals for funding.

THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES PROGRAM

The Program supports an extensive network of services throughout Australia, ranging from day care services for pre-school aged children to outside school hours care for school aged children, emergency accommodation services for adolescent youths and support services for families.

The main types of services funded under the Program are:

- * pre-schooling, which is supported

through block grants to State Governments

- * centre based day care
- * family day care schemes
- * family support services
- * services for groups regarded as having special needs for children's services, e.g. migrants, disabled or Aboriginal children, children of single parents and children both of whose parents are working
- * child care in women's refuges
- * emergency accommodation for adolescent youth
- * research and evaluation projects

The following comprise the main elements of Commonwealth policy in the provision of children's services:

- * Funded services are required to give priority of access to 'special need' groups.
- * Funded services are expected to offer a sliding scale of fees to users so that the economically needy have equal access to services. The Commonwealth offers special subsidies to enable services to do this.
- * Parents who can afford to do so are expected to pay the maximum fee for the service, although all users benefit from the Operational Support Subsidy.
- * Services are funded on a priority basis in areas of high need.
- * Funded services are required to be available to all in the community and should provide users with the opportunity to participate in the planning and management of the services.

The main focus of the Program currently is on the provision of services to young children which complement parental care. The aim of such care is to provide children with developmental and social activities supervised by skilled and caring people, for the hours which meet the children's and their parents' needs.

On 1st January, 1983, new funding arrangements for day care services came into effect, providing:

- * Operational support subsidies.
- * These are paid to day care centres and family day care schemes and benefit all users irrespective of family income.
- * Special economic need subsidies.

These provide each day care service with funds for fee rebates according to economic need among its users (as assessed by an income test). Previously existing funding arrangements limited, to some extent, the capacity of day care services in communities with a high level of families in economic need to offer sufficient fee rebates. The new fee rebating arrangements have been designed to provide each service with funds according to the need for fee rebates among its economically needy users and thus ensure that these families are not denied access to care because they cannot afford to pay the fees. National consultations on the fee relief arrangements have been undertaken during

1983; these culminated in a forum of service providers held on 19-21 September 1983. The views/proposals put forward by the forum, together with advice from an interdepartmental committee established earlier this year to examine fee relief, will be considered by the Government in formulating an appropriate fee relief mechanism.

- * Supplementary services grants.

These are additional grants to help centres and schemes provide special service elements for children with particular developmental and cultural requirements, e.g. higher staff-to-child ratios for the care of disabled children, and Aboriginal aides in Aboriginal child care services.

The Commonwealth's contribution to the development of child care services in Australia has been significant. In 1970 there were few child care services operating throughout Australia. Only a small proportion of the services that existed received assistance from State or local authorities and there was no Commonwealth government contribution to child care. By contrast, at 30 June 1983 there were 1622 Commonwealth funded child

care services: of these, 548 were day care and neighbourhood centres, 221 family day care schemes, 282 outside school hours care and the remaining comprised different service types such as services for special need groups, family support etc. . . .

The Commonwealth's expenditure for 1982/83 under the Program was \$98.04 million including \$33.09 million paid to the States and Northern Territory as the Commonwealth's contribution to pre-schooling. The corresponding allocations for 1983/84 are \$118.95 million and \$33.09 million respectively.

The Children's Services Program has attempted to encourage the development of services which have the involvement and support of the communities that they serve. Some 70 percent of the funded projects are sponsored by community based groups. The other sponsors of services funded under the Program include State government authorities, local government bodies, and religious/charitable organisations. The 'planning' model of funding services being developed in the Office of Child Care will enable the community to participate more fully in the planning and development of services.

