

A GPV/KCV COMMUNIQUE

1st July 2020

CHILD/PARENT CONTACT AND REUNIFICATION IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS AND BEYOND

Grandparents Victoria and Kinship Carers Victoria (GPV/KCV) have a commitment to supporting vulnerable families to be assisted to care for their children and young people so they can grow up safely within their families. Such support is particularly important in times of crisis.

Amongst those affected by the Covid-19 crisis are families whose children are involved with the child protection system and have been moved into out-of-home care, away from their parents, friends and extended family. There is limited community sympathy for these families but the reality of their individual situations is rooted in social disadvantage and societal breakdown.

When a child is first removed from parental care under a Children's Court order, a plan for reunification is generally put in place by Child Protection. The plan aims to assist the parent to address the issues through parenting skills programs, mental health supports, drug programs and screening if necessary, and a range of assessments. The Court decides on the contact that the child will have with her parents.

Under Covid-19 restrictions, Court-ordered contact between children and their families was suspended in almost all cases without consultation with the Court. The Court has adjourned most cases and is only hearing urgent applications where contact for children with their family and friends is an urgent matter. Programs, supports and assessments provided by community services have been cancelled or placed on-line. DHHS has advised that they are gradually resuming some contact but that their resources to do this safely within the guidelines are limited. Anecdotally we have heard that there is still very little physical contact between parents and their children in care.

Changes to the Children and Young Persons Act 2005 (CYPA) that came into effect in 2017 have severely reduced the capacity of the Court to oversee the work of Child Protection and there is now a time limit of 12 months (or 24 months in exceptional cases) for parents to show that they have addressed the issues of concern and can safely resume their parental role.

By the time the Children's Court resumes a full list of hearings, many children will have passed the time limit for the Courts to be able to make a further Family Reunification Order. Their parents may not have been able to successfully complete the program set down for them, the bonds between parent and child will have been weakened or broken and the connection between siblings, who are frequently not placed together, will have been further eroded. The Court at that stage can only make orders that have the effect of permanently removing a child from the family's care, which can result in life-long detrimental consequences for all involved.

GPV/KCV calls on DHHS to urgently work co-operatively with the Court, families and professional agencies to find ways of building family capacity so that this pandemic does not cause a surge of families permanently torn apart.

The issue of this communique marks the commencement of a GPV/KCV campaign designed to highlight the value of contact between parents and children and the importance of reunification of parents and children

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