



MEDIA RELEASE

Child Protection Services Inquiry – Women Lawyers Association take a stand

As the deadline for submissions to the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW came to a close on 11 February 2008, legal organisations and interested parties around the state provided their input into the Inquiry that may shape the future of child protection services in NSW. One body proving its views to the Special Commission was the Women Lawyers' Association of New South Wales (WLA NSW).

In making its submission, President of WLA NSW, Lee-May Saw, noted that the reasons why cases come before the Children's Court of NSW are complex and varied. WLA NSW acknowledged that the Department of Community Services NSW (DoCS) is to be commended for the level of service and assistance that it provides to often marginalised and disadvantaged families in need of support. "*In the view of WLA NSW it should not be forgotten that the majority of cases that come to the attention of the media and the Courts are of a most serious nature,*" says Ms Saw.

While making submissions in relation to a number of areas relating to child protection services in NSW, WLA NSW provided its opinion on the current system of mandatory reporting which, it says, does not encourage the kind of relationship of trust, between DoCS and refugee families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, required for DoCS to provide meaningful assistance to these families. "*Often these families are already vulnerable due to the trauma connected to their refugee background, and due to being displaced in a foreign country with a foreign culture, language and legal system,*" says Ms Saw.

The submission by WLA NSW noted that a fall out of the current system is that the responsibility of building trust with these families and providing them with meaningful support is diverted by default to community based non-government organisations. These organisations are then placed in a difficult position because of the statutory obligation of mandatory reporting. It was observed that the rapport established by many of the employees of non-government organisations is often quickly diminished in these communities following a phone call to the DoCS Help Line.

"*The current system of mandatory reporting is broad, inflexible, and ethnocentric, having no room for culture differences,*" says Ms Saw.

In the opinion of WLA NSW any system of mandatory reporting should support the best interests of the children and young people within such families, rather than re-traumatising them unnecessarily.

The views of WLA NSW have been echoed in other submissions provided to the Inquiry. It is clear to WLA NSW that the current child protection system in NSW is in need of significant reform. For such reform to be effective on the practical, policy, cultural and attitudinal levels, it must be supported by adequate and appropriate statutory reform.

The outcome of the Inquiry will be known by 30 June 2008. The full written submission of WLA NSW will be shortly available on its website - <http://www.womenlawyersnsw.org.au>.

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