Kids put at risk says advocate

Maria Billias

THE Territory’s child protection system lags behind the rest of the country with children having to wait until they are harmed before any assistance is provided to families, a leading children’s advocate has said.

The NT News exclusively revealed last week that the Department of Children and Families was struggling under the weight of unprecedented levels of child abuse and neglect notifications while trying to fill 146 frontline positions.

Frontline workers are handling up to double the number of cases they should be, with notifications reaching more than 9,200 in the past year.

There are presently 865 children in out-of-home care. While the figures can fluctuate quickly, it represents a doubling of the number of children in care since 2008.

Children’s Commissioner Howard Bath told the Territory’s estimates hearings last month that the system was not properly geared towards preventative measures that helped children before they were placed in out-of-home care.

“Our current system is framed (so that) we have to wait until those children are actually harmed before any assistance is provided,” Mr Bath said.

“We have reached parity, I guess, with the rest of Australia in identifying Aboriginal kids, in particular, who are at risk. But our protective services lag way behind the rest of Australia.

“Even though we are identifying those families, we are not doing enough to protect those children.”

Child Protection Minister John Elferink said while the NT Government provided $9.3 million towards support services through the non-government sector, parents still needed to accept responsibility for the wellbeing of their children.

“In many instances, the question must be asked of where are the parents? Parents must be responsible and provide care and protection for their child,” Mr Elferink said.

Foster Carers’ Association NT chief executive Ann Owen said the number of kids in care would continue to rise if the department did not address early intervention strategies.

“We are allowing our children to fall through the cracks and into the child-protection arena with no prevention strategies in place to support them and their families before an emergency situation is reached,” Ms Owen said.

No winter break for snakes

Jessica Brown

DESPITE the chill that has blanketed Central Australia in ice and subzero temperatures, an unusual number of snakes have been spotted.

Kristy Swift was surprised when her 7-year-old son, Levi, showed her a black and white striped snake in the backyard.

“He came in and told me he saw something that looked like a snake,” she said.

At first she didn’t believe him because “in all the time I’ve been here, we’ve never had any (snakes)”.

“I think actually our chooks might have disturbed it,” she said. “But it’s good to know that the kids are cautious.”

When her neighbour couldn’t identify the snake, she called reinforcements.

Alice Springs Reptile Centre director Rex Neindorf identified the Bandy Bandy in minutes.

He said he was also alerted to a large, venomous Mulga snake on Smith St last week.

The week before he was called to the hospital for a snake bite after a person was bitten at a remote station 800km from Alice Springs.

“Even in winter time snakes can still be out,” he said.

Mr Neindorf said people travelling up north should be cautious of snakes as they are still active in warmer areas.

Youths escape centre briefly

THREE youths who had escaped from the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre on Sunday were back in custody.

Southern Watch Commander Siri Tensousar reported to the court on Monday that the three had been taken back into custody.

She said the youth scaled a fence at about 2.45pm on Sunday but were located a short time later after a Correctional Services dog picked up their scent near Brewer Road.

The three youths, aged between 14 and 15, have been charged with escaping custody and appeared in the Alice Springs Youth Justice court yesterday.

CLP hit on child safety

SHADOW Minister for Children and Families, Lynne Walker, has criticised the CLP over the current state of child protection in the Territory, which she deems “a tragedy”.

“Labor took child protection seriously. We commissioned a Board of Inquiry report, ‘Growing them Strong’, and into the child-protection arena with no prevention strategies in place to support them and their families before an emergency situation is reached,’ Ms Owen said.

Mr Walker said the CLP Government was “mishandling child protection in the Territory”.

“There have been three CLP Ministers having carriage of the portfolio in less than two years and the CLP Government has ripped $8 million out of the Department of Children and Families,” she said.

“…it is our children left to suffer the consequences.”

By CAVENDISH MA

Expressions of interest

CLOSING: 5pm WEDNESDAY 6 AUGUST 2014
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