

# NEWSLETTER

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*The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People advocates for and promotes the best interests of young people and children under the care of the Minister for Families and Communities.*

## Young people in care triumph in youth parliament

A team of young people in care, or formerly in care, was one of the very few teams to get its bill through both houses in the recent sitting of Youth Parliament. The bill, to write into law a charter of rights for children and young people in care, was developed and championed by a team of young people, many of whom were involved in the development of the original *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care*.

Youth Advisor to the Guardian, former youth parliamentarian and team mentor David Wilkins said that their growth and development in the four month program had been enormous.

‘On the camp, our team was upfront and energetic and always the centre of noise and activity. Every single member of the team had made such an impact on the Youth Parliament program and many will remember the team because of that.

‘Our team members in both houses presented and defended their bills with plenty of good arguments and heaps of passion and the bill passed through both houses with large majorities, with the House of Assembly passing the bill 36 to 0.

‘I was impressed with the confidence they showed and how well they got into the spirit of parliamentary debate. Many other youth parliamentarians have commented on how moved they were when hearing the team members debate – I just feel sorry for the Opposition who had to refute this bill, they definitely had a difficult job!

‘The team also met with Minister Weatherill to discuss the team’s bill and he has said that he will definitely consider proposing the team’s bill to Cabinet in the near future.

Youth Parliament, which is organised by the YMCA of South Australia and funded by the Office for Youth, is an annual event in which about a dozen teams of up to eight young people draft bills on issues that concern them. They then have the opportunity to debate them in the Legislative Council and House of Assembly chambers in State Parliament according to the rules and conventions of regular parliamentary debate. The program culminates with a five-day camp during which youth parliamentarians learn about parliamentary debate, develop skills, refine their arguments and, finally, present and defend their bills in the two houses.

The team was sponsored by the Guardian’s office and supported by CREATE.

**...the camp was big like 90 people – it was great and you could just go up and talk to anyone...**

**This [charter of rights] wasn’t written by politicians, this wasn’t written by social workers, this was written by kids in care.**

**I can’t believe that I was actually standing up and debating in Parliament – I mean I was scared but I did it.**

**[my favourite moment]...was shooting David in laser skirmish.**

**words from the  
Office of the Guardian’s  
Youth Parliament team**





*Pam Simmons  
Guardian*

## Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

I am writing this flush with renewed admiration for a team of young people who stood in front of 80 peers in Parliament House and argued for the rights of children in care to be enshrined in statute. They argued with logic and passion. They won over the 'opposition' who crossed the floor to vote with them in favour of the Bill of Rights for Children and Young People in Care.

I was taken by the power of their voice. They were speaking for themselves and the 1,500 others under the guardianship of the Minister. One after the other got up to say that they wanted no more and no less than what other young people in the House had and mostly took for granted.

A second significant event to celebrate was the release of a draft action plan on alternative care. With ideas for reform that span family support, care planning, cultural identity and alternative care this document will shape the future of core services to children in care.

The two events are connected. Key to the success of planning for children and young people is listening to children and young people and acting on what they say. When, as it sometimes happens, what they want cannot be, they need to know why and that their views have been taken into account.

It demands of us new ways of thinking and new skills, but I do see more and more effort being made to involve children and young people in the decisions that affect them. The individual education plans, care plans and annual review process all expect that the children are present in person or voice. The *Participate!* website, in its final stage of preparation by Families SA, will encourage children and young people to provide feedback. The CREATE Foundation is better supported now in South Australia to provide children and young people in care with a collective voice. Child advocates in the Care and Protection Unit and the Youth Court, while not new, are critical to hearing from children in the family conference and court process.

The voice of children is the most convincing and the most authentic voice among those who would advocate for them. Listening to children and practising seeing things through their eyes will lead to better decisions and more confident young people.

*Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People*

# What's been done

September 2006 – November 2006

The implementation of the *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care* is progressing well with extensive support by relevant organisations. To date 13 agencies have endorsed the charter: Anglican Community Care, Anglicare, Centacare, the CREATE Foundation, Lutheran Community Care, Office for Youth, Uniting Care Wesley Port Pirie, Youth Affairs Council of SA, Department for Families and Communities (incorporating Families SA, Disability Services SA and Housing SA), Paraquad SA, Port Lincoln Aboriginal Health Service, Baptist Community Services and Aboriginal Family Support Services. Our sincere thanks to Stephanie Lewis who has been driving the implementation process so well since July. Stephanie leaves us in mid December to return to Child and Youth Health.

Related to the development of the Charter is the success of our Youth Parliament team who got widespread support for their Bill of Rights. (See the front page of this issue.)

The 'being in care' information has been well received and staff are responding to steady stream of requests for the materials. See the September 2006 issue of the Guardian Newsletter or go to our website ([www.gcyp.sa.gov.au](http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au) > Publications > About Being in Care) for details.

The Guardian's 2005-06 annual report is to be tabled in Parliament by the end of November and will be publicly available after that date.

As part of the Guardian's monitoring role we conduct an annual field consultation with workers directly involved in the provision of services to children and young people under guardianship, or in the custody, of the Minister. The 2006 consultation is underway with 38 visits and meetings scheduled. The previous two annual rounds of consultations provided rich information on the conditions and circumstances of children in care.

The first review of records in the secure care centres has been completed and feedback provided to Families SA. This will be repeated twice a year to monitor some of the conditions of care and compliance with national standards for juvenile custodial facilities.

The 'Design a Christmas Card' contest among the residents of Magill and Cavan secure care centres has been judged and the two winners presented sportswear gift vouchers at separate ceremonies at each centre. The winning designs are being printed and will carry the Christmas greeting from the Minister for Families and Communities and the Guardian this year. Some of the entries can be viewed at [www.gcyp.sa.gov.au](http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au) > News.

In addition to six presentations on the charter of rights we have spoken at two state conferences on children, poverty and homelessness.



***YACSA President Andrew Drummond watches as Guardian Pam Simmons signs the certificate recognising its endorsement of the Charter of Rights at the YACSA Annual General Meeting.***

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# Children affected by poverty

## ‘I don’t usually go on trips...’

A good life for a child is one with affection and love, freedom from violence and hunger, freedom to learn and explore, the presence of a consistent caregiver devoted to her or his needs, being treated as an individual and being listened to. The absence of any one of these means a fragile start.

The absence of pocket money, for example, because your parents do not have it. It means not seeing your friends after school, not having the right clothes, not learning to manage your own money and, often, having to earn money yourself to supplement the family income.

We have made great progress in Australia for children’s good and safe development. Preventable diseases, neonatal deaths and accident rates have all fallen. Our children are better educated, there is less corporal punishment and most children do not smoke tobacco, use illegal drugs or drink alcohol.

We have done poorly though by our most disadvantaged children. There are increasing numbers of low birth weight babies in low income areas, one in twelve households with dependent children ran out of food and had no money to buy more at least once in the past twelve months and more than a quarter of a million children live in homes affected by domestic violence.

The effect of the welfare-to-work measures will be felt by children in jobless households, especially by those headed by sole parents through loss of income and by the absence of their primary caregiver. Without education, the kind of work that many sole parents are likely to get will be neither family-friendly nor well-paid.

One of the traps in child protection work is that many of the procedures – notifications, court applications, psychological assessments, and a largely adversarial court process followed by court orders – lead us to conclude that the family is at fault and should be fixed. It does not so readily lead us to an understanding of social and economic deprivation.

One of the yardsticks by which we should measure a good child protection response is ‘have we done all we can to support the family struggling with caring for their child?’

The good news is that there is a belated but discernible turn in state and federal public policy towards accepting the wisdom of early intervention services and following this through with funded programs. The Commonwealth’s Communities for Children and the State’s 20 Children’s Centres are specifically meant to address disadvantage for children.

*[Excerpts from an address by the Guardian to the SACOSS Spotlight on Social Justice Conference, 18-19 October 2006.]*

***The effect of welfare-to-work measures will be felt by children in jobless households...***

# Why we are all here

It is now more than five years ago that the workers and foster carers for the children and young people in care in Port Pirie realised that their relationships had reached a low ebb.

Kerry Court, Manager Alternative Care Services at UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie (UCWPP) recalls that before she went into the first joint troubleshooting meeting between foster parents, government social workers and alternative care staff she had knots in her stomach, a feeling that was shared by all. She recalls that even in the hands of a skilled facilitator the first few meetings were pretty torrid.

‘There was anger, a lot of anger from all parties, and it had to come out before we could move on.’

Out of this challenging beginning came plans for a series of further meetings to start to sort out the raft of issues that had emerged and a successful grant application to the Morialta Trust to improve supports and networks for carers.

‘It took us eight to twelve months of this sort of meeting, just discussing practical issues as they came up,’ she recalls, ‘before we started to look at other possibilities.’

‘We started to develop training programs where carers and workers would together identify what they wanted to learn about and do the training together.’

Later on too there were also social events, celebrations, barbecues and the like that nurtured the good will that had been developed in the more formal meetings. Kerry describes a recent event in which carers were brought together for a thank-you lunch where they were given certificates of appreciation inscribed by Families SA and UCWPP workers, boxes of chocolates and, of course, the opportunity to raise any new issues.

Five years on, both of the organisations have changed their names and many other programs have come and gone, but Kerry reports that the commitment to the partnership remains strong.

‘Families SA, foster carers and UCWPP staff are still strong supporters of the partnership. We get a minimum of 12 to 15 carers to all of our events and going to the meetings is a pleasure.’

‘I’d really recommend that all regions give this kind of partnership a try. It may not be easy, especially at the beginning, but the results can be very worthwhile.’

‘Certainly we still have issues – there will always be issues – but when they come up we know each other and we respect that we are all trying to do the best we can. Practically, that means we can achieve better results and much more quickly for the children and young people who are in our care.’

‘And that is why we are all here.’



## Individual Education Plans

We know that the education and training outcomes for children and young people in care are generally much lower than their peers. On average they experience lower academic performance, fewer entries into tertiary study and higher rates of suspension and exclusion. A significant minority of those attending schools do so only for a few hours per day.

The Individual Education Plan (IEP) is the focal point of a process that will bring together Families SA, education providers, students and carers to address the specific educational needs of each child and young person in care. By the end of this year it is expected that every child in care in state schools will have a plan that identifies their individual needs and puts in place practical strategies to achieve the best outcome possible. IEP training for state pre-schools will commence in 2007 and in time it is expected that private schools, TAFE SA and others will be introduced to the plans.

Key to the success of the process is the IEP Support Group for each child which includes the child or young person, caregivers, educators, caseworker and, where appropriate, other professionals. It is anticipated that an IEP will be in place within one month of a child coming under guardianship or entering a school or pre-school and will be reviewed each year or as the child's circumstances change.

Fresh back from the latest in a series of 18 Collaborative Practice Forums to discuss IEP related matters, DECS Policy Advisor in Child Protection Initiatives and Student Wellbeing Annette Bulling reported that the response from student counsellors and other school staff working with children in care was very positive.

'One primary school principal reported that the process of going through an IEP for one child with complex needs had completely changed the way in which her staff communicated and worked together and made an improvement to the whole school.

'Other school staff said that the process had opened up invaluable communication channels with people and services in the broader community.'

Annette was also enthusiastic about the potential impact of DECS' new SMART Program on the ability of schools to deliver on their IEP commitments.

'SMART is a training program which has been provided for a representative from all primary and secondary schools in South Australia to give those schools the skills to manage abuse-related trauma, allowing children to re-engage with schools and for schools to better meet their needs. The online version of this two-day professional development seminar is free and available and will be valuable not only to teachers but to other professionals, carers and in fact anyone who has an interest in working with these children.'

Information about Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma (SMART) and the training and resource materials can be viewed and downloaded free of charge at [www.childhood.org.au](http://www.childhood.org.au)

**For more information about IEPs go to the DECS website [www.decs.sa.gov.au](http://www.decs.sa.gov.au) > Schooling > Staff > Child protection > Students in care.**



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