

Giving people a voice through the complaints process

In August 2004, the Senate Community Affairs Committee released its report on "Forgotten Australians". The report detailed the experiences of people who had been placed in institutions when they were children. While there were some encouraging findings, far too many of these children suffered from the experience and sadly a number also suffered sexual abuse. The report exposed that the abuse of children in care which had happened in many countries around the world also happened in Australia.

Many of the recommendations from the report were already in place in UnitingCare service groups such as UnitingCare Burnside. Indeed, many of the recommendations put forward from our submission to the Inquiry appeared in the final report. However, the significant response to the report by UnitingCare has been the adoption of policies and procedures specifically for dealing with complaints from past residents of children's homes. We take any complaint seriously and we have a fair and transparent procedure for dealing with them. When we believe there have been malpractices in the past, we believe they must be acknowledged and addressed. In this way, we can work to ensure that the adults of today who suffered as children can begin the healing process.

Children who are unable to live with their families are no longer in institutionalised care. Today these children are placed with foster carers in the community and some young people reside in small group homes with 24-hour care.

However for many of our older citizens, residential care is the best option for their care needs. Recently, the Federal Minister for Ageing, Senator Santo Santoro, announced changes to address concerns about the abuse of elderly people who are living in care institutions. From our past experience with children in care, we must accept that there is also potential for elder abuse. UnitingCare has supported the recent changes by the Minister. However, we know that police checks and a revamped complaints system are only part of the answer. We also need proper management systems, accountability processes, up to date policies, and relevant staff training to make sure that people in our care are properly looked after.

UnitingCare Ageing, for instance, cares for some 14,000 elderly people day and night. That is a tremendous responsibility and we can only exercise that responsibility effectively if all of our management, accountability, policies and training are of the highest quality.

UnitingCare recognises that we carry a big responsibility to ensure that the name and reputation of the Uniting Church is preserved and enhanced by providing the best possible care for the people we serve. I am confident that through the expertise, care and compassion of our management and staff, we are doing this in all of our work with aged people, children, families and young people.