

Child protection 'gutted'

Michael Madigan

30/8/12

SENIOR Queensland bureaucrats have gutted the child protection department of qualified social workers over the past eight years in a culture change contributing to a rise in youth homelessness, a leading academic said.

Karen Healy, professor of social work at the University of Queensland, told the Child Protection Inquiry the Depart-

ment of Communities and Child Safety had deliberately sidelined trained social workers since 2004.

Prof Healy said social workers were replaced with ex-police officers or those with backgrounds in areas such as records management or criminology.

"Social workers of my acquaintance were dismayed when they went for training and were told their educational qualifications were no longer

relevant," she said. Despite writing letters of complaint to two Labor government ministers, Desley Boyle and Margaret Keech, who headed up the Department of Communities and Child Safety, no action was taken, she said.

Under cross-examination from counsel assisting Ryan Haddrick, Prof Healy said the reason given for discarding social workers was that "social workers see shades of grey,

whereas police see child protection as a black and white issue". She said the policy shift sparked an increase in the bureaucracy with a focus on record-keeping and a concentration on policing families rather than helping them.

"I now have very deep concerns about the out-of-home care system, which does not do anything for kids over the age of 12," Prof Healy said. "A lot of them get released when they

turn 14 and no one knows where they go." She said she believed many lived in motels, on the street or "couch surfing".

The inquiry also heard the ongoing trauma from the stolen generation was a key driver in 4000 Queensland indigenous children being placed into care. William Hayward, from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service, said the removal of Aboriginal people from their homes in the 1970s

had a direct impact on ongoing removals today. Alcohol and substance abuse, which often led to family breakdown and child removal, was linked in many cases to experiences from the stolen generation, Mr Hayward said.

"Why are people drinking, why are they taking drugs?" he asked. "It could be they are masking that pain." The inquiry continues today.

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