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Recording Professional Social Workers Opposition to Forced Adoption Practices

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) wishes to acknowledge the loss and trauma experienced by the thousands of Australians harmed by forced adoption practices that occurred from the 1940s until the early 1980s. We acknowledge that many parents, usually young single mothers, felt enormous emotional pressure to adopt and were not provided with the support and information they needed. We join with Government and Community Services leaders in recording our sorrow and outrage at the injustices suffered by families subject to forced adoption.

As a matter of public record, the AASW also wishes it to be known that the social work profession actively opposed the practice of forced adoption. The Community Affairs Reference Committee, Commonwealth Senate, has acknowledged that:

“The social work profession from the late 1950s was supportive of mothers’ right to access their children prior to adoption, to be free of pressure to adopt, and to be informed about alternatives to adoption.”

The AASW recognises that some survivors of forced adoption practices report that social workers engaged in coercive practices. One of the challenges in substantiating these reports, is that social workers do not have title protection, which means that those identified as social workers may not have been professionally qualified.

AASW National President, Karen Healy states:

“There were few social workers working in maternity and adoption services nationally in the field of adoptions, during the 1950s and 1960s when in excess of 45,000 adoptions were effected. Indeed, the AASW understands that, during this period, there were less than 10 qualified social workers working in maternity services in New South Wales. It is clear that the majority of those involved with adoptions were not qualified social workers.”

The AASW has no evidence that any professionally qualified social worker was involved in forced adoption practices. However, the Association is concerned that professional social workers are being blamed for employment practices by governments and maternity hospitals that meant adoptions were largely in hands of officers who appear to have lacked a full appreciation of the ethical, legal and personal implications of forced adoption practices.

The AASW is proud of its historical record in upholding and advocating for the parents’ rights to be supported and informed in adoption decisions. Acknowledging the lifelong loss of those subject to forced adoption is important and as is recording the social work profession’s longstanding opposition to forced adoption practices.

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