

Kids ‘dumped’ in homes

Child safety advocates hit out as state’s residential care crisis worsens

Queensland has more kids in residential care homes than any other state in the country, with child safety advocates warning the state’s increasing reliance on the facilities is turning them into “dumping grounds” for kids with nowhere to go.

The ballooning numbers have sparked child safety advocates to call for the government to stop investing so much money into expensive residential facilities and instead put more funding into fostering and prevention programs.

Of the children in the state’s care, those who end up in a residential care setting rather than living with a family in foster or kinship care are more likely to commit crimes, become homeless and have poorer educational outcomes.

Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs Director-General Deidre Mulkerin revealed during Budget Estimates that of the 12,000 children living in out-of-home care, there were now around 1300 children in residential care – a 35 per cent increase in just two years.

“I had really hoped that the increase in children coming in would be a short-term impact of the pandemic ... that is not what we are seeing,” she told estimates.

“It would appear those families were probably on the brink, were vulnerable, and then the pandemic pushed them over the edge.”

In June 2019, 959 Queensland children were living in residential care, that’s compared to 517 children in NSW and 455 in Victoria during the same period.

Queensland’s peak body for child safety services Peak Care director Lindsay Wegener said the fact that only 20 per cent of the total child and family budget (\$309.2m) was allocated to foster and kinship care where 87 per cent of children in care lived, compared to 10 per cent of the total budget (\$161.7m) being spent on residential care where only around 11 per cent of children in care lived showed too much money was being spent on a model of care that did not work well.

“Residential care plays an important role within the child protection system but where it does best is when it has a distinct purpose attached to its use ... it may be a service set up exclusively to support young people transitioning into adulthood,” he said.

“Increasingly it seems that there is a trend for children to be put in residential care who should not be there ... in a graphic way it becomes a dumping ground for children who have nowhere else to go.”

Not for profit organisation OzChild has been running a specialist foster care program in two parts of Queensland that aims to get children out of residential care and back living with either their birth family or a kinship or foster care family.

The group’s Queensland Director Estelle Patterson said she would like to see the program rolled out across every region in Queensland, with close to 80 per cent of children having successfully completed the program since it started in December 2018.

“Residential care is an institution, it is not a home, it is not a family it is not someone there to pick up the pieces and provide that unconditional support that kids need to do well in life,” she said.

Mr Wegener said child safety was not an issue for just one or two government departments to take care of.

“We’d ask every single government department when they submit a policy or ask for investment in a particular project to ask themselves and have to report on how it is going to benefit Queensland children and families,” he said.