



## **CARE LEAVERS AUSTRALASIA NETWORK**

CLAN is a National, Independent, Peak Membership Body which supports, represents and advocates for people who were raised in Australian Orphanages, Children's Homes, Foster Care & Other Institutions.

*Submission to the South Australian Joint Committee on matters relating to Elder Abuse*

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*"I was abused in a Children's Home, please don't abuse me in a Nursing Home"*

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Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN) would like to thank the Joint Committee on matters relating to Elder Abuse for the opportunity to comment on your Terms of Reference. CLAN is a national, independent, peak membership body which represents and advocates for those who were raised in Australia and New Zealand's Orphanages, Children's Homes, other Institutions and Foster Care. There were more than 500 000 children in Australia who grew up in 900 plus institutions. CLAN's main objective is to assist and support Care Leavers and their families through the wide variety of work we do including but not limited to advocacy, counselling, casework, records searching and publishing Care Leaver's stories.

### **Who are Care Leavers and why are they a special needs group?**

For most Care Leavers, the time that was spent in 'care' was characterised by emotional and psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, malnourishment, unpaid forced labour, lack of education and separation from family and identity. Children in care were often told they were 'no hopers', 'worthless', that nobody loved them and that their parents didn't want them, at times they were also told their parents were dead and were stripped of their identities often being renamed or given a number instead of a name. It is clear that children in 'care' were denied their fundamental and basic human rights. Whilst there have been many Inquiries and there is currently a Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse, to this day the treatment of Care Leavers has not been remedied. It is our sincere hope that through the advocacy work we do this will be happen in the near future, hopefully before the majority of elderly Care Leavers die or commit suicide.

Whilst CLAN as an organisation is not specialised in dealing with elder abuse, it is a matter of great importance to us, as the majority of our members who we represent are over 55 and will be susceptible to elder abuse. In 2009 the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and former opposition leader and current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull issued an apology to Care Leavers during which, they announced that Care Leavers would be made a special needs group for aged care purposes so that they would receive appropriate and responsive care with support systems in place. As outlined above, many Care Leavers endured horrific abuse and neglectful treatment which has led to many experiencing an adulthood characterised by social exclusion and multiple entrenched disadvantage.

As a result many Care Leavers suffer from the following Mental Health issues:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Chronic Depression
- Generalised Anxiety
- Drug and Alcohol Addictions
- Phobias
- Suicidal Ideation
- Hypervigilance

Many Care leavers also experience a plethora of physical health issues including but not limited to:

- common back and knee problems (created by forced labour whilst in care),
- issues with dental care,
- heart issues

- issues such as cervical, testicular and prostate cancer which were diagnosed later (commonly because many Care Leavers are too fearful to undergo the simple preventative/early diagnostic tests due to prior abuse).

Furthermore many Care Leavers are also isolated from their families due to various difficulties and issues over their lifespan. Firstly many Care Leavers lack their own biological parents, siblings and extended family due to being separated at a young age. Many never make contact with their biological families after they leave care and those that do often have an unsuccessful or strained relationship with their family members. CLAN often hear of difficulties between Care Leavers and their own children. Often a Care Leaver's mental health issues and lack of guidance and support in raising a family can often create complex relationships between a Care Leaver and their child/children. CLAN have also heard a lot of anecdotal evidence regarding the intergenerational effects of care resulting in many Care Leavers children also spending some time in the child welfare system. These sorts of outcomes often have a detrimental effect on the relationship in families and often lead to difficulties with Care Leavers having a relationship or access to the next generation – their grandchildren.

Care Leavers may also have other difficulties like literacy issues which make it difficult for them to read and comprehend paperwork as well as fill out paperwork. Many also still carry the stigma of a childhood in care with them meaning it is hard for many Care Leavers to open up and disclose that they were in care. The Senate Inquiry (2004) acknowledged the unique needs and fears of Care Leavers regarding their old age stating "Care Leavers will have particular issues as they age and service providers are currently unaware of these issues...additionally the broader population needs to be aware of these issues so that services now and into the future can be better able to respond to this group in our community." Whilst this has come a long way since the Senate Inquiry in 2004 the majority of aged care workers are not educated and trained in understanding and assisting this vulnerable group of people.

### **The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study**

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study is an American Study which examined over 17000 individuals between 1995 and 1997. This study was able to draw correlation between the higher the number of adverse childhood experiences the higher the chance of illness, disability and early death. This study is concerning for Care Leavers as due to the repeated traumatisation of Care Leavers in their childhood, many would have quite high ACE scores. To put the studies findings into perspective an ACE score of 4 means that an individual is 12 times more likely to attempt suicide and 7 times more likely to engage in drug taking than an individual that has a zero ACE score. Many Care Leavers would have an ACE score of five or higher thus placing them at great risk as they age. Obviously, in relating this study to aged care and elder abuse, there is a clear link between childhood trauma and chronic health issues and early death. Chronic illnesses will increase the likelihood of Care Leavers needing assistance and aged care as they get older. This link has been well established in other research and literature where past traumatic life events have some sort of correlation with elder abuse (Acierno et al., 2010; Mann et al., 2014; UNDESA, 2013). It is thought that elder abuse is often a reflection of complex familial dynamics, but perhaps prior experience of trauma also contributes to an increased vulnerability when elder abuse occurs outside the home.

## **Care Leavers and Elder Abuse**

The actual prevalence of elder abuse is not known as it is thought to be widely underreported. There have also been little studies conducted in Australia to arrive at a definitive figure. The World Health Organisation (2015) has estimated prevalence rates to be anywhere from 2% to 14% in middle to high income countries with neglect, financial, and psychological abuse the most common form. These estimates along with many others do not include data from institutional settings like aged care facilities or those living with a cognitive impairment. In Australia many of the studies have been limited only to women which do not give us a comprehensive overview of the statistics. In gathering statistics from Queensland, Victorian, and New South Wales Elder Abuse helplines, it is evident that the majority of calls are made regarding female victims with the majority of perpetrators being a child of the victim and male. Whilst these statistics are a starting point they are seriously limited especially because institutional elder abuse is either not included or is a lot more difficult to report and investigate. There has been no research in regards to Care Leavers and their experiences with elder abuse at this stage either.

In 2011 CLAN conducted a survey of our members to which we had 577 respondents. In this survey we asked questions focusing on their life after 'care' including how 'care' effects them in their lives today. An important issue which arose from responses to this survey was a common unwillingness to be placed in an aged care facility. We received responses such as:

- "I will never live in care again. I am scared of being abused again"
- "I would rather die"
- "I don't want to die in an institution"
- "I would rather live on the streets than in a nursing home"

These responses were fairly typical of how most people responded to this question. Not surprisingly, it was determined that for the vast majority, living in their own home would be their first preference and living in an aged-care facility would be their last preference. Many Care Leavers feel they cannot trust the government or other organisations run by churches or charities due to past experiences. Many have extreme anxiety about being placed in an institution again especially if it is run by the same provider who ran the Orphanage or Children's Home that they grew up in. For many spending their older years in a Nursing Home is their greatest fear and for many this fear is not unfounded. It is well documented that some residents in aged care facilities are the victims of elder abuse, and are preyed upon as vulnerable persons. Care Leavers who are already vulnerable feel particularly susceptible to this abuse because of their trauma histories, as we have already discussed those who have had previous trauma are more likely to experience elder abuse.

## **Recommendations for Assisting Care Leavers Regarding Elder Abuse**

Due to Care Leavers susceptibility to elder abuse it is important that part of their treatment as a special needs group includes targeted prevention from elder abuse. There are many ways to support this happening and it starts with better education and training of all those involved in the care and support of Care Leavers. This is not just about those working in aged care facilities, hospitals or professional in home support workers, it should also include any friends, relatives or support people who are paid a carers allowance or payment through Centrelink for a Care Leaver. ANYONE caring for an aged Care Leaver needs to undergo specialised education and training about the unique histories, circumstances, and specialised needs of Care Leavers. This training should be conducted by groups such as CLAN who have a lived experience of a childhood in 'care' and who have worked

with Care Leavers for over fifteen years. It is essential that those with a comprehensive understanding of the issues Care Leavers experience and an understanding of their needs in their older years deliver this sort of education and training. Those who work with Care Leavers need to understand how their childhood experiences will affect them in their older years, this includes fear of authority figures, PTSD and the types of flashbacks that may occur and various other triggers. Issues that may present themselves in aged care that workers need to be aware of include:

- Care Leavers who were punished for bedwetting as a child. Punishments ranged from emotional and psychological abuse, to severe physical beatings, to being made to stand with their urine soaked sheets over their head. Bedwetting may occur in a Care Leavers older years.
- Care Leavers were often malnourished, under fed, forced to eat rotten food, forced fed and if they vomited were force fed their vomit. Many Care Leavers can be fussy eaters due to this past, and institutionally cooked bulk made foods can often be reminiscent of food whilst in care.
- Care Leavers were often subjected to humiliating, distressing, and painful medical examinations including internal exams which were a huge violation. This can often make it hard for older Care Leavers to be examined by doctors, nurses, have treatment and be tested preventatively.
- Medical experimentation. Many Care Leavers were subjected to medical experimentation which can make them quite wary of medications and injections.
- Psychological, physical and sexual abuse. The general abuse that Care Leavers were subjected to will make them wary of anyone who is in charge of caring for them when they are in a vulnerable helpless state. Losing their independence as an elderly person will make them dependant on those caring for them which can trigger feelings of worthlessness from childhood.

All of the abovementioned issues make it vital that those working with elderly Care Leavers understand these sorts of triggers, thus it is important that they are well versed in trauma informed care. In relation to Care Leavers and elderly abuse, being trauma informed involves a detailed understanding by aged care professionals and others caring for Care Leavers, of the psychological, neurological, biological and social effects of trauma and violence on children separated from their families and raised in orphanages, Children's Homes, and foster care. Understanding the high prevalence of traumatic experiences for adults who now receive mental health services and those who are in aged care is essential. Having the correct training and supervision to work with, treat and assess individuals with trauma histories including an abusive childhood is imperative for trauma informed care.

Additionally CLAN believe it is important that all Care Leavers (as well as other individuals who are formally cared for whether institutionally or at home) should be educated on their rights and be given information about various support systems and organisations in place to assist them. This would take place with a social worker or an 'aged care advocate'. These individuals would be tasked with educating those being cared for (including Care Leavers) with what their rights and entitlements are, numbers to call and even websites to go to for more information. They could set up Care Leavers with support and advocacy organisations such as CLAN (and other appropriate organisations for other individuals). For those who don't enter institutional care it is important that social workers or 'aged care advocates' are still involved. This may take place when an individual applies for carers allowance or payment in relation to an elderly person, or formalised in home care is funded through various government assistance programs.

It is also essential that 'aged care advocates' routinely visit elderly Care Leavers (and other elderly individuals) to assess their condition and advocate for their needs. This is particularly necessary for those Care Leavers and other elderly individuals with particular disabilities especially, sensory or cognitive impairments. Random, unannounced visits by an advocate is essential to a system like this working to both prevent and detect elderly abuse.

Lastly it is important that Care Leavers as a special needs group are given extra provisions to enable them to live in their own homes for longer. As stated many times previously in this paper, Care Leavers are more susceptible to being victims of elder abuse due to their trauma histories. Purely due to this fact, Care Leavers as a group need to be supported with extra funding to have in home assistance and in home carers to enable them to stay comfortable and out of harms way, both psychologically and physically for as long as possible.

CLAN would like to once again thank you for the opportunity to comment of the matter of Elder Abuse in South Australia and to give you some information about a particularly vulnerable group who are statistically more susceptible to elder abuse.