

3 February 2020

The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
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Via Email: forcedadoptionsinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

To Whom It May Concern,

RE: Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

The APS is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 24,000 members. A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing.

Forced adoption can have significant and long-term psychological effects on those affected, including higher rates of mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and thoughts of suicide, with many people also experiencing difficulties with identity, interpersonal relationships, grief and loss. These effects can also be experienced by mothers, fathers, adopted persons, adoptive parents, siblings and extended family as well as by subsequent generations.

Safeguards are required to be put in place to ensure that past forced adoption practices are never repeated. These safeguards would put in place protections for the community so that adoption orders are clearly understood, their effects are understood, and procedures for revoking consent are clearly understood. Additionally, the short and long term psychological impacts of adoption for parents and the child need to be addressed before, during, and after any decision of adoption is made.

In 2015 the APS was funded by the Australian Government to develop and deliver a training package for mental health professionals nationally to enable them to more effectively work with people affected by forced adoptions. The training was funded in response to a 2012 Senate inquiry which was established to identify and address the range of issues arising from the practice of the removal of babies from their mothers during the 1940s through to the 1970s. The Senate Inquiry identified that people had difficulty finding help from

clinicians who understood the history of forced adoption, its lifelong impact and were able to engage with them in a way that didn't further contribute to their sense of loss and abandonment.

The APS considers it important for the Victorian Government to establish whether existing services are meeting the needs of the community, and specifically whether affected individuals are accessing and benefiting from them. This submission seeks to assist the Committee to investigate the adequacy of existing responses and support services in Victoria for people affected by forced adoption, by providing information about the nature, quality and uptake of the training. The APS believes that having access to trained health professionals with an understanding of forced adoption and trauma informed approaches is critical for doing effective work with people affected by forced adoptions.

Forced adoption education and training package

The aims of the national online training and resources developed by the APS were to:

- increase health professionals' awareness and understanding about forced adoptions policies and practices in Australia, and the impact of these practices on individuals and their families;
- provide readily accessible resources and reference material for clinicians to enable them to better structure treatments to meet the mental health needs of affected individuals; and
- enhance and up-skill clinicians in the provision of clinical mental health services to this client group through access to training, resources and guidance that advises on best practice evidenced-based diagnosis, referral, treatment and management options, including trauma-informed treatment and care approaches.

Three online training courses were developed as part of the package:

- [8 hour course for mental health professionals](#),
- [2 hour course for general practitioners](#), and
- [a free 1 hour course](#) providing an overview of past forced adoption policies and practices in Australia.

Since the training became available in March 2016, 766 people have completed¹ the 8 hour online training, 206 of whom are from Victoria. Completion rates declined significantly when government funding to subsidise the cost of the training for individual practitioners ceased in 2018. In 2016 and 2017 training was provided free of charge to participants, as part of the government funding arrangements. Since the beginning of 2018, the training has been available on a user pays basis via the APS Institute.

¹ A much larger number have registered, but not completed. This may be because they have not yet finished the course or perhaps were only interested in completing specific modules.

Course feedback from the exit surveys has been very positive, with over 90% of all survey respondents from the 1 hour and 8 hour courses agreeing that:

- The course added to their knowledge and understanding of practices and techniques when working with people affected by forced adoption
- The learning objectives were appropriate for the level and delivery mode of the course
- The content for the course was clear and communicated sufficient information on the topics covered.

Anecdotal information from state based providers indicates that the training is of high quality and well regarded. However, it has also been suggested that greater promotion of the training is required and that cost might be a barrier for some participants. There may also be scope for improving communication to ensure that state based providers know about and can contact practitioners who have completed the course. Currently course completers are encouraged to independently contact their state-based services directly should they want to offer their services. However, the establishment of a state-wide directory may be of value and something for the Committee to consider.

Working with people affected by forced adoptions can be both challenging and rewarding work. Given the prevalence of complex trauma, support is likely to need to be ongoing and long-term. While it is vital to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of psychologists (as well as other allied health professionals) available with appropriate expertise, there is also a need to ensure that mainstream service providers are educated about the issues so that they can identify and make appropriate referrals.

The APS recommends the Victorian Government provide funding to subsidise the existing high quality training courses to enable more Victorian health professionals to access training. In combination with this, the APS would be happy to work with the Victorian Government to better promote the training package, establish a state-based directory of trained health professionals, and enable access to a professional support network as appropriate.

The APS would be very happy to provide any further information to the Committee as required, as well as provide evidence at a public hearing.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Frances Mirabelli', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Frances Mirabelli
Chief Executive Officer

Acknowledgements

Professor Daryl Higgins PhD MAPS, Australian Catholic University, Director,
Institute of Child Protection Studies