

Bid for ideas to support families

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Page 15 | Section: General

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NEWCASTLE-BASED researchers, parents, government, and child protection workers have come together in what's believed to be a national first to find solutions to a broken system.

In a personal message to the Family Inclusion Roundtable, NSW Minister for Family and Communities Kate Washington said that, as the state government embarked on significant structural reform, it was clear the status quo was not an option.

"We know that collaborating with parents and family helps keep children safe and improves their long-term outcomes. Their voices and experiences are critical to building a better child protection system," Ms Washington said.

The family inclusion forum, held at the University of Newcastle's NUspace, aims to change practises related to child protection and family inclusion across Australia.

Nicola Ross from the School of Law and Justice presented research covering the challenges experienced by children, parents, kin, and other stakeholders, starting with adversarial approaches to investigations.

For far too long parents have been left out of the teams, systems, and policies developed to keep children safe and there is a long way to go to reform child pro-

tection to align with family inclusion, Dr Ross said.

A key issue was the need to focus on families before they have contact with child protection, and once they are in contact with child protection, before there is a need for any legal proceedings she said.

Currently, about 17 per

cent of the spend on child protection services went into family support, early intervention and family preservation programs and that was not the right balance. The bulk of spending is on investigating families and providing out of home care. Children are removed based on predicting the future risk

of maltreatment, rather than assessing what support the family needs to keep them safe, she said.

The research showed that parents find the system punitive, blaming and stigmatising; kinship and foster carers are not heard and are excluded from the decision making process, and workers on the frontline are silenced, Dr Ross said.

Children and young people themselves also felt unheard about wanting to live with and retain connections with their siblings, and more time with family, many of them leaving care to return to their parents or other family.

"What we are doing is

evidence-based, based on research with people who are usually not heard or listened to, but who are a key part of the group that is needed to make things change," Dr Ross said.

"I hope we can find some solutions to the how of involving parents and families so that there's less dramatic calls on, for instance, emergency accommodation for children, which is so expensive and so traumatising for everybody involved, particularly the children but also their families."

Two new projects being piloted in the Hunter which may become part of the solution are being led by Family Inclusion Strategies

Hunter (FISH) which is run by parents with lived experience.

The first is a supported family time program, where families will be supported to engage with their children during supervised visits once they've been removed, to help them maintain their connection and relationships.

The second is an orientation workshop for parents entering the system for parents.

That program has been developed by a team of experts including workers from the Department of Communities and Justice, non-government organisations, and parents.



Family Inclusion Strategies Hunter president Tammy Prince-Doyle, with Associate Professor Nicola Ross, ahead of the Family Inclusion roundtable at the University of Newcastle's NUspace. Pictures by Peter Lorimer.