



Forgotten Australians abandoned again

Forgotten Australians are truly forgotten

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse completed its work less than two years ago. If we recall, this was the Royal Commission that looked at the nature, the causes and the impact of sexual abuse and what institutional systems need to do about it. Of the 52 public hearings (called case studies) 11 of them were concerned with the circumstances of children brought up in institutional care. The **Final report: Historical residential institutions, Volume 11**, was devoted to the nature and the impact of institutional care on children. The largest proportion of survivors who made presentations and statements to the private session process were survivors of institutional care. These survivors are known as Forgotten Australians.

The childhood deprivation and brutality that has led to life long suffering for many Forgotten Australians was on display at these public hearings. Survivors who appeared as witnesses at these public hearings and who spoke of their ordeals were followed by a long line of representatives, from both the State (who was the guardian of these children) and from the “caring” institutions (e.g. Salvation Army). They all made their “mea culpas”, promised it would never happen again and promised to look after the survivors.

And yet in Victoria the State Government and the provider agency, Berry Street, are walking away from the only support service available for Forgotten Australians; Open Place. This is the service that has over 4000 Forgotten Australians on its books, provides a network of counsellors and counselling across Victoria, provides a record searching and family searching function for over 300 Forgotten Australians a year, provides a case work and support service that provides brokerage access to health services that would otherwise be unavailable, provides a redress support service and access to social connection for hundreds of Forgotten Australians via a drop in centre and 14 support groups across Victoria.

Change of provider and change of service model

For months there has been a veil of secrecy hovering over this decision. Approaches to the Berry Street CEO and to the President of the Board were met with obfuscation and then silence. It is now official. Despite previous denials Berry Street is divesting itself of the service. There will be a token consultation process run by DHHS. Following this, sometime in 2020, the service model and its individual but integrated components will be broken up. How does this decision ensure a continuing and effective service for Forgotten Australians?

A simple question has to be asked: what do FAs want? They want three things:

- Their childhood back; this can never be realized

- A redress scheme that is inclusive of all types of abuse; this is regrettably unlikely to be realized
- A support service that “gets” the history of Forgotten Australians and can respond holistically to these needs; currently Victorian Forgotten Australians have this service. It is provided by Open Place.

Berry Street may have decided to divest itself of the Open Place service; however it owes the Forgotten Australians, in Victoria, a duty of care. This is a duty of care responsibility that ensures the current model of an integrated service be seamlessly transferred to another provider; this includes service users, staff, the existing programs and all the associated resources and knowledge that goes with the service. If this cannot be guaranteed then Berry Street is guilty of abandoning a disadvantaged, marginalized and perpetually overlooked group of adults.

DHHS has a responsibility to either encourage Berry Street to stay the course with Open Place or to seek an agency/provider that is prepared to sustain the effective and integrated service provided by Open Place. The current model provides a holistic and “on request” response to Forgotten Australians who are seeking personal and family history, counselling to address past trauma, access to health services and social connections. Why break up the model?

What have Forgotten Australians experienced?

It may be useful for the decision makes in both Berry Street and DHHS to read some of the transcript of witnesses from the Royal Commission’s public hearings. Transcripts are accessible on the Royal Commission web site. This paper provides some excerpts from one of the public hearings; **Case Study 33**. See Attachment.

What has been learnt about and from Forgotten Australians?

The summary below distills, into a few inadequate dot points, the thousands and thousands of individual stories of Forgotten Australians; stories of suffering and deprivation. These stories have provided the basis for the Open Place service model.

- Childhood suffering lasts a lifetime. The witnesses at the Royal Commission describe chronic mental health and physical health problems, failed relationships and loneliness.
- Many Forgotten Australians develop adaptive behaviors to manage their childhood trauma. These behaviors may lead to adult institutional incarceration.
- The institutional experiences of childhood, the brutality, the abuse, the neglect will have an adverse impact on the next generation
- Forgotten Australians find it difficult to trust; help is best provided by a trusted “one stop shop” where Forgotten Australians are believed.

The stories and the experiences of Forgotten Australians and the learnings arising should not be new to both the Executive and the Board at Berry Street or senior management in

DHHS. These stories have been repeated countless times; in the 2004 Senate Report, in the Oral Histories stored in the NLA, in autobiographies, in many newspaper articles and not least the Royal Commission. Why is it that the authorities have such trouble comprehending the reality of what was done to children, the impact on them as adults and the best way to provide support?

Open Place and Forgotten Australians

Open Place provides a service that works for Forgotten Australians; it won't bring back their childhood nor will it provide redress. But it does provide a place of safety, a place of comfort, a place which values their lives and understands their experiences. And it provides this in an integrated and holistic way. The service knows Forgotten Australians. Forgotten Australians do not need to repeat their story. Forgotten Australians need, as "Ralph" said to the Royal Commission (**Volume 11** p. 151), a *one stop shop* that will *bat for you* and *if the door gets slammed in your face then I am going to open it for you*.

Open Place is a relatively new service in terms of program lifecycles. It is just 10 years old. Open Place has used these years to learn about Forgotten Australians. It has taken the service 10 years, incrementally and painfully, to absorb and to apply these learnings. It has achieved this by "listening" and "doing no harm". It has been flexible and responsive and has attempted to provide a tailored individuated response to every request for service. This is a service that for the vast majority of service users has worked and is working. Numbers continue to grow and demand outstrips resources.

Fundamental to this learning has been the Forgotten Australians themselves. They know the service they want and they know how they want to be treated. They are integral to service improvement and development. It is Forgotten Australians who teach new staff about how to listen and how to do no harm. To reach conclusions about the future of Open Place including change of provider and service disaggregation, without reference to Forgotten Australians, is staggeringly arrogant and deeply depressing. When will we learn?

To contemplate a change of service model flies in the face of everything that has been learnt over the last 10 years. It is contrary to three external reviews (in my time) that have supported the fundamental governance, structure and nature of the service model. It is also contrary to the evidence presented at, and the conclusions of, the recently completed Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

A final word from a Forgotten Australian:

I am what I am today, mentally and physically, because of my past. I want to feel safe.... We are all exhausted... We need a safety net. I can go to Open Place and not feel I need to explain anything. I can just be me... We need a place like Open Place to stay in existence to reaffirm and state who we are. (We Hope – Maree H, 2016)

Why are we asking Maree and the thousands of other Forgotten Australians, who are using Open Place, to once again fight for a service that for 10 years has built up trust and credibility? Forgotten Australians need encouragement and affirmation, not further rejection and abandonment.

Simon Gardiner

Manager of Open Place, March 2012 – September 2017

October 2019

Attachment:

Excerpts from: **Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Case Study 33, Salvation Army Southern Region, October 2015** (includes Box Hill and Bayswater Boys' Homes).

To remind ourselves of the "care" experience of Forgotten Australians, below are some extracts from the transcript of evidence:

Excerpts 1 & 2.

The following two excerpts highlight the lifelong impact of a childhood spent in institutional care and the neglect and brutality that accompanied this care.

1. Since leaving State care, I've spent a number of years in gaol. I received a very poor education while I was at Bayswater. When I was no longer a ward of the State, I kept getting into trouble. I taught myself to read as I did not learn at school.

I feel like gaol has better supervision than the boys' homes I stayed in, and consequently there is more access to justice there.

I've been alone all my life. I've never wanted to marry or have a family because of what I went through. Sometimes I get very upset when I see people with families because I know what I've lost. I have friends, but I don't let them get too close because that's how the people who abused me were able to get to me. The only way I can do it is to be moving on all the time.

2. I have carried with me a constant physical reminder of my time in Box Hill Boys Home - my broken tooth caused by the bashing I received from Colonel Stevenson following reporting my sexual abuse by Sangster.

Following my time in Box Hill, I have carried around a sense of anxiousness and fear that I am going to get into trouble. I am always nervous about doing the wrong thing and scared that I will be punished. For example, I am always quite early to appointments because I am conscious of being late. I am always conscious to avoid being judged negatively and I am eager to please others.

I similarly feel quite fearful and anxious of authority figures. I have recurring memories and dreams. These are quite vivid and deeply upsetting. Because of the abuse perpetrated against me by Sangster, I have a recurring dream where I wake up in only my singlet, only

I am in a huge crowded room with many people without any pants on. I am scared to get out of bed because all the people will see me. I feel scared and vulnerable all over again. I have been diagnosed with severe depression, agoraphobia and post-traumatic stress disorder. I go through life with a positive approach. I will never overcome it and it is always there, but I just get on with my life.

Excerpt 3.

This excerpt highlights the ripple effect of institutional care; the impact on family and the next generation.

Counsel Assisting (Sophie David SC): May it please the Commission, the next witness that was to be called was Mr. David Wright.

Sadly, he has passed away before being able to give his evidence. His family has asked me, firstly, to read a note from them secondly, to read his statement to the Royal Commission.

If I may begin by reading some words from his family:

My father, David Wright, passed away a few painful hours after your call.

We are holding a service for him in Byron Bay on Friday, 9 October. I don't think my father fully comprehended the depth of destruction that the abuse he suffered rendered on his life and every significant person in it.

My father was left unable to control his emotions, unable to deal with stress, pain, anger, loss, his children and every relationship in his life. My dad was unable to trust anyone for most of his life, and the guilt he felt made it hard for dad to connect to his three sons or for his three sons to connect with him.

My father couldn't even ask for help when he found out he was sick and had just 3-5 months to live. He suffered alone. He didn't think we cared and he regretted the impact his abuse had on us as children and as adults.

My mother was a broken person and remains wracked with guilt, even after the passing of more than 40 years. My brother and I remained with our dad. When I was 7 the relationship ended. He did his best but was emotionally unreachable and prone to fits of depression, despair, self-loathing, blame and anger.

He was not able to fulfil the emotional needs of his two young children. The situation devastated the lives of his two little boys. [REDACTED] and I are also the products of the abuse my dad suffered.

We are both unable to form and maintain significant relationships. We have major trust issues. We have had few or no significant others or friends in our lives and have both been unable to find or keep gainful employment. We have ongoing treatment for mental illness. I have never been able to communicate or relate with anyone in my family, not my dad, my brothers, grandparents or my mother.

Most days I am unable to leave the house. The abuse my dad suffered destroyed him. It destroyed everything in his life, which was also my life, my mother's and my two brothers. It destroyed my family; it destroyed me and ended our family. There are no grandchildren for dad or children for us. There is no-one to remember my dad, my brothers and I.

Excerpt 4.

This excerpt highlights the contempt held by the authorities for the children in their “care”. It is little wonder that abuse and brutality were part of these children’s lives. Most of the children in “care” at this time were wards of the State.

Notes of a visit of inspection by DHHS to Box Hill Boys’ Home (1965)

I feel there is a very real place in the Victorian system for such an institution as Box Hill, where the staff can accept without too much heartburning long-term placements of boys from very substandard families who are unlikely ever to do them much credit or older lads who are too dull or unmannerly to be acceptable in the more refined type of cottage home

Counsel Assisting (Sophie David QC) the Royal Commission asks the DHHS witness, representing the Department:

Q. I suggest to you that that's a remarkable attitude for someone who is supposedly inspecting these homes to have about wards of the State.

A. Yes.

Q. And that might well explain- not the only explanation, but might well explain in part why these facilities were not adequately inspected and supervised, because that was an attitude held by Department officers?

A. Yes, it might (source transcript 12 October 2015, case study 33, c11338)

50 years later nothing has changed.

Today Forgotten Australians are again being abandoned by those who have promised to care.

The past repeats itself.