

A NATIONAL PEAK BODY: WHY AUSTRALIA'S GRANDPARENTS NEED ONE

CAROLYN HODGE¹

Australia currently lacks a national peak body uniquely dedicated to representing grandparents. As we move further into the twenty first century, the roles grandparents play are changing in response to modern dynamics such as dual income families or parental substance abuse issues. Research is capturing the stories of grandparents from around the nation who are raising their grandchildren, providing high levels of informal (unpaid) child care and those who are denied access to their grandchildren. However, more work needs to be undertaken to ensure that what we are learning from research is informing actions that will produce improved outcomes for grandparents. This article will suggest ways in which a national peak body for grandparents could challenge some long standing unmet need and prompt policy shifts to produce actions based on evidence, consumer input and best practice.

Based on data collected in 2006/2007 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)² notes the existence of 14000 grandparent families nationally. The ABS reports numbers of grandparent families have decreased since 2003 figures acknowledged 22000 grandparent families³. However, services interacting with grandparents raising grandchildren report anecdotally that they are experiencing continuing growth in client numbers, suggesting the possibility that many grandparents may not wish to be formally identified as the guardian or carer of their grandchildren. While there are no available figures on grandparents affected by denial of access the ABS does note that grandparents provide regular child care to over 600 000 children annually- making them the largest provider group of informal child care in the nation⁴.

In 2003, COTA National Seniors⁵ released, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*⁶, a report developed from a research project that involved 499 grandparents. The information collected was primarily gathered during workshops held in Queensland, NSW, Victoria South Australia and Western Australia. Additional data was collected via email, post or via telephone from further afield⁷. Five years later in April 2008, the Council on the Ageing (COTA) NSW team that contributed to the 2003 project worked in collaboration with the NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee (MACA) to convene the NSW Grandparenting Forum. The two day forum brought together grandparents, government representatives, service providers and researchers to discuss a range of issues related to contemporary grandparenting issues. Four workshops focussing on; Respite Issues and Needs, Aboriginal Grandparent Care, Cultural Perspectives in Grandparenting and Legal and Access Issues were included in the proceedings.

The three distinct cohorts of grandparents attending the NSW Grandparenting Forum were grandparents raising their grandchildren, grandparents providing high levels of informal childcare and grandparents denied access to their grandchildren. Discussions at the NSW Grandparenting Forum echoed the findings of Australian research published in this decade⁸. Though for different

¹ Policy Officer with the Council on the Ageing NSW and Chair of the Grandparent, Relative and Kinship Caring Alliance in NSW.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Characteristics and Transitions* 4442.0 2006-2007 (2008) [8].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Childhood and Education Care* 4402.0 June 2008 (2008) [4].

⁵ COTA National Seniors was a partnership between State Councils on the Ageing and the National Seniors Association. The partnership is no longer active having been dissolved in 2006.

⁶ Margot Fitzpatrick, *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*, COTA National Seniors (2003).

⁷ Ibid at [17].

⁸ See Cass, Bettina, 'Exploring Social Care: Applying a New Construct to Young Carers and Grandparent Carers' (2007) 42(2) *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 241; Margot Fitzpatrick, 'Grandparents Raising Grandchildren' *op cit*; Marilyn McHugh,

reasons, grandparents raising grandchildren shared significant feelings of grief and loss with those denied access, as their expectations of retirement and the grandparent role were vastly different to their experiences. Both cohorts also struggled to maintain relationships with the birth parents of their grandchildren. Grandparents raising their grandchildren have often acknowledged that maintaining difficult relationships with birth parents is a major challenge⁹. While Foster Carers may also have cause to interact with birth parents, the family connection grandparents have with the children's parent or parents can produce added complications.

Grandparents attending the Grandparenting Forum noted the financial hardships arising from complex family situations. Assets built up for retirement can be eroded by caring for children and/or taking legal action to gain access or maintain legal custody. Though not easily liquefied, assets like the family home and superannuation payments must be assessed when applying for Legal Aid¹⁰ at times weighting the means and assets tests against a favourable outcome. Without low cost legal representation many grandparents are faced with the unenviable task of foregoing financial security in their later years to pursue legal custody when they believe this to be the only way to keep their grandchildren safe from harm. Other grandparents sharing their experiences at the Grandparenting Forum told how the children's parents were happy for the grandparents to raise the children as long as Centrelink payments continued flowing to the parents undisturbed. Over sixty percent of grandparent families count government pensions as their main source of income¹¹. As age pensions are not designed to provide support to those with dependants, maintaining a family without additional supplements is no easy task.

The NSW Grandparenting Forum was attended by grandparents from a range of cultures. These grandparents spoke of how they enjoyed providing informal childcare to their grandchildren but at times felt it was expected rather than agreed, echoing sentiments outlined by Goodfellow and Laverty¹² in their summary of the *Grandcarer Study*. Aboriginal Grandparents expressed their desire to access support from Aboriginal Grandparent Support Workers who understood the roles of extended families in their communities.

Interestingly, many of the financial, legal and respite issues raised by grandparents attending the forum in 2008 were outlined as recommendations for action in the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* report of 2003. This is not to say there has been no action since 2003. There have been some very positive developments, especially at state and local community levels. Grandparent Support Services are sites of innovative practices developed to respond to complex needs. Similarly, state statutory bodies such as Community Services¹³ in NSW, are increasingly moving to improve supports for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren while developing greater parity in their support to Foster and Kinship Carers in a strengthened out-of-home care environment. Yet even with positive shifts, it must be said that multiple jurisdictions, complex family relationships and the interplay of issues that come with the ageing process make navigating through the various government and non government organisations that provide services to grandparents a complicated, and at times challenging experience.

COTA NSW has been working with grandparents for over a decade. During this time, grandparents have repeatedly called for the establishment of a national grandparenting association. Grandparents going through complex situations look for avenues of support that are easy to access and navigate

A Framework of Practice for Implementing a Kinship Care Program (Report for the Benevolent Society), Social Policy and Research Centre, UNSW (2009); Gay Ochiltree, *The changing role of grandparents*, AFRC Briefing No.2, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (2006).

⁹ Goodfellow, Joy, and Judy Laverty, 'Grandparents supporting Working Families: Satisfaction and choice in the provision of childcare' (2003) 66 *Family Matters* 14. See also The Benevolent Society, *Supporting Kinship Care: towards a new practice framework* (Research Snapshot, 2009).

¹⁰ Legal Aid NSW, *Policies in Brief: Means Test* Legal Aid NSW.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Characteristics*, 4442.0, June 2003 (2004)

¹² Goodfellow and Laverty, above n 9, 14.

¹³ Formerly known as the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS).

through. Being able to access information, advice and support from people who are cognisant of all of the layers of complexity contained in the modern grandparenting environment would be extremely helpful to them. Similarly, they see great value in having an organisation that is nationally recognised as a place that grandparents can approach for information, advice and advocacy.

Of course, there are established organisations that respond to a range of needs throughout Australia. An excellent example of such an organisation is Carers Australia. Established in 1993, Carers Australia has become a recognised place of contact for carers, service providers, policy staff and government¹⁴. Their work has been integral in raising the profile of carers nationally and establishing greater awareness of the significant social and economic contributions carers make to Australian society. A great strength of Carers Australia as an organisation is that they operate in multiple environments working with government, business and the community sector to advocate for carers on a number of issues¹⁵. Through Carers Australia affiliated state bodies, carers themselves have the opportunity to share their perspectives in a number of community and professional forums and contribute to research projects that inform and guide the policy development processes¹⁶.

Though there are many valuable organisations working across Australia to support grandparents there is at present no one organisation that is a recognised authority on grandparenting issues. Nor is there a single organisation giving grandparents a public voice. Like carers, grandparents interact in a multitude of environments. COTA's experience in this field has shown that it is not uncommon for grandparents raising their grandchildren to be working with many state and federal government bodies simultaneously to access a range of supports and services. For example, a grandparent may be engaging with state child protection authorities, federal government departments to access Family Tax and Child Care Benefits while concurrently interacting with Legal Aid or Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) services to deal with custodial issues. In tandem with these activities they may also need to interface with educational authorities and allied health staff to manage challenging behaviours or developmental delays of the children they are caring for because there has been a history of abuse and or neglect.

Organisations such as Legal Aid NSW¹⁷ and Centrelink¹⁸ have excellent resources to assist grandparents to navigate through their services. However, a centralised hub that is capable of guiding people through all facets of the grandparenting journey is currently lacking. COTA's research in this field from both 2003 and 2008 has clearly illustrated that grandparents want a central point from which they can easily access reliable and comprehensive information. Attendants of the national conference for grandparents, *Taking Care of the Future*¹⁹, in late 2009 were again speaking passionately of their struggles to access consistent and comprehensive information to help them deal with difficult situations.

A search of available resources shows the public sphere houses a wealth of information. Some examples include the Mirabel Foundation's *'When the Children Arrive'* book aimed at kinship carers raising children who have been affected by their parents' substance abuse and the Aboriginal Child Family and Community Care Secretariat (AbSEC) NSW has an information booklet and telephone line for Aboriginal Foster and Kinship Carers. Additionally, the South Australian Government produces booklets for grandparents on a range of issues and the Child Support Agency (CSA) offers information for grandparents affected by family separation or divorce.

¹⁴ Carers Australia, *About Carers Fact Sheet* (no publication date).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carers NSW, *Carer Representation Program* Carers New South Wales (2009).

¹⁷ Legal Aid NSW, 'Are you a grandparent? Your legal questions answered' *Legal Issues for Older People* (information brochure, 2009).

¹⁸ Australian Government (Centrelink), *Are you a grandparent (or relative) caring for children?* (information brochure, no publication date)

¹⁹ Grandparents Taking Care of the Future Conference: National Congress for Grandparents & Kin carers and those denied access. Bond University, Gold Coast 4-6 November 2009.

A sustainably resourced national grandparenting peak body would be well placed to map all of the resources and services that are available nationally. A map of this nature would also be invaluable in illustrating where gaps exist, giving policy makers and funding bodies clear indications of unmet need. Similarly, any duplication would also be uncovered, allowing service providers to realign their focus or take up opportunities for greater collaboration.

A national grandparenting peak body would be a useful mechanism to co-ordinate a detailed study of State and Territory child protection and out of home care policies. Presently, allowances paid to out-of-home carers vary greatly between state and territory. These inconsistencies produce a situation whereby grandparents face greatly reduced income should they need to move interstate. The ability to easily compare out-of-home care allowances, through a national body of some kind, would enable grandparents to make more informed decisions when considering relocation.

The notion that grandparents are delivering similar messages in forums in 2008 as they were in focus groups in 2003 is perhaps reason enough to justify a more concerted effort to lobby for the installation of policies and programs aimed at addressing some of the gaps in the Australian grandparenting arena. In 2003, grandparents were calling for a range of respite options to be made available to them to allow so they could take time out to rest and take care of themselves²⁰. Today in 2010, access to respite for grandparents raising their grandchildren continues to be a vexed issue with options that are available so heavily subscribed to that they are often not widely promoted. The grandparents who interface with COTA NSW speak of feeling invisible- without the recognition Foster Carers receive and unable to access the National Respite for Carers Program²¹ unless the children they care for have a severe disability. An organisation with developed grandparent, service provider and research networks would be ideally located to mount a campaign capable of raising awareness of significant issues in this landscape to challenge this status quo.

There are some extremely efficient, creative and innovative organisations providing support to grandparents. Funded by Queensland's Department of Communities, Lifeline Community Care Queensland provides camps for grandparents and the children they are caring for through the *Time for Grandparents*²² program. These camps provide important respite for grandparents; and both the children and grandparents in attendance benefit from valuable peer support. Unlike similar programs that run in other states, this program caters exclusively to grandparents who receive no financial support from the state- therefore giving informal carers in Queensland an avenue of support not widely available in other states or territories. A national peak grandparenting body would be a useful repository of examples of innovative practice, such as the one noted above, that could be used to develop evidence based, best practice guidelines for a range of services aimed at supporting grandparents.

Of course any national body would need to acknowledge the diversity of the grandparent population and the range of issues they face. Grandparents who are denied access to their grandchildren have different needs to those who are raising their grandchildren. There is great scope to improve the availability of services to help grandparents deal with these painful situations and develop greater understanding of the benefits intergenerational relationships have for grandparent and grandchild alike. Similarly, multifaceted understandings of family across a variety of cultures need to be better understood to ensure policies, services and resources are designed to accommodate a diverse range of needs.

There is an enormous amount of work to be done. Fostering change of any sort will require concerted and ongoing efforts. While there are many organisations working in this field that have the benefit of knowledge and experience, there are few who have the additional resources to maintain national networks, write detailed submissions, lobby across multiple jurisdictions and mount a national

²⁰ Fitzpatrick, *ibid.*

²¹ Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing, *Caring for Someone* (2009) Department of Health and Ageing.

²² Life Line GPQLD, *Time for Grandparents Program* Grandparents Queensland, (2008).

campaign. Similarly, there are few who have the profile that could draw grandparents, service providers, advocates, researchers and policy makers together to work toward change in this field. A national peak grandparenting body could provide a central point of access for all existing stakeholders to feed into. Rather than duplicating existing structures, a sustainably resourced peak body would be ideally placed to capitalise on the opportunities arising from work that has already been done to ensure positive outcomes are delivered to the grandparents of Australia.

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