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Exodus of case workers to care for kids

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A MASS exodus of frontline caseworkers from the child protection system is being blamed on privatisation.

Hundreds of workers have opened compensation claims due to stress and burnout while the number of kids in crisis being seen continues to fall. Just 17 per cent of the 18,193 children deemed at risk of significant harm in the 12 months to September 30 last year were seen by a case worker.

That rate was 24 per cent during the previous year, a difference of 1221 kids suspected of suffering instances of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, violence or serious emotional harm.

Those figures do not include the thousands of other "concern reports" made about children with issues deemed less serious.

The statewide caseworker vacancy rate has spiked by five percentage points to 12 per cent between July and September last year.

The Public Service Association is calling on the Minns government to take responsibility and de-privatise the system.

PSA General Secretary Stewart Little said his union had been in dialogue with Child Protection Minister Kate Washington who now needs to act fast.

"Vulnerable kids aren't slipping through the cracks anymore, they're just tumbling through gaping holes,"

he said. "We need urgent and fundamental reform. Our members in child protection are telling us they've never seen the system in worse shape. They are stressed out of their minds and leaving in mass numbers."

Mr Little said private providers could pick and choose which kids they take on, often refusing to accept responsibility for the most troubled children.

"Hundreds of kids are being left to live in scrappy motels for months, barely supervised by untrained staff," he said.

"The privatised foster system has been left to wither and die. The terrible inefficiencies are costing NSW taxpayers more than we ever paid for the public system."

To the minister's credit, she had acknowledged that costly and inefficient privatised child protection services in NSW might have to be placed back into public hands, Mr Little said.

"We now need the government to act," he said.

"The government has a moral responsibility to care for the most vulnerable kids, and it is failing at the moment. The way to take responsibility is to stop outsourcing to NGOs, take control, and start getting qualified caseworkers back into the system.

"The privatisation of child protection service in NSW was a grotesque experiment and it's been a grotesque failure."

Ms Washington and the NSW Department of Communities and Justice have been contacted for comment.

Premier Chris Minns said the statistics were not good enough and reiterated the importance of his government's decision to remove public sector wage caps to attract more staff.

"We're hopeful that the changes we've made for the public service across the board will encourage more people into this profession because many people regard it as a calling," he said yesterday.

"It's really difficult work and the people that do it are truly saints."

Fams, a peak body supporting the not-for-profit sector, says there needs to be more focus on early intervention and prevention programs.