

## **FUNDING GAP** Service providers concerned critical early intervention has missed out

# 'Hole in budget' for kids in crisis

Gabriel Fowler

A LACK of early intervention funding to help prevent children being removed from their families and entering the beleaguered out-of-home care system has come under attack.

In the NSW budget announced on Tuesday, an extra \$241 million was announced for the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to "rebuild the foster care system".

It will be directed into expanding the government's role as a foster care provider to move vulnerable kids out of emergency accommodation and increase the recruitment of urgently needed, longer-term foster carers.

But there was nothing in the budget for early intervention and other facets of NSW child protection services that came in for heavy criticism in a scathing Auditor-General's report for being "inefficient, ineffective, and unsustainable".

The report found DCJ is still failing to proactively support families at their earliest point of contact with the child protection system, waiting until families are in crisis, increasing the likelihood children will be removed from their parents.

While welcoming other aspects of the budget, the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) says other key

services have missed out.

NCOSS CEO Cara Varian said more investment was needed in critical social infrastructure and front-line support.

"There are limited additional cost-of-living supports for low-income families, which is unfortunate given the immense pressure they are under to make ends

meet during this cost-of-living crisis," Ms Varian said.

"And there was no funding for early intervention and family preservation services to ensure kids and families are getting the support they need early, instead of when they hit crisis point."

Fams, the peak body for NSW not-for-profit family and children's services, also welcomed the NSW budget but expressed concern about the lack of early intervention and prevention funding for vulnerable children.

Fams CEO Susan Watson said the \$224 million investment into the foster care system was a good step forward, but it didn't tackle the underlying issues.

"The \$224 million investment into foster care to better support the 14,000 children and young people in NSW who cannot live safely at home with their families is significant," Ms Watson said.

"However, this is only a band aid solution to a much

bigger problem.

"We have said before that unless we fund the services that will stop children from experiencing harm and ending up in bad situations including foster care in the first place, we are just treading water.

"The frontline workers in the early intervention and prevention not-for-profit sector are achieving some incredible outcomes despite a lack of resources.

"The families they see are much more complex now than 10 years ago. And the added burden of the cost-of-living crisis means services are stretched to the limit."

Ms Watson said these workers were also being slugged with a 31 per cent increase to get a Working with Children Check, rising from \$80 to \$105

"The NSW government needs to give our sector more sustainable funding to

keep children and families safe and together, not charge our workers more to be able to do their job.

"We understand the NSW government is facing significant budgetary pressures, but we cannot leave our most vulnerable children and families behind - which is our very real fear with this budget."

The Department of Communities and Justice remains focused on reduc-

ing the number of children in high-cost emergency accommodation such as hotels and serviced apartments which has cost taxpayers \$860 million in the past three years.

Minister Kate Washington has promised significant reforms and has so far overseen the establishment of a Ministerial Aboriginal Partnership Group to oversee reform measures.

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## **The frontline workers in the early intervention and prevention not-for-profit sector are achieving some incredible outcomes despite a lack of resources**

Susan Watson



Hunter Central Coast Public Service Association coordinator Paul James, with a poster created as part of the union's campaign for better functioning child protection services. Picture by Jonathan Carroll.