



**Commission of Inquiry into
the Tasmanian Government's
Responses to Child Sexual
Abuse in Institutional Settings**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JODIE STOKES

I, Jodie Catherine Jean Stokes of [REDACTED] in the State of Tasmania, Regional Manager – Community Services at Anglicare Tasmania Inc ABN 90 9797 428 36 (Anglicare) do solemnly and sincerely declare that:

- 1 I am authorised by Anglicare to make this statement on its behalf.
- 2 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

BACKGROUND AND QUALIFICATIONS

- 3 I have been employed by Anglicare for approximately two years. I have been the Regional Manager – Community Services at Anglicare since 2020. Prior to that role I was the Area Manager Community Services for Mission Australia from 2009 to 2020.
- 4 I have a Diploma of Management and Advanced Diploma of Community Services Child Care.
- 5 Attached to this statement and marked **JS-01** is a true copy of my curriculum vitae.

CURRENT ROLE

- 6 I am currently the regional manager for Community Services at Anglicare for the North and North-West of Tasmania. I commenced this position on 24 February 2020.
- 7 In this role I am responsible for leading a team of Program Managers and managing several community service programs in the areas of Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol, and Families, Children and Youth.

ANGLICARE

- 8 Anglicare is a non-for-profit organisation that employs close to 1000 people in delivering a wide range of community and support services to people in Tasmania.

- 9 Anglicare is also an organisation of the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Tasmania committed to the basic doctrines of Christian faith. In response to the Christian faith, Anglicare strives to achieve social justice and improve opportunity for people in need to reach fullness of life.
- 10 Anglicare's services include providing support to children, young people and families at risk and manages programs such as its Supported Youth Program (SYP).
- 11 I am making this statement to assist the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings in its work by providing details both of my own personal experience and the experiences of the staff whom I supervise. Anglicare is committed to working to improve the safety of children and young people in Tasmania. Where in this statement I identify problems or making criticisms of the current system, I do it with the intention of being constructive and doing what I and Anglicare can to improve that system.

Supported Youth Program

- 12 Anglicare has been running the SYP since 2010 and is the only service in the North and North-West that provides the SYP. Children and young people located in the South of Tasmania receive a similar service called 'Targeted Youth Support' through Mission Australia.
- 13 The purpose of the SYP is to provide support, counselling and mediation to young people and their families as well as connecting them back into education, training and community connection in a non-judgemental and safe environment.
- 14 The SYP is for young people between the ages of ten and 18, who live in the North or North-West of Tasmania. Our records indicate that we have had approximately 75 children and young people over the last year participate in the program, with slightly more children receiving the service in the North than the North-West, due to the funding arrangements in place.
- 15 The SYP is funded by the State government. We receive approximately over \$900,000 per year which funds three full time staff in the North and 2.8 full time staff in the North-West. The government provided extra funding recently which allowed for the creation of over three Youth Wellbeing Officer positions across

the State. The focus of those new positions will be on young people under 16 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and staff will work with the young people, their families and other organisations to help find permanent, safe accommodation. We have only just started to put those positions on the ground.

Eligibility criteria

- 16 The SYP works with children and young people who are identified by the community or welfare professionals as having significant and/or multiple risks, such as:
- (a) an unstable home environment;
 - (b) disengagement with school;
 - (c) experimentation with alcohol or other drugs;
 - (d) difficulties fitting in socially; and
 - (e) being at risk of Child Protection or Youth Justice intervention.
- 17 The main eligibility criteria for a child to be admitted to the program are that they need to be disengaged from school, at risk of homelessness or homeless.
- 18 Other factors which will be considered are whether the child has a background of trauma and/or has experience with the Youth Justice System.
- 19 Whilst admission into the program is determined on a case by case basis, the program does not generally otherwise admit young people subject to child safety orders. This is because the Secretary of the Department of Communities Tasmania (**Secretary**) is the guardian of the children and young people under those orders and has the role of meeting their needs, including their need for housing and other supports.

Referral process

- 20 To participate in the SYP, a child or young person must first be referred to Anglicare. This referral must come through the Strong Families, Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line (**ARL**). Any person can call the ARL to make a referral, including a young person, school or Youth Justice.

- 21 Once a call is made to the ARL concerning a child who needs support, the case will then be sent to an 'allocation meeting' to discuss whether the child is eligible for the program.
- 22 Allocation meetings are held weekly and are facilitated by Community Liaison Officers from Baptcare in the North and Mission Australia in the North-West. Integrated Family Support Service Alliance partners and Anglicare also attend. Those meetings allow members to present a number of referrals that need assistance which include family support referrals, youth support referrals and referrals for Anglicare's North-West Early Start Therapeutic Support program (**NESTS**) which involves building an attachment between a child and their primary caregiver. Discussions are then had around what information is available about a child's family and who is able to provide support to them.
- 23 The referral that comes through the ARL provides comprehensive background information about the child and any further information required by Anglicare (such as whether a child has experienced family violence).
- 24 When a young person is determined to be eligible for the SYP they become a client of Anglicare, not the young person's family. Their family may however receive supports from another family support service. Where possible we will work closely with their family.

The ARL

- 25 Anglicare and the ARL have a good relationship. In fact, four of the ARL Community Liaison Officers (**CLOs**) are co-located in the Anglicare offices in the North and North-West. Also, because Anglicare works closely with the CLOs especially if a young person's or family's circumstances change.
- 26 Although the ARL has been a positive for Tasmania, I am aware from my staff that they have observed some delays in the referral process. Concerns have been raised that there may be referrals out there for children needing help and for those wanting to participate in the SYP but the referrals are not processed fast enough to go directly to us. If we are aware of the referral, we work closely with the ARL to ensure the referral is presented to the weekly allocation meeting. Being a regional area we have less services available to young people and families compared to the South. So if a referral is not sent through in a timely manner it could put them at risk as the option of using another

service is not always available to them. In my opinion the North need extra EFT for CLOs as they do not have the same resources as the South and the North-West.

- 27 It has been reported to me that there has been a delay in referrals sometimes longer than three months, that Anglicare staff are aware of, around a young person that has been identified as needing a referral to the SYP or families to NESTS. At times, we have to go outside of the referral process to ensure they are allocated. We work with the CLOs to follow through with the referral or inform ARL that we are taking the referral as we are aware that they are eligible even though it has not gone through allocation yet. It is concerning that some referrals have fallen to my staff to make and that children's ability to access the SYP is being delayed. I understand that the last couple of years have been challenging with staff resources because of COVID and the vaccine mandate but I also worry if children, young people and families that need our help are slipping through the net.

Information about young people

- 28 Once a child is placed into the SYP, Anglicare will record the statistics of the children that participate in the program in particular their age, gender and cultural background (including whether they are of Aboriginal descent or from a non-English speaking background). From my experience, there is generally an even number of boys and girls however recently we have experienced a lot more referrals for older boys and younger girls.
- 29 It is not rare that children and young people who are referred to the SYP have experienced family violence, physical abuse, and/or sexual abuse. Aboriginal children tend to be over-represented proportionate to the percentage of the population, in the referrals we received for the SYP.
- 30 In terms of sexual abuse, it is not rare for the SYP to have referrals where there are allegations of and/or disclosures of sexual abuse that have occurred in a child's family or in some other context.
- 31 It is also not uncommon for a child in the SYP to be involved in the Youth Justice system. In fact, we have a handful of boys from the Ashley Youth Detention Centre who have been participants in the SYP. At this stage

approximately 50% of the children and young people in the SYP would have had some involvement in the Youth Justice System or police intervention.

- 32 Any information about a child's background or experience with trauma is dependent on what is provided to us at the time of referral including if any notifications are made from Child Safety Service and contemporaneous file notes.

Working with young people

- 33 Once a child is referred to the program, we try and collect as much information as possible from various sources to see whether Anglicare can assist the child. This process is very much individual based since it depends on the child's needs.
- 34 For example, if a referral was linked with a school we would call the school for further information or if the child was living at home we would attempt to chat to their parents.
- 35 Where we can get consent (such as parental or guardian permission) to work with a young person we will. But this can be difficult because sometimes the young person is already homeless. Or they might identify a guardian or somebody similar. We might identify that Child Safety Service need to be involved with the young person especially if they are under 16 years old but this can be a difficult process because often Child Safety Service will say the young person is "self-selecting". I address "self-selecting" later in my statement at paragraphs 47 to 48.
- 36 Ultimately the SYP is focussed on the needs of the young person and they will voluntarily need to agree to work with us.
- 37 Anglicare works under the Tasmanian Wellbeing Framework and the six domains where we identify the child's goals and design an individual program that is designed to work towards achieving the child's goals. So, the SYP works on a strengths-based program where there is a plan for every child.
- 38 Through the program, the SYP workers are trying to connect the child or young person with other programs, re-engage them with school or reunify them with their families. Therefore, when a child or young person leaves the program is dependent on the child. An Anglicare worker may transition a child or young person out of the program, if over time they achieve their goals, such as going

to school, engaging with a mental health plan etc. Some children and young people disengage from the program themselves. However, the average time a child is in the youth program is about nine to 18 months and usually we will not keep a child or young person past two years unless their needs are complex.

- 39 Although the program is for children between the ages of ten and 18, we also have a discretion where we can extend a program into the young person's eighteenth year, if we believe the young person needs the support.

Other community programs which intersect with the lives of children in the SYP

- 40 Other programs for families, children and young people which intersect with the lives of children in the SYP are Pathway Home, Kids in Focus and Reconnect (all run by Anglicare). We also work with many other programs including, Youth Justice, Child Safety, Education etc.
- 41 Pathway Home is a reunification program which provides assistance and support to help children return to their family home in the North and North-West of Tasmania. This program is targeted at children and young people who have been in out of home care and referred by Child Safety Service within the Children and Family Services branch of the Department of Communities. It also supports and assists families to ensure a stable family environment.
- 42 The services which Pathway Home offers include one-on-one or family counselling, information about Centrelink, Medicare and government assistance, support to parents, and day to day support to get children to school and packing lunches.
- 43 Kids in Focus on the other hand is a State-wide program run by Anglicare which assists with children impacted by parental use of alcohol or other drugs. It assists families with children up to 18 years of age who are impacted by their parents' use of alcohol or drugs.
- 44 These programs are all available to children who are a part of the SYP, and may even have family who are participating in these programs and those programs welcome referrals.

Children who may need statutory intervention

- 45 Children and young people are not eligible to participate in the SYP unless they have complex needs as explained in paragraphs 16 to 17, are at risk of

homelessness or are already homeless. Whilst working with these children and young people and learning more about their situation Anglicare may identify that a child or young person needs statutory intervention through Child Safety Service. Anglicare has a policy about making well-being concerns to the ARL. If the child or young person discloses abuse we will also contact the police.

46 Anglicare works very closely with Child Safety Service and has had some really positive outcomes when working to meet the goals of families and young people. But on occasion we experience difficulties referring back to Child Safety Service.

47 If we consider that a child needs statutory intervention, we make a referral to the ARL. I understand from my colleagues that the best case scenario after a referral to ARL is that the child or young person would go into therapeutic residential care. However, in Anglicare's experience a referral to the ARL may not result in Child Safety Service involvement. Sometimes this is because Child Safety Service decide that they cannot or will not work with the young person. Anglicare staff have told me that their usual experience after reporting a well-being concern is that Child Safety Service say they will not get involved because the child or young person is "self-selecting" and they are already involved with the SYP.

48 In my experience, "self-selecting" is a term used by Child Safety Service to say the child is choosing to live in a certain place; that is, they are choosing to be in unsafe situations such as homelessness or couch surfing, and that their choice is to be accepted. In my opinion and the opinion of my staff, these children are too young to be given control over these things. They are children.

49 I am aware of Dr Catherine Robinson's research into the cohort of children presenting to youth homeless services who are not receiving an out of home care response. Her research was sparked from the Northern SYP team and the concerns and trends that they were seeing with young people, and Anglicare staff are amongst those who are quoted in her report.

50 There has always been limited housing options for young people in Tasmania but the current housing crisis has created a situation where young people are increasingly being put in unsafe situations. Children 13 or 14 years old are not

capable of protecting themselves, and they should not even if they could. They are children.

Sharing the Risk

- 51 I have seen a gradual shift of risk while working in Community Services and we are often told "we're all sharing the risk." This shift has put much more pressure on Anglicare to live with the risks posed to young people and families and to try and manage that risk. There has also been a lot of negotiation to try and get these children where they need to be.
- 52 In making these comments, I do understand that Child Safety Service are also under stress, with a lack of resources, high staff turn-over and a constant flux of change. This is possibly leading to change fatigue. In my experience in the North and North-West of the State I have observed the continual restructure of Child Safety Service.
- 53 If the risk for this cohort of young people is to continue to sit with us, we need further funding and training to better manage that risk. Currently the legislation places the responsibility for children at risk of harm on Child Safety Service (as delegate of the Secretary), but in my experience, my staff are taking on extra responsibilities for these children, resulting in them doing extra work, staying longer with the young person, and doing more of the interventions and therapeutic work

Issues faced by children of the SYP with regard to homelessness and other risks

Social disadvantages and chaotic lifestyles

- 54 The main eligibility criterion for the SYP is that the child or young person is at risk of homelessness or is homeless. A lot of the children that we work with have been living in really chaotic, unsupported and a potentially homeless life. Anglicare has observed that these children often do not know where they will be sleeping at night and they are not engaged in school.
- 55 I think there should be more flexibility in education provision to children and young people. Education is an important factor to help protect children from the risk of harm, including sexual harm. Currently there is the Indie School in the North, Space in the North-West and RADAR in Launceston. But these schools have limited enrolments.

Involvement with the criminal system

- 56 The SYP workers have told me that some children who have participated in the SYP end up in and out of detention and gaol and have their own children removed.
- 57 I understand from speaking with the SYP workers that at present approximately 50% of the children and young people in the SYP have had involvement with the criminal justice system to some degree. The number of children in Ashley Youth Detention Centre who are on the SYP program fluctuates over time.

Lack of appropriate interventions

- 58 One of my staff has experience in working with children and young people on the SYP who have been placed in Ashley Youth Detention Centre. She has commented that in her experience nearly all of these children that she has worked with have been failed earlier in life by various services in particular the lack of appropriate intervention. For example many of the children and young people that she has worked with:
- (a) were subject to sexual or physical abuse at home;
 - (b) had a lack of early intervention when the child was starting to display poor behaviour and disengaging from school;
 - (c) had a lack of an education; and
 - (d) had a lack of services that will take these young people on because they are classed as too high risk.
- 59 This worker's observations match my own. It has been a concern of mine for a long time working in community services that there is a gap which leaves some young people without any appropriate support. There is early intervention for children between the ages of zero to five, and then there is intensive intervention between ten and 18 years old. But often there is nothing in between. In that period of time between ages five and ten we lose the opportunity to intervene in these children's lives to divert them away from the need for intensive intervention when they are older and when it may be too late.
- 60 At the intensive intervention level Anglicare is the only service that provides this level of intervention, although Reconnect in Tasmania does provide some

interventions. Schools are often relied on to support young people and their families who are having difficulties at home and are under a lot of pressure.

- 61 To provide better early intervention supports the Government should look to the Reconnect program which is a federally funded program. It may be possible to have a State funded program that is similar to create greater capacity to work with families earlier. This would prevent a lot of children from ending up in the SYP program.

Lack of housing as an issue of risk

Housing initiatives

- 62 I am aware of some initiatives to improve housing for young people including a supported youth shelter for under sixteens in the North that is to be completed in September hopefully. A new Youth Foyer to be built in Burnie soon. There are also Pods that will be available soon in the North.

Lack of support services

- 63 There is also a lack of family violence services for young people. Through the work of Dr Catherine Robinson and her interviews with workers and with young people we have found that a lot of young people do not even know that they have been in a family violence situation with their family, and they have gone straight into one with their relationships.
- 64 We have recently implemented some programs to address this such as the Shark Cage for young women and RAGE training for young males. We also provide Relationship Abuse of an Intimate Nature (**RAIN**) program in the North-West of Tasmania to work with young people in domestic violence situations. Anglicare provides counselling services, support and advocacy for women and men experiencing relationship violence and again is based on a referral process. These programs are all run voluntarily and are free.

I make this solemn declaration under the *Oaths Act 2001* (Tas).

Declared at



on [08/06/2022]

Before me:



[Full name of Justice, Commissioner for Declarations or Authorised Person]