



15 YEARS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY AT BURNSIDE – LOOKING BACK/ LOOKING FORWARD

As an agency of the Uniting Church, Burnside stands in a proud tradition. As part of the UnitingCare network we reflect our collective commitment to social justice. Our vision is for a safe and just society for all children, young people and their families. This is only achievable through genuine inclusion and a redistribution of resources and opportunities

This understanding of social justice is a thread woven through Burnside's policy, practice and planning – it is an intrinsic part of our organisational culture and informs 'the way we do business' all over NSW. From our engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Far West to our work with isolated families on the North Coast, from our services for children and young people in out of home care to our focus on early intervention and in our commitment to investing in innovative service delivery.

We have made the strategic decision that we can make the greatest difference for children, young people and families by focussing on communities where social and economic disadvantage is negatively impacting on children's life chances.

However we know that disadvantage and social *in*justice are not just the product of individual, family or even community circumstances. Injustice is a systemic issue and so Burnside has, over the last 15 years made a commitment to invest in influencing the legislation, policy settings and practices that have such a significant impact on people's lives.

Now and then

Burnside is nearly one 100 years old (this celebration is in 2011) and one could say that we have been practicing social justice all that time, starting with the desire to give neglected children a fair chance in life.

However it was 15 years ago when Burnside's community development work started to officially focus on broader social justice concerns. In 1993 the community development program was renamed the Social Justice and Community Development program. Burnside's first policy officer, Anthony

Bendall was appointed in 1995. Anthony, now the Deputy Privacy Commissioner in Victoria, has joined us tonight.

A highlight from that time was a campaign of advocacy for a specialist children's court in Campbelltown so that children, young people and their families did not have to travel from south west Sydney to have matters heard. Along with our colleagues in peak organisations and local organisations in South West Sydney, we successfully lobbied for the specialist facility to be built in 1996.

Campaigns

We know very well that we are stronger together and we have worked with many of our colleagues in the non government sector over the last 15 years on campaigning for a better deal for disadvantaged children, young people and families. Our constant colleagues have been ACWA, NCOSS, NSW Family Services and we have also worked closely with Absec, CREATE, Barnados, SDN Children's services, our colleagues in UnitingCare and others to draw attention to the changes to policy settings that we believe will make the greatest difference. This is what the non-government sector does, and does well. It is wonderful to see a number of our colleagues and co-conspirators here tonight

In 1999 we worked with many of these organisations on the **Invest in Families Campaign**. That campaign drew from the research that now underpins the consensus on the critical importance of early intervention and prevention in the early years. In the NSW election that year, the campaign highlighted the programs and policies that we believed would make the difference. While this campaign contributed to paving the way for the government's significant commitment to the Families First initiative (now Families NSW), we continue to advocate for the vital investment in home visiting, early childhood education and care and increased resources for family support services.

With the **Good Start for Children Alliance**, we joined with our colleagues in children's services again focussing on the difference we can make with children through high quality early childhood education and care and the importance of focussing those services in areas of disadvantage.

Last year, the **Every Kid** campaign highlighted these issues along with education, child protection, dental health and the experience of kids in care, as NSW went to the polls. The Every Kid campaign brought together key agencies in supporting and developing a call for a Guarantee of Services

from government for children and young people in out of home care. The OOHC Guarantee sets out the minimum services required from government to support children and young people in care to have positive life experiences, quality education, good health and the opportunities they need to have a terrific life.

Research focus

In 1997 we grew our social justice work to include research as we recognised the importance of the evidence base for informing policy and practice and saw an opportunity to bring a unique perspective to social research. We gained our first Australian Research Council linkage grant in partnership with the University of Western Sydney in 2000, focussing on the needs of children in care. This groundbreaking research provided children and young people in care with an opportunity to tell us about what they believed made good models of out of home care.

Essentially children and young people told us that they wanted relationship driven care services. They wanted stability and carers who really understood where they were coming from and what they were dealing with. They told us they wanted to be heard and to be involved in decisions in a way that was right for them. Children and young people told us how important their families were, how their relationships with sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts and school friends were critical to their identity and that models of care needed to recognise this. We learned and keep learning from this research.

As we wait for feedback on two new ARC linkage draft submissions, one with the University of Sydney and Anglicare and one with the University of Sydney and the Department of Education, it is exciting to reflect on the impact a single piece of research can have both here and overseas.

Our new grant submissions reflect other Burnside social justice passions –the impact of welfare reform on low income sole parents and their children and addressing educational disadvantage in disadvantaged communities.

Strengths based approach

Our policy work has taken the lead from our practice and incorporated a strengths based approach. This means that we are not interested in highlighting problems but in looking for solutions and working together with our partners in government and in our sector to identify the ways forward. This year, the Special Inquiry into Child Protection has offered another opportunity for us to take our vision forward for services for children and families in NSW. Recognising that while it is easy to highlight things that go

wrong, but harder to put create useful and realistic proposals for the future, we have focussed our work on what a system that delivers for children, young people and families would be like.

It's no secret to many of you that we believe that a system that delivers will need to be radically different to the system we have, and that there needs to be a separate focus on children which is not driven by child protection concerns. What may be surprising to some is that we believe that we *can* create a system in NSW that works and that together government and non-government agencies can make even more of a positive difference in the lives of children. And we can do this in a systematic, consistent and respectful way. But we have to be prepared to invest quickly and significantly in prevention, build on the early intervention services we have and recognise the intensive family support required in many communities. We have to be prepared to build a workforce that can manage the many challenges they face and that supports the specialist role played by those staff at the statutory end of the service spectrum. We have to have a plan (and this time it will work – with apologies to *My Friend the Chocolate Cake*) and be prepared to commit to it over the long term – ten years and more. Most of all, we have to believe that we can make a difference in families.

In a recent paper for ACOSS Dr John Falzon, formerly a project officer at Burnside, and now a great advocate at St Vincent de Paul, talked about the importance of communities of hope. We believe that hope is a critical ingredient and certainly hope is needed in child protection.

All of our policy work and our practice is predicated on the conviction that we can make a difference.

Service user voice

One of the great privileges of our social justice advocacy work has been that we have been able to tell the story of the experience of the children, young people, families and communities to policy makers. All of our submissions and other publications bring the lived experience of real people to policy makers alongside our practice knowledge and the research evidence. We have also been able to stand beside service users as they tell their own story, and continuing in that tradition this evening, I will be welcoming a number of people from our programs to share some of their experience. This has been a powerful tool in highlighting the lived experience of disadvantage and making sure that the impact of policy decisions is visible.

Looking forward

As we look forward, hopefully to at least another 15 years of investing in social justice advocacy, Burnside remains committed to our vision – a safe and just society for all children.

Our priorities

- the need for a new way of supporting children that goes beyond the narrow investigative and punitive system to include a spectrum of services for children, young people and families,
- bringing together support to build a network of integrated child and family centres in disadvantaged communities that that will provide a range of inclusive, accessible and flexible services
- bringing nurse home visiting to all vulnerable families in NSW
- investing in our work with indigenous children, young people and families to make a significant contribution to addressing the unacceptable gap in social, health and life outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people
- achieving Government commitment to a Guarantee of Service for all children and young people in OOHC.

Our skills, ambitions and staff continue to grow, and many of our social champions including Claerwen Little and Sandra Black continue to work in other parts of Burnside and UnitingCare. Our work is not yet finished.

As so movingly put by Mick Dodson,

Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and understanding of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.

Thank you for joining with us in this celebration

Jane Woodruff
8 May 2008