

NEWSLETTER

GPO Box 2281, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001
email gcyp@saugov.sa.gov.au
website www.gcyp.sa.gov.au



The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People advocates for and promotes the best interests of young people and children under the care of the Minister for Families and Communities.

Why rights ARE important

New Youth Advisors Rachel and 'John' have their say on why it is time for South Australia to have a charter of rights for children and young people in care written into law.

'John'

In the unit where I live, the young people never stick up for themselves. I try to help them and encourage them but it's very hard. They don't have much confidence.

I think that the Charter of Rights is important because it was written by kids in care. They know what things are important to them and they put them in the Charter.

Having rights written down in law will help kids stand up for their own rights. It will also help adults and carers too. Kids are sometimes too scared or haven't got the words to stand up for themselves so you need adults to help.

Adults like care workers and teachers need to know what the rights of kids in care are and help them to stand up for them. This will give the kids more confidence to stand up for themselves in the future.

In Youth Parliament last year, my team convinced 80 other young people that having a bill of rights written into the law was essential. Even though most of the young people in Youth Parliament were not in care they understood that we don't have adults like parents to stick up for us like other kids. Almost all of them voted for the bill of rights.

As well as the youth parliamentarians we had a lot of interest from the Minister and a couple of other politicians who offered us advice and help and asked for more information. I really think that if this got into the state parliament it would get a lot of support.

Rachel

Every other state but Tasmania has a charter or reference to a charter written into their laws. With all of the other good things we are doing, why is SA lagging?

Putting a charter into law would reach out to each and every single child in care and let them know they are not alone. It would reassure them that being in care is not their fault and encourage them to strive to be the very best that they can be.

In some cases, children in care may feel intimidated about seeking the help that they deserve. This is not okay and more support needs to be provided to ensure that these children are nurtured and guided through trying times. The charter is therefore, the foundation for moving forward in protecting children who are afraid of seeking help and encouraging them to become more involved around the choices regarding their personal wellbeing.



The Guardian's team successfully champion a bill of rights for children and young people in care through Youth Parliament last year.



*Pam Simmons
Guardian*

Letter from the Guardian for Children and Young People

The Guardian's role includes advocating for all young people who are in custody or guardianship of the Minister. We therefore have a mandate and interest in what happens to young people who are incarcerated in secure care centres.

Primarily our interest is in preventing offending by young people and, if offences occur, preventing repeat or more serious offences that require incarceration. However, if they must spend time in secure care centres it is our shared duty to ensure that they have the best possible care, education and rehabilitation.

The good news is that youth crime is falling and most young people in South Australia are never in trouble with the police. In 2005, only 2.5 per cent of young people aged 10 to 17 years were apprehended by police. More than half of these did not warrant a court appearance. We do well at steering first time offenders away from their second or third offence with crime prevention strategies and cautions or family conferences following police apprehension.

The more vexing problem is how to stop that small minority, around 8 per cent, who start at an early age and persist in offending. From research findings and our own knowledge of the young people who repeatedly commit offences, their early family experience, including deprivation, homelessness and cultural confusion, is a significant root cause of their offending. Prevention of further offending then requires a social and emotional response as much as one that holds them responsible for their actions.

If we are to hold young people responsible for their criminal behaviour we must also be accountable for the strength of our teaching, guidance and support in their childhood.

In the public discussion of late there is a tendency to see repeat young offenders as merely wilful and beyond rehabilitation. Of course they must face the consequences of their offending but our responsibility is to pay attention to their mental health needs, disabilities or developmental needs, the consequences of past abuse or neglect, substance use and negative peer relationships.

If we are serious about serious repeat young offenders we must improve the physical and therapeutic environment of our secure care facilities, provide quality rehabilitation programs and assist their re-integration into the community. This is in addition to the early intervention crime prevention measures.

We could offer, as other states and countries do, medium or low security facilities that focus on re-integration rather than punishment. We could extend the practice of family conferencing to other purposes such as sentencing, healing and early release planning. Improved case management and post-release services would help the young person make different choices, as would dealing with substance abuse, past trauma, learning delays and lack of self confidence and control.

There is much to be done and all of it more complicated than a simple punishment response. There is a great deal of expertise, determination and knowledge among those who work in youth justice and we will depend on that in the coming months of debate about repeat young offenders.

Pam Simmons, Guardian for Children and Young People

What's been done

March – May 2007

Agency endorsements of the *Charter of Rights* are celebrated in the office every week. There have been another seven endorsements in the past three months taking the total to 25. Congratulations to the following new endorsees: Kumangka Aboriginal Youth Service, Ranges Youth Service, Southern Junction Community Services, Service to Youth Council, Connecting Foster Carers, the Department of Education and Children's Services and UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide.

We have commenced an investigation into the educational support required by children in care and we expect to report on this by July. The report is intended to provide us all with ideas on what else can be done to improve their educational outcomes. Parallel to this we have joined with Families SA, Department of Education and Children's Services and Revise (a not-for-profit organisation for volunteer teachers) in a trial of introducing teachers to residential care units. There will be more on this in the next issue.

The monitoring framework for this office has been released after consultation with the agencies most affected. The framework will clarify our role, activities and expectations in fulfilling this function of the Guardian. View it at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au>**Publications**>**Information Papers and Fact Sheets**.

As part of our monitoring role we visited the two secure care centres and six residential houses in this reporting period. We also audited annual reviews at Murray Bridge, Marion, Port Lincoln and Port Pirie.

Our written submission to the Commissioner for Social Inclusion on serious repeat young offenders is available from our website, www.gcyp.sa.gov.au>**Publications**>**Submissions**.

We have recruited two additional Youth Advisors to share the work done by Mellita Kimber and David Wilkins. A big congratulations and welcome to Rachel and 'John'. The benefits are countless from the advice and ideas we get from our Youth Advisors.

We are sad to farewell Angela Andary who has been the Senior Project Officer since October 2004. Angela has contributed hugely to the culture, work and credibility of the Office and we have gained so much from her knowledge, commitment and courage. Angela is taking 12 months leave to venture and we wish her all the best.



At the April board meeting of UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide, CEO Libby Craft and Chair of the Board Reverend Don Catford receive a certificate of endorsement of the Charter of Rights from Guardian Pam Simmons



Angela Andary - we have gained much from her knowledge and wish her all the best

Keeping young people in care at school

The Families SA Social Inclusion School Retention Project was set up in 2003 to work with the disproportionate number of 12 to 17 year-olds in care for whom the relationship with school had broken down.

Lead Program Officer, Rohan Bennett explains that one of the keys to their remarkable success so far is getting everyone working together.

‘Whether we are contacted by DECS or a Families SA social worker, we always make sure that the other one is in agreement.

‘We get together a case conference with the school, the young person, the social worker and other interested parties and try to broker a solution that works for them all.

‘Of course, what the young person wants for themselves is absolutely central. If they aren’t on board then even the best plan won’t work.’

Project Officer Wendy Dale agrees.

‘First you work out what interests and excites them and then try to build a flexible learning package around that.’

Programs involving environmental work, radio and sound, car mechanics, working at Monarto Zoo and, soon to start, training guide dogs, are a few examples of the diverse ways students are involved in work that engages with their interests.

Rohan gives great credit for their success to the flexibility of high schools that allow students to join the programs and to the teachers make the considerable effort required to get SACE accreditation for the work done by their students.

New addition to the team Natalie Trim recalls from her time in the field how much of a social worker’s time is absorbed organising the physical necessities, like safety and a place to live.

‘We [in the school retention team] have the luxury of time to concentrate on the child’s education alone, the time to think creatively and proactively and to provide support to the other workers. We add value to the work already being done by [Families SA] District Centres.’

A key strategy for the team is the use of mentors. Rohan explains that the mentor is important because, of all the adults around, the mentor can be there just for the young person.

‘Many of our kids’ lives are disrupted by changes in where they live, their social worker and their school. The mentor can be there for the kid for the long haul to give some essential continuity.’



The Social Inclusion School Retention Team is Wendy Dale, Sarah Cooper, Rohan Bennett and Natalie Trim.

Working, as the team does, with young people who are the most disengaged and difficult for schools to accommodate, success is often the patient accumulation of small victories.

‘Persistence is the key,’ says Rohan. ‘Immediate and spectacular improvements do happen but they are rare.’

There are, however, landmark successes like the young man who is now doing work experience and some paid work for a light and sound company and the students who have enrolled in a TAFE bridging course. For many young people, though, just being back in school on a regular basis or completing a program are major achievements in themselves bringing with them new confidence and self-esteem.

When the Social Inclusion School Retention Project finishes its four-year Social Inclusion funding in June this year, there is uncertainty about its future. Families SA and DECS staff have expressed concern that the model, with all of the skills, networks and resources that have accumulated in the last four years, should not be lost.

Indeed, the model has proven so successful that, when asked, the team see every reason that it should be extended to take in a younger age group.

Wendy again.

‘We frequently get requests for the same services for younger people. It would make a lot of difference to intervene much earlier before some of the negative behaviours become entrenched and then the transition into high school could be so much easier.’

Jane

‘Jane’, 15, is under Guardianship of the Minister until 18. Jane is highly at risk of sexual exploitation and being drawn into criminal behaviour and her aggressive behaviour made relations difficult with her peers.

Attempts to meet her needs in a special school were not successful. Her learning disability was mild compared to the other students and she didn’t identify with them. Other issues such as her personal presentation, hygiene and communication skills also hampered her relationship with other students.

In September 2006 the School Retention Team helped put together a plan with Jane so that she could start at a high school in the inner south. A tailored program was designed to help her address her learning, behavioural and social needs. Jane worked with a mentor for 10 hours per week to go through this important transition and for the opportunity to engage in some positive recreational activities. Jane’s relationship with the mentor has been central to her success. The mentor has provided her with a positive role model and Jane has learned appropriate boundaries.

At the same time, Jane attended an individualised one-to-one personal development and grooming program through RAVE which focussed on her personal grooming and on developing her self esteem and confidence. Jane thoroughly enjoyed the RAVE program and has made improvements in her appearance which is improving her relationships with her peers.

This school year has been a good one for Jane so far. She has been attending school on a regular basis. There has been a significant improvement in Jane’s behaviour and she is more settled.

Welcome to new Youth Advisors

This year, we welcome Rachel and 'John' who join 'veterans' David Wilkins and Mellita Kimber on the Office's Youth Advisor team. The Youth Advisors are an essential part of the Office and their experiences and connections with young people in care are invaluable in keeping the Office focussed and relevant.



Rachel Hopkins

Rachel Hopkins

Rachel was in care until she turned 18. Her first contact with the Office was in 2006.

'I had the opportunity to work on the Charter of Rights which really kickstarted the volunteer work I now do.'

Since the Charter, Rachel has been heavily involved with the CREATE Foundation contributing her skills in computer design and layout and assisting with training.

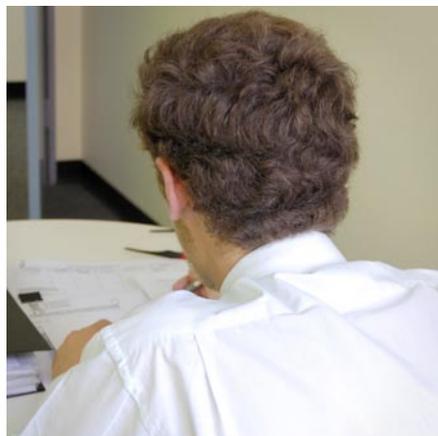
At the start of this year she commenced a full time program in TAFE and later joined the Guardian's Office as a Youth Advisor in April.

'I like to be busy', she says, and demonstrated this by relaxing in the TAFE term break by hanging from an abseil rope and marching around the Kuitpo forest on a CREATE camp.

She brings to the Youth Advisor role an acute awareness of the difficulties faced by some children in care.

'As a former child in care, I can't stress enough the importance of promoting a healthy self-esteem. Being in care is a difficult journey and is often a test of your personal limits and endurance. What with all of your unanswered questions, the uncertainty that seems to surround you and, worst of all, the way you judge yourself, being in care can be quite emotionally destructive.

'However, everyone has the right to feel good about themselves and it's important that every single child in care is supported in achieving this goal.'



'John'

'John'

'John', we can't use his real name or face because he is still in care, describes himself as a pretty typical high school student, attending Ross Smith Secondary where his favourite subject is PE.

Like Rachel, he became involved with the Office during the creation of the Charter of Rights in 2006. Later in the year he joined the Office's Youth Parliament team, gaining tremendous skill and confidence while leading the team to successfully negotiate its charter of rights bill through both houses.

He is convinced of the importance of helping young people in care to become their own advocates.

'I want to use this role to encourage young people in care to have a voice and to make sure that their voice gets heard in the places that matter.'