

A review found systemic failings in the child-protection system and how it needs to change, **LAUREN NOVAK** reports

Saving our at-risk kids



Child Protection Minister Rachel Sanderson in Parliament yesterday. Picture: Naomi Jellicoe

THE release of an inquiry into failings in South Australia's child-protection system this week sparked heated debate about whether the minister in charge, Rachel Sanderson, is up to the job.

The Opposition want her gone, but Ms Sanderson's colleagues are supportive.

Opinions on Ms Sanderson's handling of the portfolio vary greatly, but child-protection staff and advocates agree on the key challenges she must address in the wake of the damning report.

THE INQUIRY

Former judge Paul Rice was asked to examine the Child Protection Department's policies on reporting serious incidents, after Ms Sanderson was not informed two 13-year-old girls had fallen pregnant while in state care.

Mr Rice found the reporting systems "a mess" and uncovered a culture in which workers were desensitised to the daily horrors – and did not always report up the line.

FRONTLINE FATIGUE

Mr Rice found "a strong sense of child-protection fatigue" among staff dealing with "all manner of abuse and neglect of children".

This is a critical problem for the sector, equally experienced by workers in non-government organisations. Ms Sanderson has acknowledged staff are doing "one of the hardest jobs" in government, but if she is to be confident they will report serious incidents to her in future she must ensure workers are better supported to deal with the trauma they regularly confront.

"The level of abuse and violence, the drug use, the stuff that child-protection social workers have to deal with on a day-to-day basis is so extreme that I don't believe members of the public could even fathom," Child and Family Focus SA chief executive Rob Martin said.

"But the amount of supervision is woefully inadequate to assist staff to deal with the



How The Advertiser has reported the child-protection failures.

consequences." Guardian for children in care Penny Wright said hiring more administrative staff would ease the stress on frontline social workers "juggling large and complex workloads". Ms Sanderson has argued there were "immense case loads" and pressure under the former government and "I am working very hard to change that".

THESE ARE NOT ORDINARY CHILDREN

The abuse and neglect suffered by children before they are taken into state care has a profound impact on their behaviour and needs. However, Mr Rice found some staff expressed a view that "children in care are no different to ... other children".

When responding to news late last year that a second 13-year-old girl in care had fallen pregnant, Ms Sanderson said "what has occurred could happen in any home".

But it's a simple fact that the circumstances are different for children in state care.

Ms Sanderson acknowledged in Parliament this week that "these children come from very difficult backgrounds" but advocates argue she must deeply understand the effects of this trauma, and how it makes working with children in care different, if she is to be effective.

CREATE Foundation chief executive Jacqui Reed noted Ms Sanderson did not have a background in child protection so "sometimes her lack of understanding of the sector ... might be a drawback, but in some respects

it can be an eye-opener" or bring fresh ideas. Public Service Association SA general secretary Natasha Brown said it was "so important for the minister to understand the depth of the circumstances from which these children come".

Former Anglicare SA chief executive Peter Sandeman said it was "extraordinarily difficult" to prevent harm to children who "do engage in extreme risk taking behaviour, and are prone to exploitation".

KEEPING THEM SAFE

It is very common for children living in state-run homes to run away, most often to be with family but also – as the cases in the Rice Review illustrate – to people who will harm them.

It is true, as Ms Sanderson says, that authorities cannot legally detain children in these facilities, though the government initially considered building a secure facility, before ruling it out last year. Instead, it has allocated \$600,000 to provide more support to address the underlying reasons children in state-run homes run or act out.

OUTSIDE EYES

In addition to her role as Guardian, Ms Wright was given powers to inspect state-run homes in 2018. However, funding for that visiting scheme ceased in late 2019. Ms Wright said it must restart to ensure there is an independent monitor for the number of children living in those homes, which has grown "significantly".