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MEDIA RELEASE

18 November 2021

Children and young people in fear of their safety while in state care

Safety and stability remain the top presenting issues from children and young people living in South Australia's child protection system. For the fourth year in a row, many children and young people living in care who seek advocacy from the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People have said they don't feel safe where they live.

Data from the latest [Guardian for Children and Young People Annual Report](#) show the number of children and young people in care is now at 4,647, an increase of 6.3% from the previous year. While children and young people living in residential care make up 12.9% of the care population (34% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) they constituted 58% of the enquiries received from children and young people during the year.

"For the fourth year in a row, children not feeling safe where they live was the number one issue raised by both children and young people and adults when contacting my office for advocacy support," Guardian for Children and Young People, Penny Wright said.

"Young people tell us about their fears and distress for their safety in some residential care properties, with one young person telling us they spend most of the time in their bedroom, to keep safe. Police are repeatedly called to a number of houses. This is not the home environment we should accept for any child or young person, let alone a child who has already been removed from their family home because it is deemed unsafe," Ms Wright said.

The Guardian's report stated that due to the increasing numbers of children coming into care, and the effect of other external forces (market and social), the state's child protection system is under considerable strain. Shortages in available placements have created very difficult conditions in which to provide shelter, a safe home and love for every child and young person to the degree that they need.

"Despite the best efforts of the Department for Child Protection and non-government agencies, the number of family-based placements with kinship or foster carers has not kept up with demand, placing more pressure on other options like residential care. In turn, declining vacancies in the rental market and competition for skilled carers have made it difficult to procure properties and adequately staff them. These factors have led to such a shortage of residential care placements that, despite the strongest advocacy by my office, some children must continue living in placements that are dangerous and harmful," Ms Wright noted in the report.

"If a child does not feel safe where they live, this affects all other aspects of their life – from repeatedly going missing from the house, associating with other young people who are negative influences, and not going to school. It all adds up, and ultimately the mental health and physical safety of the young people is at stake," Ms Wright said.

“In August of this year, I resigned from the role of the Child and Young Person’s Visitor – a role which oversees the rights of young people living in residential care – because the position was not funded. Despite significant safety and wellbeing issues, my team and I cannot regularly visit some of the facilities we know are of highest concern.

“Young people are telling us that safety and stability in placement is an ongoing issue but I am deeply concerned that in another 12 months’ time the situation will remain, with children and young people still at risk. This cycle must end.

“When children and young people are removed from their families, the South Australian community expects that they will be safer in state care. I am deeply worried that placement shortages and a lack of capacity to respond to risks in the system mean that some young people may be no better off,” Ms Wright said.