

The Hon Tim Carmody SC  
Commissioner  
Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry

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Dear Commissioner

This submission to the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry is made on behalf of Griffith Youth Forensic Service (GYFS). Our submission touches on several of the Inquiry's terms of reference, and canvasses a number of wider issues relating to child maltreatment - particularly sexual abuse - and its prevention.

#### Background

GYFS has been contracted by the Queensland Government (currently Department of Justice and Attorney General, Youth Justice branch) continuously since 2001 to provide state-wide specialised assessment and intervention services for young (10-17 year old) sexual offenders and their families. Referrals are received exclusively from the courts. To date we have received referrals concerning 395 young people proceeded against under the Youth Justice Act (1992).

GYFS is part of a larger group of researchers and practitioners, based at Griffith University, working together to understand and prevent sexual violence and abuse.

#### Conceptual and empirical framework

GYFS services are guided primarily by a social ecological framework, whereby problem behaviour is understood in the context of the youth offender's family, peer, organisational (e.g. school), and neighbourhood systems. We are also mindful of the developmental and situational context of offending. Interventions therefore aim to address individual, situational, and ecological risk and protective factors. The primary goal is to prevent further offending, particularly further sexual or violent offending.

#### Delivering services to a geographically dispersed and culturally diverse client group

GYFS gives priority to referrals assessed as high complexity / high risk, and to referrals from regional and remote locations, including remote Indigenous communities. More than 80% of accepted referrals have originated from outside Brisbane, and about 40% have involved Indigenous youth and their families.

Specialised clinical services for youth sexual offenders in Australia and elsewhere are typically centralised, requiring clients to travel to major urban centres to be assessed and to participate in treatment. GYFS practitioners instead travel to wherever the young person lives, including to regional and remote locations.

GYFS field-based model allows for direct observation of the contextual factors that may contribute to sexual abuse offending and victimisation, as well as other problem behaviour. Field-based practice also allows interventions to be delivered in the same environment in

which risk and protective factors are situated. It also removes many of the barriers to participation and engagement by young people and their families.

GYFS practice model relies on the identification and recruitment of a team of local collaborative partners. This collaborative approach draws on the broad range of experience, knowledge and skills that already exist in local communities to enhance interventions, increase cultural and ecological validity, and in distant locations to facilitate continuity of service delivery between GYFS visits. Collaborative partners are identified on a case-by-case basis, and may include statutory youth justice and child safety officers, mental health practitioners, teachers, youth workers, family members, alternative care providers, community elders and other persons who may exert a positive influence on the young person concerned. This aspect of GYFS work has the secondary aim of building capacity of local professionals and communities to prevent sexual abuse or to respond effectively should it occur in the future.

#### Intersection of youth justice and child safety concerns

Almost one third (30%) of young people referred to GYFS are the subject of dual (youth justice and child safety) orders. Nearly two thirds (62%) have a significant history of child safety concerns. All forms of maltreatment (neglect, and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse) are represented in the backgrounds of our clients. At the time of their referral, about one third of GYFS clients also have a history of nonsexual offending. We believe these data reflect individual and ecological risk factors common to both offending and victimisation.

More than half (52%) of GYFS clients have an official or self-reported history specifically of sexual abuse victimisation. While most victims of sexual abuse do not become sexual offenders, recent Australian research has shown that sexually abused children were 7.6 times more likely than the general population to be later convicted for a sexual offence. These figures highlight the need for accessible and high-quality victim services, particularly for young males. Few therapeutic victim services are available on a state-wide basis in Queensland. Few services of any kind give any dedicated focus to male sexual victimisation.

Victims of GYFS-referred offenders have ranged in age from two to 80 years, with a median age of nine years. The majority of victims are thus themselves children, and most (about 80%) are female.

#### Tensions with child safety policy and practice

Our work in the field has brought us into close contact with child safety managers and front-line practitioners across the state. Our experience is that the availability and quality of child safety services are highly variable. This in itself suggests the need for greater uniformity in access and practice standards. We would like to acknowledge the extraordinary dedication and skill of many child safety professionals, some of whom have been among our most valued and effective collaborative partners. At the same time, we are compelled to point out below some of the many shortcomings and failures we have observed.

Many of our clients have had longstanding involvement with child protection and other services before they commit their first sexual offence. This suggests to us that many opportunities for early intervention have been missed. We have had clients who have had multiple out-of-home placements – as many as 40 separate placements in some cases. Such

experiences often compound serious personal and social attachment difficulties and associated behavioural problems. Many of our most difficult and dangerous clients have the most problematic child protection histories.

Evidence suggests that developmental risk factors for sexual offending are much the same as those for general and violent offending. Two factors that may be specifically relevant to sexual offending are sexual abuse and early sexual behaviour problems. We have already noted some of the shortcomings in the availability of victim services. Children (generally under 12 years) with sexual behaviour problems in particular seem to fall through the statutory net. Child safety services tend to focus on harm to children from parents and other adults, and seem ill equipped to deal with risks that may be presented by other children. Child safety personnel often seem to lack the knowledge and skill to assess early sexual behaviour problems and prevent concerning behaviours from becoming harmful to the child or others.

Even after young offenders are referred to GYFS it is often difficult to obtain effective child safety services. For a variety of reasons (e.g. family breakdown; legitimate safety concerns), many GYFS clients are unable to live at home with their families. Appropriate, safe, supervised placements are very difficult to source. In our experience, placement decisions are frequently made without due consideration of the needs of the offender or the safety of others. As an example, in one case GYFS made detailed written recommendations to the effect that a particular young offender should not be placed in a residence with other vulnerable children. Against these recommendations, our client was placed in precisely the kind of circumstances we had warned against, and he committed further sexual offences. In our view these new offences were predictable and preventable.

In cases where GYFS clients have been removed from their home, family re-unification often becomes problematic. Widespread generic fears among child safety officers about 'sex offenders' often appear to over-ride thoughtful, professional decision-making. These anxieties seem to be based on simplistic, stereotyped conceptions of the most persistent and dangerous adult offenders, ignoring the context of the problem and the wide variations among youth offenders and the risks they may pose. This suggests the need for greater access to quality education and training for child safety staff.

Particularly in some regional and remote communities where GYFS has provided specialist services to youth sexual offenders, no similar service has been available for victims. Child safety services will often attend to immediate problems, but victims are often left without therapeutic services, and their families without support or appropriate intervention.

#### Prevention-centred policy and practice

For many years concerns have been expressed internationally that, in the face of limited resources, overwhelming demand, and complex family problems, child protection systems and services continually gravitate to reactive, coercive, individual-level interventions. Prevention-centred approaches, by contrast, aim to provide non-coercive, non-stigmatising, neighbourhood-based, family-focused, child-centred interventions. Evidence points to family and parenthood education, family support, and home visiting programs as the most promising approaches to preventing child maltreatment, including sexual abuse. On the other hand, since the 1980s sexual abuse has increasingly been singled out as a unique problem requiring completely different approaches.

We believe that both the common and distinct aspects of sexual abuse need to be recognised. Accordingly, our group has proposed a comprehensive sexual abuse prevention framework that aims to integrate public health, child maltreatment prevention and crime prevention concepts and methods. The model recognises that separate strategies are needed to prevent sexual abuse before it would otherwise occur, and for responding effectively after the fact.

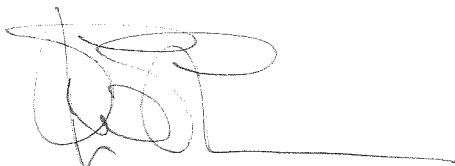
A new approach to community-level prevention

Our group is presently developing a place-based prevention project focused on two separate communities in Queensland. This work has arisen directly from GYFS fieldwork with referred offenders, and is focused particularly on apparently endemic problems with youth sexual violence and abuse in these communities. In partnership with Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet, we are presently investigating the scope, dimensions, and dynamics of the problem at these two sites. For this phase of the project we are obtaining quantitative and qualitative data from official sources (e.g. police, child safety, health), conducting clinical file reviews, interviewing local adults, youth, and relevant service providers, and conducting systematic site observations. These data will be used as a basis for devising a range of locally-tailored, evidence-informed prevention strategies.

We are hopeful of establishing local, state, commonwealth and international partnerships to move this project forward to the next phase. This next phase will involve selecting, implementing and evaluating a suite of individual, situational, and ecological interventions over a three to four year period. We aim to facilitate the transfer of this knowledge and expertise to other sites in Australia and internationally.

We hope this submission is of assistance to the Commission of Inquiry. We would be very pleased to provide more detail if required.

Yours sincerely



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