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Children in care face proof of life hurdles

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Victorian welfare workers are concerned the lack of a birth certificate is making it difficult for children, including in foster care, to access some services. Picture: iStock

Thousands of Victorian children in care could be without proof of life documentation, sparking an urgent audit by the Andrews government to investigate the breadth of the problem.

The government is working with Births, Deaths and Marriages to determine how many of the more than about 9600 children have easy access to a birth certificate to speed up their and their carers' ability to obtain government assistance and more efficiently enable carers to recoup costs.

Welfare workers are concerned the lack of a birth certificate is hindering some carers and making it difficult for children, including in foster care, to access some services.

The government believes there is only a small number of children who have never been registered at all, while there is a potential for large numbers of cases where children do not have easy access to their certificates.

All children in Victorian out-of-home care are part of the data-matching exercise, with the daily average number of children affected running at 9634 in March, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing said. The government could not say how many children did not have access to their main proof of life certificate.



Opposition child protection spokesman Dr Matt Bach. Picture: NCA NewsWire/Luis Enrique Ascuí

Opposition child protection spokesman Matt Bach said it was negligent that the government had failed to act sooner to address the issue, warning that there were significant potential issues for the reimbursement of costs faced by carers. “You actually need a birth certificate. This is quite outrageous,” he said.

Foster Care Association of Victoria CEO Samantha Hauge said it was important for the children and people supporting them to have all the necessary documentation to enable proper care.

She said there were sometimes issues with carers being reimbursed for health services, and a lack of critical paperwork could significantly slow the process.

She said a high number of carers complained about the failure to register a child’s birth because it could prevent or slow access to childcare, Centrelink payments, Medicare, passports, bank accounts, tax file numbers and a driver’s licence.

She said the government appeared to be addressing the issue but everything should be done to ensure quality service for the children and their carers.

“The moment they are born they often need access to universal health services,” she said.

A government spokeswoman said the department was working with authorities to make sure it had a copy of the birth certificate for each child in its care.

“This does not mean the parents do not hold a birth certificate or their birth was not registered,” she said.

“The department has an arrangement with the Commonwealth to obtain Medicare numbers or apply for a new card when needed.

“No child is prevented from receiving medical care when they need it. Carers are reimbursed when they are out of pocket.”

The 2022-23 budget allocated \$6m for a special care support helpdesk to provide more streamlined support for children in care.

This included support for carers, assisting the child protection workforce deal with its many challenges and for people to access key documents such as birth certificates and Medicare cards.

Questions over the existence of birth certificates come as Mr Bach said the government had had a succession of child protection ministers, undermining management of the system.

Child protection is widely accepted as one of the most difficult portfolios for governments to manage, with constant battles finding enough foster carers willing to look after children who need care and protecting the most vulnerable children.
