

FCAV Carer Support Team Annual Results 1 July 2023 – 30 June 2024

The **Carer Support Team** comprises **Carer Advocates** providing information, advice and advocacy to foster carers (enquiries), **Carer Assistance Program**, providing short-term counselling to foster and permanent carers & adoptive parents (referrals) & a **Learning & Development** stream delivering a range of forums for carers.

The Carer Support Team responded to and closed **946** Enquiries/ Referrals, delivering **1701** hours of service in the 2023/2024 period.

Figure 1 shows the number of enquiries/ referrals steadily increasing over the past 4 years, since the expansion of the Carer Assistance Program.

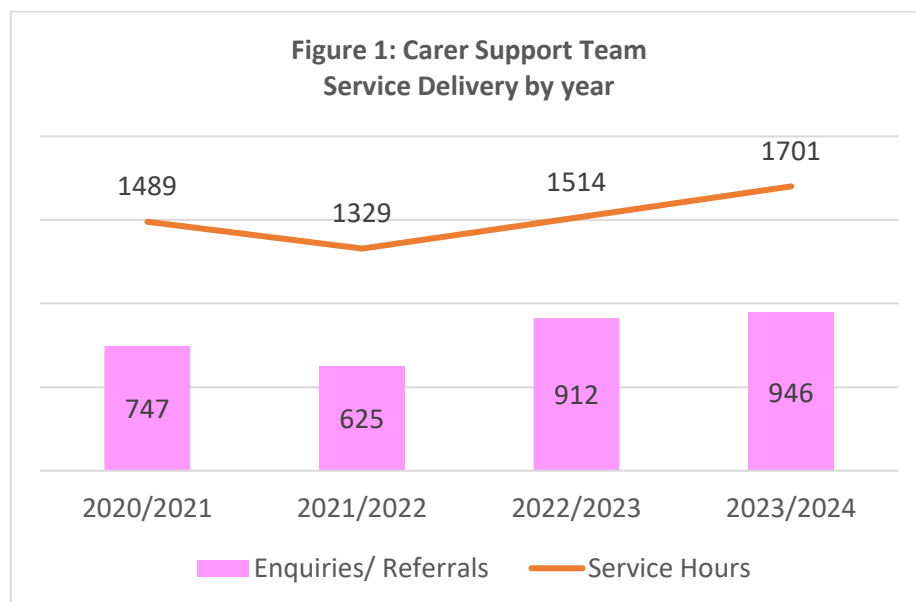


Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the separate figures for foster care Enquiries and CAP referrals over 4 years. CAP referrals doubled when the service was extended to Permanent Carers and Adoptive Parents.

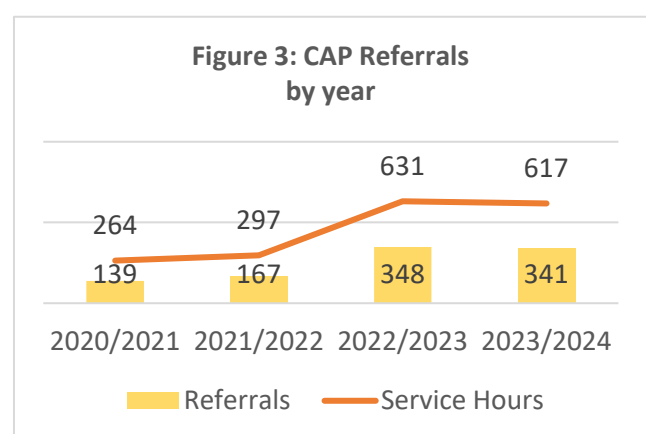
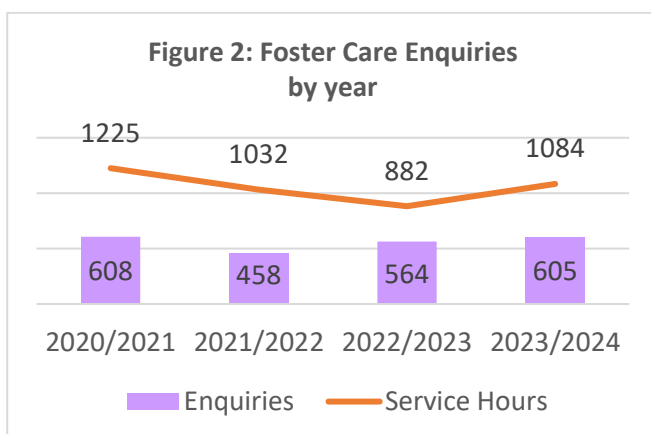
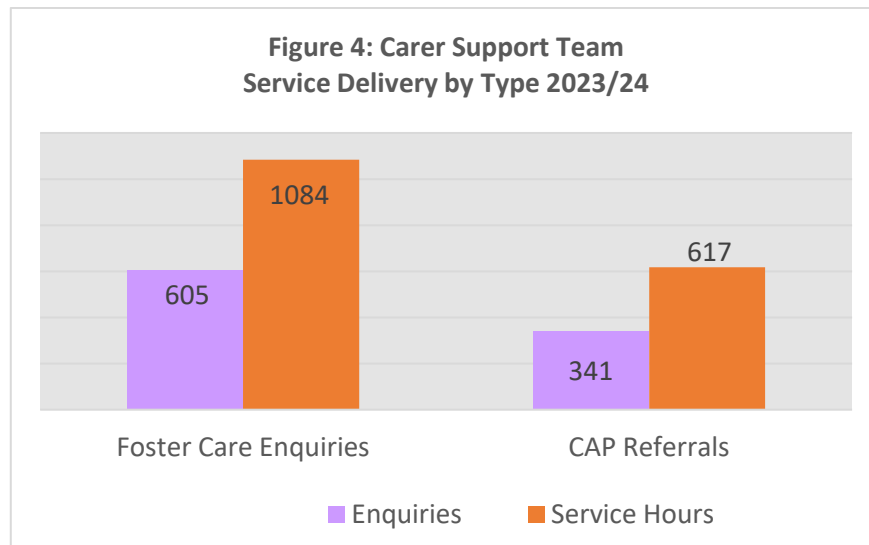
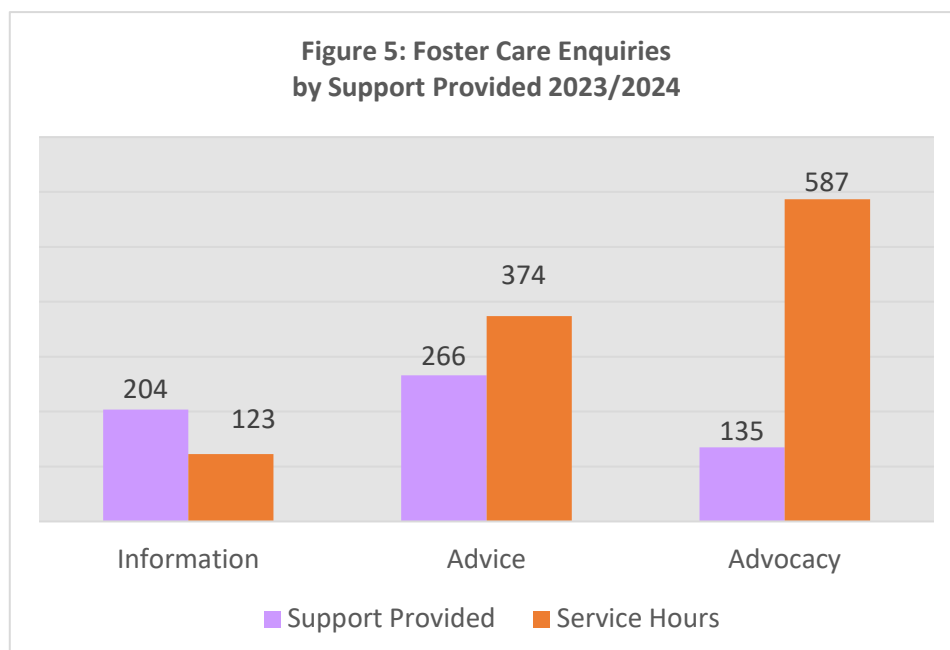


Figure 4 shows the separate figures for foster care enquiries and CAP referrals in the 2023/2024 period.



Foster Care Enquiries

The Carer Advocates provided information to 204, advice to 266 and advocacy to 135 foster care enquiries in the 2023/2024 period.



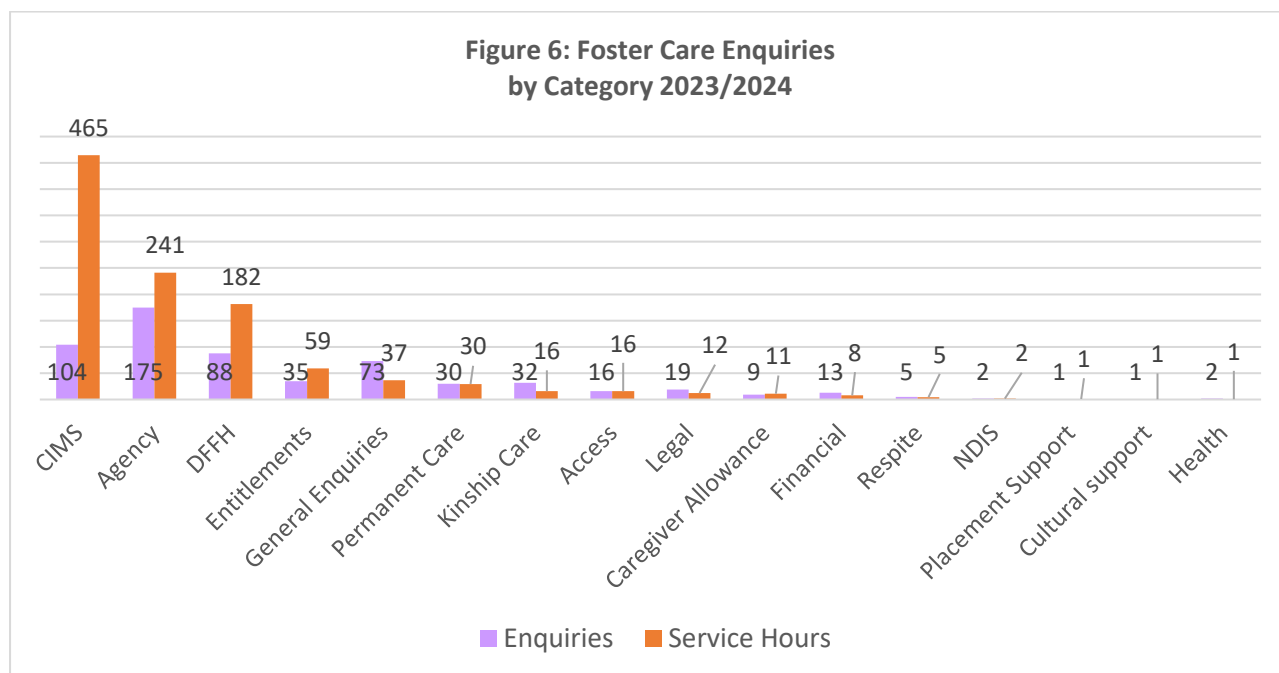
The highest number of enquiries were in relation to carers seeking advice. Many carers were unsure of processes and systems within their agencies and reported having insecure relationships with agency and child protection staff. Sometimes this is a result of carers not feeling valued or respected in the system and needing reassurance.

Advocacy is a significant component of the work provided to carers. Often relationships with professionals are broken and the FCAV is mediating on behalf of carers and advising them of their rights in the Out of Home Care system.

A significant component of our work is advocating for carers’ rights in a difficult CIMS process. We support carers in preparing for, and attending their investigation interviews, preparing them for suitability panel and providing advice in relation to reviews and appeals of decisions.

Categories

The most time was spent responding to foster care enquiries relating to CIMS, agency and DFFH matters. Considerable time was spent on financial support (Carer Allowance Rates/ Level) and permanent care (foster to permanent care conversion).



Client Incident Management (CIMS)

The Carer Advocates responded to and closed 104 CIMS enquiries, delivering 465 hours of service in the 2023/2024 period. This accounted for 43% of overall service delivery hours.

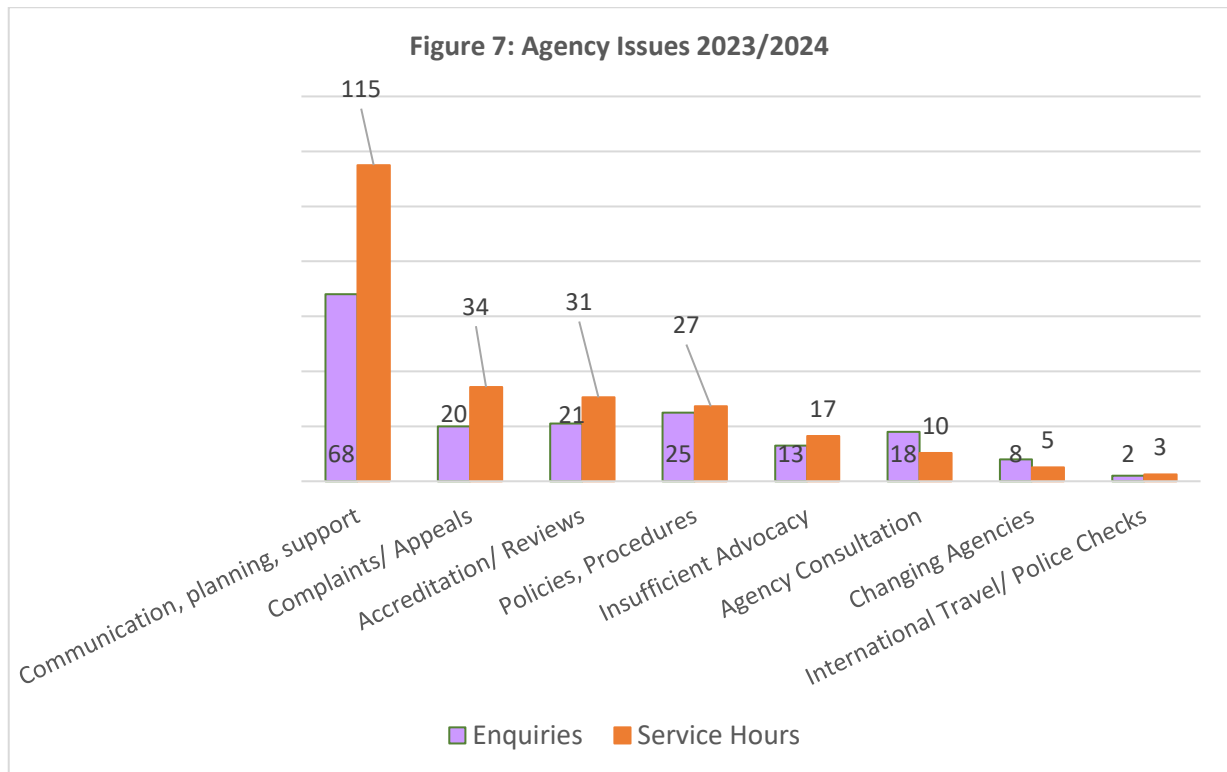
The multiple layers of CIMS (investigation, Reportable Conduct Scheme, S81 investigations) result in confusion and repeated carer enquiries for clarity of these processes, with each enquiry averaging approximately 3 hours of support. More complex cases have required 6 to 25 hours of support.

The removal of child/ren in foster care following reporting of allegations has had a significant impact on retaining carers in the system. Support has been provided to carers concurrently by the Carer Advocates and the CAP Service.

The FCAV has continued to meet with the CIMS review team, including Cube Consultants in June, reporting on significant shortfalls in the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness within the CIMS process. The FCAV has continued to provide feedback for improvement to the investigation process including a proposal for an Industry Code of Practice for the CIMS process.

Agency Issues

The Carer Advocates provided support to 175 enquiries relating to agencies, accounting for 241 hours of service. Communication, planning and support was by far the largest category of referrals with 115 service hours.



There are significant issues with communication and support from agency staff. The FCAV proposes professional development or training on developing and maintaining respectful relationships and navigating difficult conversations with carers.

Carers consistently comment that they don't feel valued or respected in their role as a foster carer.

It is evident that agency staff are often in their first years of experience and there is significant turnover of staff in many agencies.

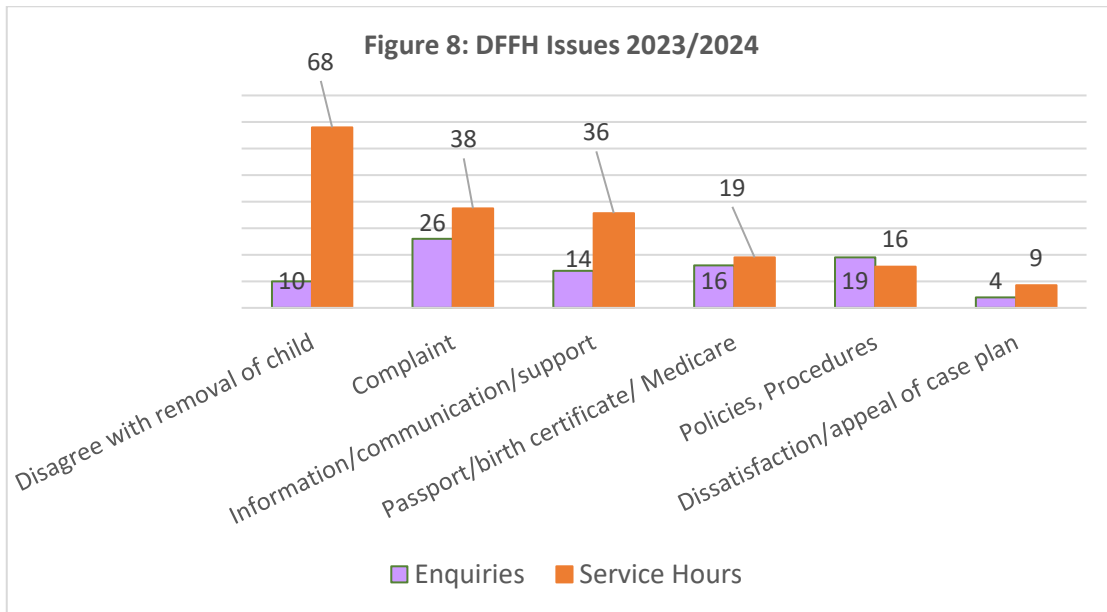
The FCAV has information sheets for carers and agency staff as a guide to building respectful relationships and creating a working agreement between a worker and carer to establish good practice by both parties.

Carer feedback shows significant frustration with the number of workers each carer will experience in their care journey.

The FCAV has conducted a Roadshow visiting 90% of all agencies across the state and has begun conversations about respectful relationships with agencies.

DFFH Issues

The Carer Advocates provided support to 88 enquiries relating to DFFH, accounting for 182 hours of service. Significant time was spent on complex matters relating to removal of child, complaints and lack of support.



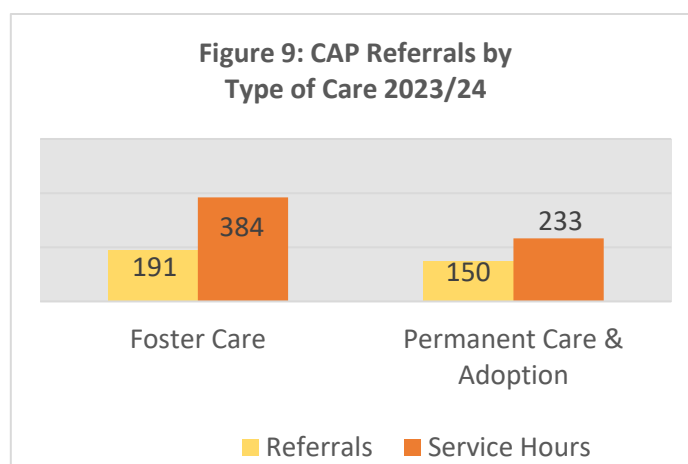
Carers are calling very distressed by the removal of a child in their care. Often the process is immediate with no apparent reason provided and does not give adequate time for the carer and child to transition to the new arrangements. This could be for a range of reasons, such as reunification, placement breakdown of the child being permanently placed.

It is recommended that DFFH attempt to be transparent in decision making and communication.

The FCAV supports carers through the complaints processes to ensure they have an opportunity to be heard. This guidance is key to deescalating carers’ disillusionment which in turn, supports retention of foster carers in Victoria.

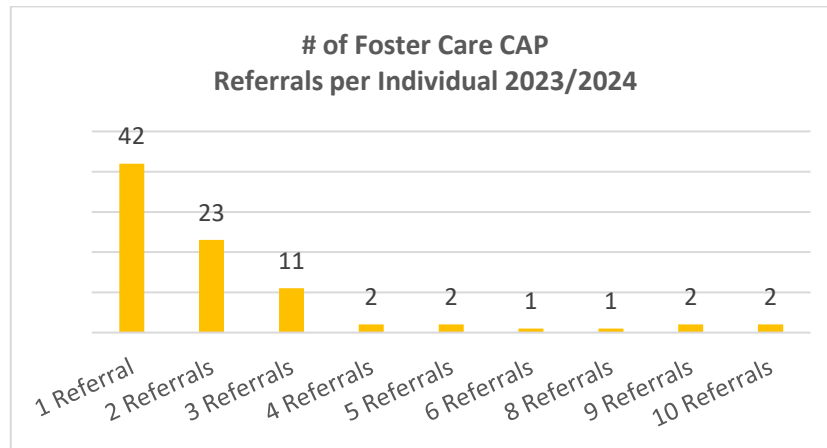
Carer Assistance Program (CAP)

The Carer Assistance Program received 341 referrals for short-term counselling, delivering 617 hours of service in the 2023/2024 period.



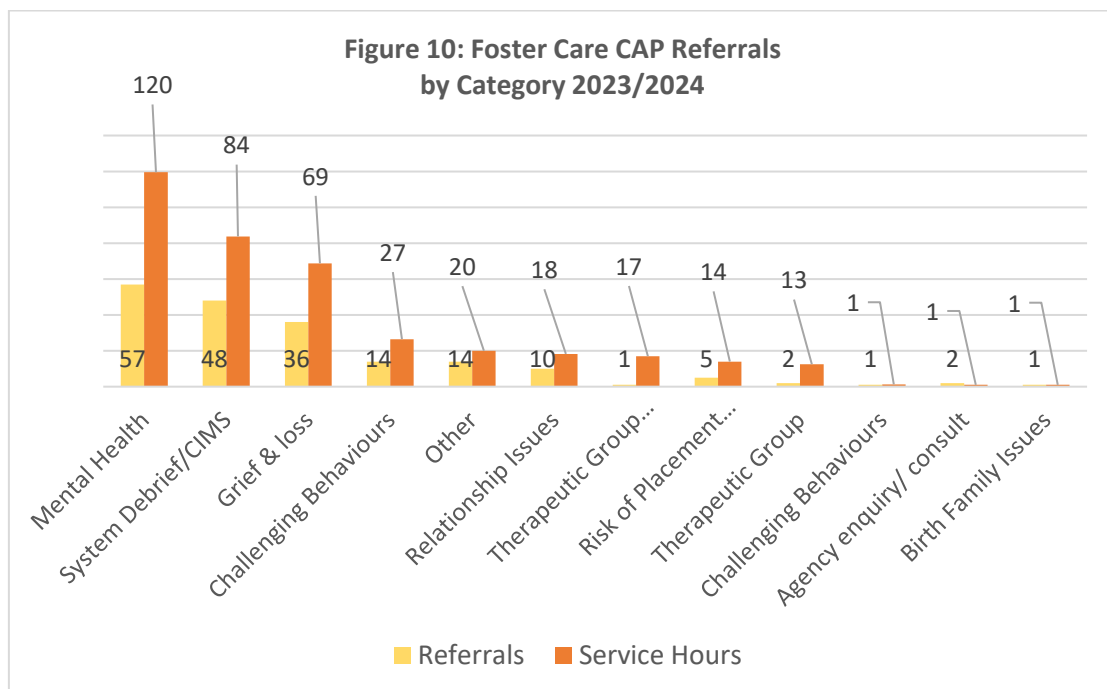
Foster Care CAP Referrals

While the majority (80%) of foster carers require 1 – 3 counselling sessions, 10 individuals required longer term counselling from 4 – 10 sessions.



Foster Care CAP Categories

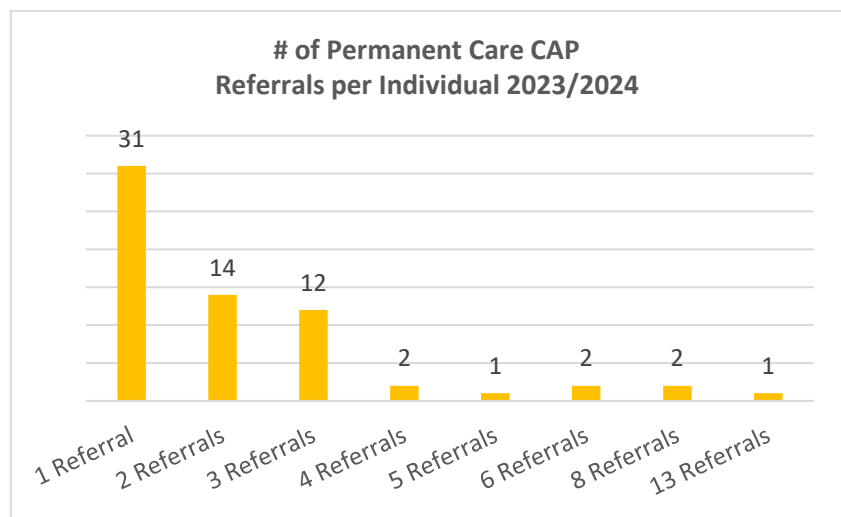
Mental Health, CIMS and Grief & Loss continue to be the most common issues for foster carers seeking emotional support.



Permanent Care CAP Referrals

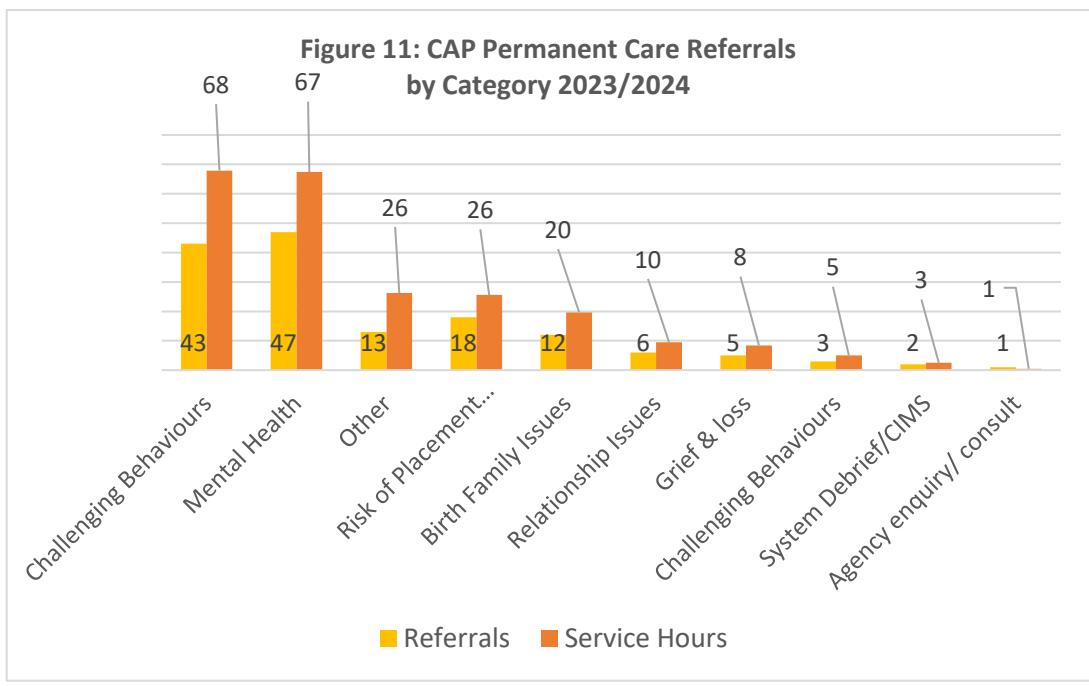
While the majority (88%) of permanent carers book 1 – 3 counselling sessions, in some cases the issues are so complex and multi-faceted that individuals are seeking longer term counselling from 4 – 13 sessions.

In this case the CAP Worker will develop a discharge plan with referral to another support service. In some instances, the carers are accessing a mental health support plan, alongside the CAP program due to the complexity of issues they are navigating.



Permanent Care CAP Categories

Most permanent carers are seeking emotional support due to the challenging behaviours of children in their care. Mental Health, placement breakdown and birth family issues were also common themes in the year.



The FCAV delivered a series of CAP Group sessions. This provided an opportunity for carers to validate their issues and share with others, who have similar experiences. Carers welcomed the group experience.

We have only offered daytime sessions; however, it would be worth considering offering evening online sessions to assist carers accessing the valuable experience if group sessions are held.

The FCAV has secured ongoing funding for CAP, with an additional day of service available for carers.

Carer Support Team Feedback

Carer Advocates from 2024

- *The service offered was exemplary. They were both highly professional and demonstrated deep compassion and understanding regarding the issues I am facing.*
- *Leigh continues to be an invaluable support to me - at times being the only person demonstrating any understanding of what it may feel like to be a carer in my situation.*
- *Without this service I can't imagine how we would have managed. My husband and I are so grateful for the wonderful help and advice we have received.*
- *Thank you for assisting me to navigate the issue. I felt empowered and even though the issue still exists, the matter is being investigated now.*
- *Biba is wonderful as always, listens, hears and understands the concerns and plan to move forward.*
- *The sheer volume and breadth of issues regarding carer treatment needs to be made visible to allow DFFH and agencies (and carers) understand the magnitude of these issues.*

CAP Feedback from 2024

- *I want to thank Tonya for all her support Tonya is great and easy to communicate with*
- *Jake is a wonderful knowledgeable support and without his insight and help I would not be where I am today Thank you so much*
- *The ongoing issues w the foster care sector means there are multiple ongoing problems for carers. It's not always made known to foster carers we can access the EAP services in relation to foster caring problems.*
- *I think this service is really worthwhile and so glad it exists. I was unable to access the program due to the practitioner only being available on Monday and Tuesday. Would love to see it more accessible for working carers (which is most people due to the poor payments) but understand that resources are limited.*
- *I was so impressed with the support and care that I was given I finally felt heard and understood. Thank you.*

Summary of Key Themes from Feedback

1. High Satisfaction and Positive Feedback:

Majority of feedback is positive, with many clients praising the service, individual advocates, and the overall support provided.

2. **Need for Increased Availability and Responsiveness:**
Suggestions for more staff, extended service hours, and better follow-up communication reflect a desire for more accessible and timely support.
3. **Enhanced Advocacy and Listening:**
Some clients feel a need for stronger advocacy, especially in conflicts with agencies, and better listening to their concerns and experiences.
4. **Systemic Improvement and Broader Advocacy:**
Feedback includes calls for addressing larger systemic issues and advocating for improvements in the foster care system beyond the service itself.
5. **Support for Specific Needs and Legal Services:**
Recommendations include the introduction of legal services and more detailed guidance on handling issues like allegations and financial responsibilities.

Learning & Development

FCAV hosted forums in 2023/2024.

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	ATTENDEES
14/7/23	Caring Thru Art at Ceres	Metro	8
17/8/23	Chat with CEO – Carers	Online	14
19/8/23	Hold My Hand Training at Ceres	Metro	10
22/8/23	Managing Stressful Relationships Training at Meli Foster Care	Regional	8
31/8/23	Chat with CEO -Agency/ACCO staff	Online	23
21/10/23	Cultural Day, Keeping Place, Bairnsdale in partnership with GEGAC	Regional	19
2/11/23	Chat with CEO - Carers	Online	6
23/11/23	Chat with CEO – Agency/ACCO staff	Online	9
11/12/23	Fearless – Triple P Training in partnership with Berry Street	Online	7
13/2/24	Chat with the CEO - Carers	Night/ Online	31
22/2/24	Chat with the CEO -ACCO and Agency Staff	Online	21
14/3/24	Caring Thru Art Training	Inverloch	18
19/3/24	Managing Stress and Developing Respectful Relationships	Online	28
26/3/24	The Impact of Neglect Upon Children in Care Webinar	Online	30
18/4/24	Chat with the CEO -Carers	Online	15
2/5/24	Chat with the CEO -Agency & ACCO Staff	Online	20
14/5/24	Carer Support Group with Meli Carers	Geelong	14
20/6/24	Chat with the CEO Agency & ACCO Staff	Online	15
25/6/24	Chat with the CEO – Carers	Online	10
27/6/24	CIMS Webinar with Chris Craig & Leigh Hillman	Online	21

The **Learning and Development** offerings have been well received by carers. Carer feedback shows that sessions have provided:

- opportunities for learning
- networking and connection
- validation
- advocacy on complexities in the system
- understanding the importance of self-care activities and mental health wellbeing

The session, **Managing Stress and Developing Respectful Relationships** opened an active discussion with and between carers. The training could be further developed to provide carers with an opportunity to practice challenging, or difficult conversations with agency staff. In the training forum it was apparent that there are low levels of confidence amongst carers, and a fear of retribution at their annual review if they challenge decisions.

The **CIMS webinar** was informative for carers and demystified a complex system. It was valuable having Chris Craig from MacKillop Family Services as guest presenter, alongside a carer advocate to outline in detail the process and reasons for some of the delays during a CIMS investigation.

The **Chat with CEO** sessions provide valuable information for the advocacy work at FCAV. The format works to hear from carers and then meet with agency staff. Current issues include the quality of information provided to foster carers and agencies, at the beginning of placement with a lack of detailed and accurate information about the child coming into their care. The need for respectful relationships is another reoccurring theme, that has carried across several sessions this year. We are in the process of meeting with DFFH staff to advocate for a sector response to this issue.

The CIMS process is often discussed and although the focus is on the carer, it is often the case that if case workers were able to have more open and honest discussions with the carer earlier on, a proportion of CIMS could be avoided. The Out of Home Care sector expects that carers are trauma-informed but this requires good and ongoing training and carers being provided experienced and informed supervision throughout the placement.

These issues need to be addressed for the system to retain carers in Victoria.