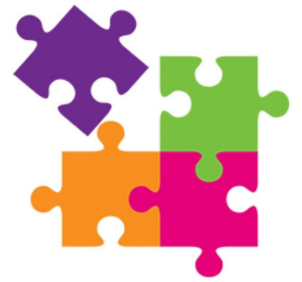


Carer Assistance Program

www.fcaav.org.au/cap



Foster Carer Therapeutic Support



DELIVERED BY THE

**foster care
association of
victoria**

The Foster Care Association of Victoria (FCAV) is the peak body for Victorian foster carers. Established in 1992 by a small and passionate group of foster carers, it is a not-for-profit organisation working towards better outcomes for foster carers and the children and young people in their care.

Foster care is the backbone of the Victorian response to protective intervention for children and young people at risk. Foster carers are the volunteers providing a home, family life and care to children and young people who are unable to live with their birth family for a variety of reasons. Many of these children have suffered traumatic events and the role of our foster carers is critical and complex in providing a safe and healing environment for children and young people to reach their full potential.

The FCAV provides information, support and advocacy directly to all Victorian foster families. It's work directly affects the care provided to the thousands of Victorian children and young people in foster care by providing:

- Carer Phone Support Service—a free, independent advice and support service to foster carers;
- Advocacy on behalf of foster carers to government, their agencies and in the community;
- Community building—as the only centralised body for all foster carers in the state; providing forums and carer events;
- Providing carer news and updated information through our comprehensive website & regular newsletters; and
- State-wide learning' development and training courses for carers throughout Victoria through Carer KaFÉ

The Foster Care Association represents over 5,000 foster carers across Victoria. In tandem with one-to-one support it provides to individual foster carers, it also advocates for vital improvements to the foster care system. The FCAV's member mandate is to strengthen Victoria's investment in greater recognition, respect and resources for foster carers, the volunteers who every day and every night make a difference in the lives of Victoria's children and young people.

THE NEED FOR CARER MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

It is well established that women deliver the bulk of paid and voluntary care services in Australia including foster care. The sectors that have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic include the education, health and hospitality sectors which all have high levels of female employment. Because sectors with high female participation have been most affected by the pandemic, women are more likely than men to exhibit clinically significant signs of depression, anxiety and irritability.^{1}

Women make up over 83% of volunteer foster carers in Victoria. Volunteering for foster carer frequently requires women to work part time on a reduced salary, accept lower paying jobs to ensure they have the flexibility to support the placement of high needs children or cease work altogether. Work place supports such as childcare are frequently unavailable or difficult to access making work force participation even more challenging.

¹ <https://lens.monash.edu/@coronavirus-articles/2020/12/07/1381836/women-bear-the-cost-of-the-covid-19-care-load>

Foster carers had consistently reported the limitations of accessing ongoing targeted support to the FCAV through established counselling and support programs. Key issues include the lack of services and service providers which understand the unique role of foster carers and the systemic, social and economic issues they face which can be a significant source of psychological stress.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Carers reported an escalation of issues relating to their coping, emotional fatigue and general wellbeing in response to COVID-19. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic both the Federal and Victorian Governments provided temporary funding to support carers through the pandemic. The FCAV has used this temporary funding to establish the Carer Assistance Program pilot program to offer a targeted and therapeutic phone counselling support service to address their mental health issues. The pilot program is funded until 30 June 2021.

Key factors which can affect foster carer mental health include:

- lack of certainty about placements;
- competing demands from various interested parties including parents, agencies, schools and departments;
- complex and challenging behaviours associated with providing direct care to at risk children and young people;
- lack of systemic supports which enable foster carers to work and access social support networks; and
- lack of therapeutic supports for children to address behaviour issues caused by trauma and broken attachments.

THE AIMS OF THE CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

A unique service such as the CAP not only addresses a gap in existing services but is strongly aligned with the Victorian Government's Action Agenda which aims to have more Victorians *resilient and connected*. The strategic, longer term vision of their Wellbeing Strategy is further reinforced by the CAP goals to facilitate *enriched lives*, acknowledging that *early support may prevent ongoing mental health issues*.

Since launching the CAP in September 2020 the response from carers and the sector regarding has been overwhelmingly positive, with a broad acknowledgement of the value of a sector specific therapeutic service for foster carers.

The CAP has two primary goals:

- offering a therapeutic service to support carer wellbeing given the many issues that often arise in their caring role that may impact their personal resilience and psychological/emotional health; and
- retention of foster carers in the Out of Home Care system.

Alarming a large majority of the carers who have accessed the CAP report that they have either already decided to exit the system or are contemplating leaving the system. It seems that if any real gains are to be made to effectively support carers and maintain them in the system, early intervention is essential.

The declining retention rates are consistent with the trend reported by the FCAV's carer snapshot survey 2021, which highlights that there are as many carers recruited in a year as are leaving the system.

The FCAV currently estimates that the cost recruiting foster carers through the Governments recruitment program (Fostering Connections) is in excess of \$10,000 per accredited carer.

CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The existing CAP structure (up to 3 individual counselling sessions) was initially based on an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) model of delivery. However, it has become clear that the CAP is uniquely positioned as it not only offers sector specific knowledge and expertise, but also has the capacity to deliver an integrated collaborative support within the sector.

That is, an opportunity exists to not just deliver an isolated counselling session to carers, but an option to provide parallel support alongside the FCAV's carer support phone-line service. It is also anticipated this integrated approach will improve support to carers across the broader system. This is critical as many carers reported that another limitation of EAP services is the isolation from the wider system which can be a barrier to meaningful and ongoing engagement.

In addition, foster care agencies often report that accessing an EAP service for volunteer foster carers is also incredibly costly. This ultimately impacts carers access to this service as not all agencies are able to allocate funding to EAP's and where they can funding is often restricted to a limited number of sessions.

CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM DATA

Between 1 Sep 2020 and 30 April 2021 the CAP:

- responded to and closed 110 enquiries;
- delivered 204.8 hours of support to foster carers; and
- provided support to 66 individual foster carers.

Of the 66 individual foster carers accessing the CAP, 26 participated in more than a one session.

There were 9 carers requiring more than three sessions given the complex and significant nature of the issues for them resulting in depression, anxiety and intense grief and loss.

Approximately half of the carers who have accessed the CAP reside in the greater Melbourne area with the other half in living in regional areas across Victoria. Because approximately 60 percent of carers live in greater Melbourne, this particularly illustrates the value of the CAP for people living in rural and remote areas.

TYPE OF CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM REFERRALS

The CAP has received referrals relating to many complex issues including:

- depression/suicide risk
- anxiety
- grief and loss
- compassion fatigue
- system fatigue
- CIMS emotional support

CARER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM CASE STUDIES

Below are examples of cases dealt with under the CAP.

CARER 1

Carer 1 has accessed 5 therapeutic sessions following the suicide of a young man whom was in her long term care. There are significant issues relating to intense grief and loss, which has also triggered personal trauma relating to her early history. This carer has "disengaged" with daily life, is finding it challenging to sleep and is emotionally fragile.

CARER 2

Carer 2 has accessed 5 therapeutic sessions relating to grief and guilt for relinquishing care of a child who was physically and emotionally abusive of her and who is currently at risk of sexual exploitation and is self harming and using drugs. The carer is emotionally depleted, dominated by feelings of intense failure and guilt. Her family have staged an "intervention" as they are concerned about her psychological wellbeing.

CARER 3

Carer 3 contacted The CAP following her first placement (of 6 months) with a suicidal young woman, experiencing regular psychosis. The carer was "traumatised" and indicated she would exit the system, as she felt she had failed the young woman, as well as the system failing to support her to be able to navigate the complex needs of the young woman. Following sessions with The CAP, the carer was able to acknowledge a positive shift in her emotional wellbeing, celebrate her contribution to the young woman's care over the 6 months and was even contemplating in what capacity she might re engage the sector.

CARER 4

Carer 4 has accessed parallel CISS and CAP support, following a complex and difficult CIMS Investigation and ongoing Independent Investigation. The carer has described not eating, sleeping, with limited capacity to engage in daily activities. The carer is deeply distressed at the loss of the child who was removed (having provided long term care), making parallels to his neighbour's experience of having their child pass away suddenly. He has intense feelings of loss and failure and is under medical supervision. The collaboration between programs has clearly allowed a more integrated approach to supporting the carer.

EVALUATION FEEDBACK

The CAP is committed to monitoring the efficacy of the service to ensure it is purposeful and meaningful for carers.

Evaluation data collected so far suggests:

- 100% of the respondents claimed "having access to the CAP worker helped me";
- 100% of the respondents claimed they would recommend the service to others;
- 100% of respondents agreed "It is helpful to have a service for carers, like CAP, which understands the Home Based Care sector and the issues faced by foster carers";
- 94.74% of respondents felt a service like CAP "would assist to retain me as a carer" further highlighting the benefits of early access to supports, before carers decide to exit the system.

DIRECT CARER FEEDBACK

Some direct carer feedback includes:

"She listened and responded to my concerns and gave me the tools / suggestions to progress forward. I am very grateful for the professional support. I will be contacting her again in 2 weeks."

"Was wonderful to talk to someone who already understood the complexity of carer issues...it was so helpful to just be able to dive into talking about life as a carer and some of our struggles without having to talk about a back story or explain who everyone is...would definitely use this service again"

"The person I spoke to was incredibly helpful, supportive, knowledgeable and practical. Thank you!"

"Her empathy, experience and assurance has helped us tremendously."

Carer Assistance Program Foster Carer Therapeutic Support

We can help with:

- Grief and loss following a placement termination or breakdown
- Anxiety and depression
- Compassion fatigue
- System 'trauma' following CIMS, being deregistered, loss of carer identity

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FUTURE DIRECTION

Based on an evaluation of the CAP pilot program, the FCAV anticipates that carers will want to access the CAP from across the State.

This reflects the ongoing need for mental health support for foster carers whilst they continue to navigate the impact of COVID and ingrained systemic issues within the child protection system. However, to provide the CAP the FCAV requires additional funding.

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