

Carer Help Desk Proposal

Purpose

To outline a proposal for the establishment of a carer help desk to assist both carers and agencies to resolve administrative issues that can affect placement stability

Background

Carers and agencies often struggle to obtain key documents or permissions in a timely manner. These can include (but are not limited to):

- Medicare cards/number (for access to universal health services);
- Birth certificates
- Vaccination certificates
- passports
- Centrelink customer number

These documents are necessary for access to a range of essential services including:

- Medicare/universal health services
- childcare and kindergarten access
- Centrelink family payments
- travel

Without these essential documents placements can come under significant stress because carers aren't able to access childcare (which can affect their capacity to work) or may have to pay for expensive health services or other living expenses out of their own pocket.

Problem/issue

It is not unusual for carers to wait months or years for birth registrations and Medicare numbers. During this time, they may be unable to access childcare or medical services unless they pay for the full cost of those services themselves. While refunds are available these can also take months to action. Carers report that delays occur despite regular requests from both themselves and their agencies.

The failure of the Child Protection system to provide the necessary documents or placement supports occurs for several reasons including:

- children are often removed at short notice and the required documents are unavailable at the time of removal; and
- registering a birth or obtaining a Medicare number, passport or vaccination certificate can be very resource intensive.

From an administrative perspective, the requirement for all applications to go through the assigned Child Protection worker is a significant bottle neck and key barrier for effective action and timely decision making. This decision-making bottleneck occurs because the relevant worker may not have the time (because

they are responding to emergency situations) resources or administrative support to obtain the documents or complete the applications. Furthermore, in relation to passport applications, considerable experience is required to complete an application which most Child Protection workers don't have.

Proposal

To assist carers and address delays in decision making caused by bottlenecks and under-resourcing additional administrative support is likely to be required. To be effective, the support needs to have the power to make decisions regarding the provision of essential documents such as birth certificates, Medicare numbers, vaccine certificates and passports.

This replicates the approach taken by some other organisations. For examples, Centrelink has a Grandparent and Carer Hotline which can be contacted to address difficulties carers experience with Centrelink application processes. Centrelink staff are able to identify and rectify application problems from the back end which means that carers don't have to use myGov or the Centrelink call centre which can be very time consuming and frustrating.

Advantages of establishing a carer help desk include:

- staff gain high levels of expertise in specialised application processes which will improve efficiency;
- staff can trouble shoot an application to ensure it is complete when it is lodged which is likely to mean it will be approved in a minimum time;
- staff can establish back channels to key organisation such as Centrelink, Medicare, Passports and Births Deaths and Marriages to assist with liaison, problem solving and timely decision making;
- providing both carers and agencies with a contact point within Child Protection to provide essential documents will not only assist child protection workers but will also prevent relatively minor and solvable problems from becoming critical problems;
- having a contact point to assist carers and agencies will reduce sector frustration and improve carer retention.