

FOSTER CARER PEER SUPPORT GROUP PROPOSAL NOVEMBER 2024

Purpose

To outline a foster carer peer support group development proposal.

Background

Foster carers face unique challenges, including managing the complex needs of children who have experienced trauma, navigating the foster care system, and balancing the demands of the system with their own personal lives. These challenges often lead to stress, burnout, placement instability and a sense of isolation.

Further, carers are asked to care for children and form attachments knowing that at some point the children will be leaving the placement. Research indicates that the importance of acknowledging the grief and loss for foster carer wellbeing.¹ As such, programs that assist carers to manage grief and loss need to be a core part of carer supports.

The Foster Care Association of Victoria currently provides a limited free counselling service called the Care Assistance Program. The program offers counselling to foster carers and permanent carers. Referral to a local peer support network would be an invaluable addition to that program.

Foster carers have consistently identified lack of support as a key reason why they choose to leave the care system.² FCAV research shows that 40% of carers have identified the need for peer support as a top priority.³

By fostering a supportive community, these groups aim to reduce feelings of isolation, share practical advice, and improve the overall well-being of foster carers and the children they care for. The goal is to create a sustainable support network that contributes to better outcomes for foster families and children in care.

Carer exit rates

The need for peer support should be considered in the context of the Victorian Child Protection system which has one of the worst carer retention rates of any State in Australia. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data shows that Victorian carer household exit rates have reached nearly double the carer recruitment rates.⁴

Year	Commence	Exit
2019/20	354	569
2020/21	315	580
2021/22	317	624
2022/23	246	551

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0312407X.2024.2378751#abstract>

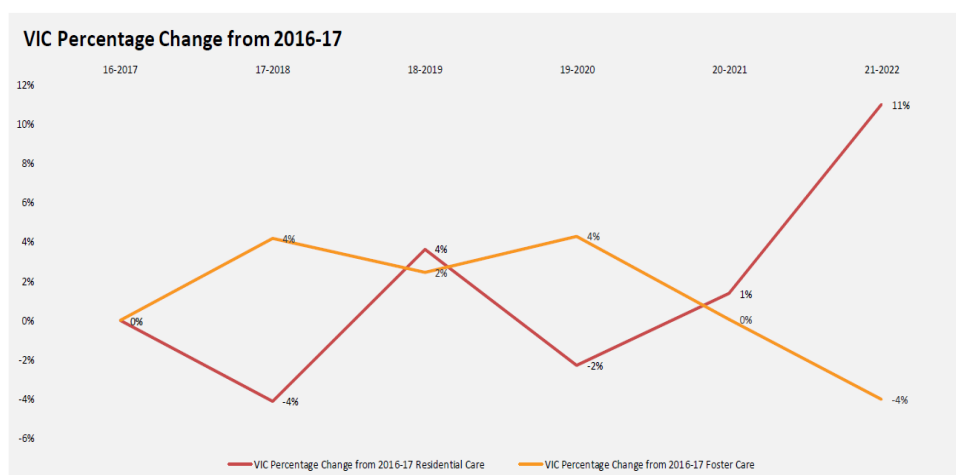
² Page 80: <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/strong-carers-stronger-children>

³ Page 11: FCAV Carer Survey 2024. Orima

⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-welfare-services/child-protection/data>

The failure to retain carers is placing a significant strain on the care system with increasing numbers of children being placed in emergency accommodation and residential care. Residential care placements increased by 13% between 2019/20 to 2021/22 while foster care households declined by approximately 8% during the same period (see table below).

Victorian Residential Care and Foster Care % Change



AIHW Child Protection Australia 2021-22

Single carers and peer support

Recent carer research⁵ commissioned by the FCAV includes the demographic profile of carers and shows that 35% of carers are single—with 90% of those carers being women. The need for peer support amongst this cohort of carers may be higher because they are not undertaking caring jointly, which adds to their isolation and may be more likely to seek external sources of support.

Economic case for investing in foster care

The Centre for Excellence commissioned the study *The economic value of foster care in Victoria*⁶ to measure the economic contribution that volunteer carers make to the Victorian economy. The study found that:

- volunteer care giving provided a direct economic value of \$80 million annually; and
- avoided costs of around \$453 million because of reduced demand for alternative expensive care arrangements such as residential care.

The report also found that foster care returns \$4 for every \$1 invested. Consequently, programs that assist in supporting and/or retaining carers is likely to be a good investment.

⁵ Carer Survey 2024. Orima

⁶ www.ozchild.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CFECFW-Economic-value-of-foster-care-Final-1.pdf

Peer support models

There are several types of peer support models currently operating in the sector/community which are outlined below.

Agency models

Most agencies run carer support sessions which often have the following features:

- hosted at agency premises;
- face to face;
- morning or afternoon tea;
- sessions held during business hours; and
- may be facilitated.

There is also some evidence that agencies are reducing funding and resources for their peer support groups. This is occurring for several reasons including:

- Funding for peer support is generally provided from target/placement funding. With fewer carers, agencies have less available funding for peer support programs. This may be having the perverse effect that agencies are unable to run programs that retain carers resulting in a vicious cycle of reduced funding which further reduces carers.
- Agencies struggle with practical issues associated with offering support to carers due to the competing demands such as time of day and paid work commitments. Peer groups can more readily meet their specific needs.
- Agencies are seeking ways to reduce costs because government funding does not cover the full cost of supporting carers. It has been estimated that the costs agencies incur in supporting foster care placements exceeds government funding by an average of 6%.⁷

Carers have identified several limitations with agency based carer support groups including:

- groups are not carer led;
- groups are only from agency accredited carers which limits the capacity to meet carers from other agencies in the local area;
- difficulty discussing concerns about an agency when the agency is hosting the session;
- no online platforms; and
- sessions limited to workday hours.

My Forever Family

My Forever Family NSW provides portal access to locally organised foster or kinship carer support groups which are available across a wide range of locations in NSW. The

⁷ Valuing something that really matters—The economic value of foster care in Victoria. Cube Group. March 2022. Page 16

carer support groups can differ in membership and focus and potentially include non-authorised carers. My Forever Family does not provide program support for the groups and there is no structured program of topics used to guide discussions at support group meetings.

MyTime

MyTime is an example of a peer support program for parents and caregivers of children aged 0-18 years with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition that has been operating since 2006. The program is run across Australia and is contracted to different organisations in each State. In Victoria, MyTime is run by Down Syndrome Victoria.

Many of the features of the MyTime program make it easily adaptable to the foster care environment including:

- groups established and led by carers;
- carers paid to facilitate groups and recruit members;
- groups meet weekly or every second week throughout a school term;
- program manager oversees the administration of the program and develops a calendar of sessions for each term which may include speakers, topics and information sessions;
- carer facilitators meet monthly with the program manager;
- Facebook page moderated by the program manager; and
- groups for carers with specific needs are subcontracted: for example, groups for carers of identified cultures.

Aboriginal carers and carers of Aboriginal children

We anticipate further consultation with ACCO's regarding the most appropriate peer support model for Aboriginal carers or carers of Aboriginal children and young people. The FCAV believes ACCOs are best placed to represent Aboriginal carer interests as part of the program development process.

Peer support group costs and benefits

When considering the feasibility of peer support groups there are several costs and benefits that need to be considered:

Costs

- Initial setup costs:
 - development of program materials and training resources
 - recruitment and training of group facilitators
 - marketing and outreach to inform foster carers about the program.
- Ongoing operational costs:
 - venue rental and associated costs for in-person meetings
 - program manager and facilitator wages/fees
 - administrative costs for program management and coordination
- Indirect costs:

- time commitment from foster carers to participate in meetings
- potential need for childcare during meetings

Benefits

- Improved retention of foster carers:
 - reduced burnout and stress by sharing experiences and providing emotional support—leading to improved sense of well being
 - increased satisfaction and commitment to fostering
 - filling the gap between training and case manager support
 - potential for cost savings for foster care agencies due to decreased turnover and placement breakdown and reduction in recruitment costs.
- Enhanced quality of care:
 - foster carers gain practical strategies and emotional support from people who understand the situation, leading to better outcomes for children
 - Reduced placement disruptions as carers feel more capable and supported.
- Community building:
 - strengthened networks among foster carers, fostering a sense of belonging and community
 - opportunities for experienced carers to mentor and support new carers, enhancing the overall support ecosystem.
- Cost savings in the long term:
 - investment in peer support groups can lead to reduced need for crisis interventions and formal support services
 - stable placements reduce administrative and operational costs for Child Protection/agencies.
- Positive impact on children:
 - children in foster care benefit from more stable and supportive home environments.
 - improved caregiver well-being translates to better emotional and behavioral outcomes for children.

FCAV proposal

The FCAV believes that the establishment of peer support groups for foster carers is a strategic initiative that can address the critical needs of this essential volunteer group. Investment in the establishment of peer support groups could be an important component in the development of a more sustainable support system that enhances the well-being of foster carers and the children in their care.

Key features

Accordingly, the FCAV proposes that DFFH consider funding a foster carer peer support program with the following key features:

- carer led peer support groups which are independent of agencies;
- carer host payment to support group establishment, recruitment and participation;
- program manager to coordinate and manage the program;

- two carer support workers to assist the carer host to manage the meeting and associated discussions
- use of online and face to face meetings depending on the needs of the carers, their meeting format preferences and geographical location;
- after work hours meeting options;
- meetings scheduled within school terms;
- use and moderation of online social media platforms such as Facebook;
- use of buddy system by pairing experienced carers with newly accredited carers; and
- establishment of peer support groups/programs for carers with specific needs or cultural backgrounds, such as Aboriginal carers and/or carers of Aboriginal children.