

National Victoria Child safety

Sara has fostered more than 400 children. The state's 'disregard and disrespect' means she's done



Wendy Tuohy

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In more than 18 years as a foster care family, Sara, her husband and their three children have shared their regional Victorian home with about 400 Victorian children in need.

Sara's mother and aunties were also foster carers, and her children have grown up doing whatever activities they enjoy alongside children living with them at the time.



"I've never felt so disregarded, disrespected and unappreciated," says long-term foster carer Sara. *Credit: Jason South*

The family lives in a region with high family violence rates and is used to supporting school-aged children who have survived abuse and trauma, whose behaviour is often challenging because of it.

Sara, who also works as a teacher's aid, does this because making a difference feels worth it, she says.

Due to a [shortage of foster carers](#) in Victoria, "children are being forced into [residential care](#) at a much earlier age ... and kinship placements are being approved a lot quicker [with people who are not experienced] and this is [not protecting the children](#)," she says.

But despite Sara's long commitment to a system [losing foster carers](#) at twice the rate it can recruit them, she has informed the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) that she will no longer offer care.

This is not because of the breakages or other difficult conduct by troubled children, but because of the demeaning way the state government is treating foster carers.

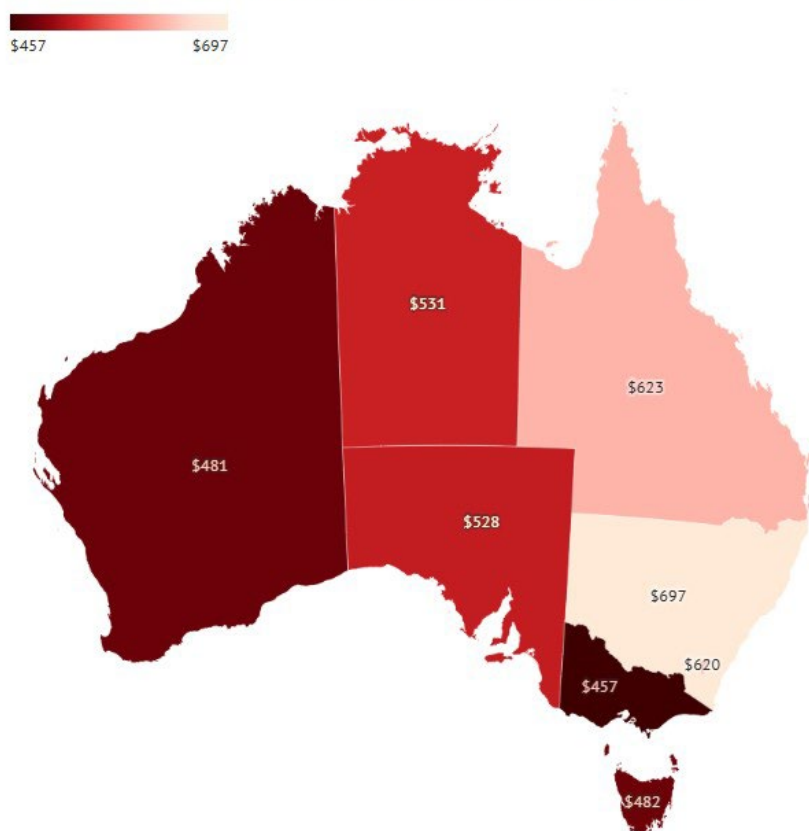
"In 18 and a half years I've done foster care, I've never felt so disregarded, disrespected and unappreciated," says Sara, whose identity cannot be revealed because she lives in a small town and has fostered children deemed unsafe with local parents.

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She is one of many carers of high-needs children whose support allowances were cut by up to three-quarters with no notice or explanation earlier this year, as *The Age* [revealed on Monday](#).

Sara's family had two sets of two children aged between eight and 10 living with them this year, whose need level was originally graded at level 4 (about \$87 a day per child). The government suddenly dropped reimbursement allowances to Sara to level 1 (about \$33 a day) without notice.

Fortnightly base rates of each state/territory for first age range



Source: Foster Care Association of Victoria

Two of the girls had level 2 autism diagnoses, had disclosed sexual abuse and had severe trauma. Sara could only conclude that their needs, which were high, were suddenly deemed less complex as part of cost-cutting.

"I'm just wondering whether they have to cut budgets somewhere, and they're not wanting to do it [in] wages?" she said. "It seems to be happening everywhere, to everyone."

She has been in a dispute with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for months about the gap between expenses

she paid for the two sets of children and the much-reduced reimbursement payments she received in return.

“Child protection couldn’t give me a written reason why it was happening, and still haven’t shown me a copy of their policies. And the children’s case workers also weren’t spoken to [before the cuts happened].”

Chief executive of the Foster Care Association of Victoria Samantha Hauge said carers across regions had also reported payments being summarily slashed by the DFFH, and that her organisation was concerned this would make the placements of vulnerable children unstable as carers struggled to cover costs.

The cuts occurred because children with high psychological, medical, physical or behavioural needs had been quietly downgraded from the [top levels of need, 4 and 5, to the lowest level, 1](#). Allowances are paid to carers according to the children’s needs levels.

Hauge said the impact on individual carers, who used allowances to cover expenses including medicines, education, food, activities and shoes, was “really significant, it’s massive”.

Victoria already spends less per child on care services than any other state or territory, as revealed in the Productivity Commission’s latest [Report on Government Services](#), in March. It recorded 14,398 substantiated cases of child abuse, neglect or harm in state care in the last financial year.

More than 160 reports of 85 vulnerable [children living in residential care being prostituted](#) were also revealed by the state’s former commissioner for children and young people Liana Buchanan last year.

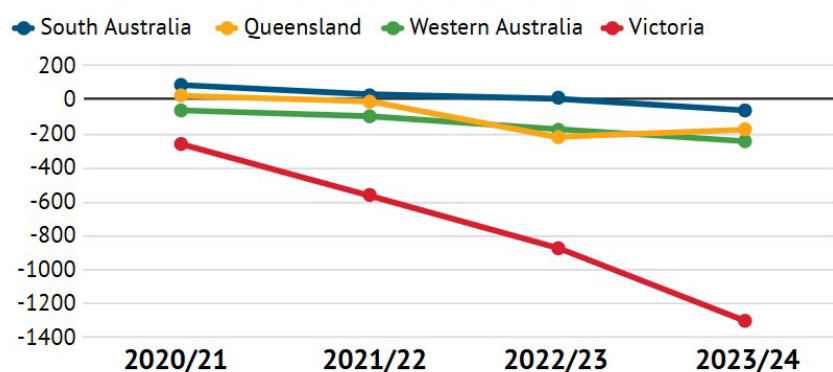
Legal aid data showed in 2023 that one in two children are [charged with a crime within two years of entering residential care units](#).

The state government did not answer questions about whether carers were informed that the cuts were to happen, why their allowances changed and if this was permanent and how carers of children with high needs were meant to continue to provide the same level of care and support services on vastly reduced sums.

In response to detailed questions from *The Age*, a government spokesperson said: “Care allowance levels vary based on the age and needs of a child, and can be reassessed as a child’s needs change. It’s not related to budget.”

“There has been no change in the care allowance policy.”

Net loss or gain of foster care households by year and state



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Former chief executive of the commission for children and young people, Brenda Boland, said DFFH information outlining the changes to the scaling of allowances was confusing.

“We absolutely support the goal of expanding therapeutic foster care, but we’re hearing

from carers that the new rates can be lower in practice. The focus now should be on making sure the rollout doesn't disadvantage the very carers we need most ... we are seeking more information on the payments received by our carers," she said.

"In terms of the messaging to our very valued carers, it's overly complicated and hasn't been well communicated" said Boland, who is now chief executive of the Lighthouse Foundation for youth.

"These families, like all others, are struggling with rising costs, they open their homes to vulnerable children and plan their households around the expected allowances.

The Age spoke with two other long-term foster carers who had similar experiences to Sara's – both had current foster children in their homes and could not be identified.

One had had a severely traumatised girl with oppositional-defiance disorder and ADHD living in her home for four years, and said the change in allowance was "an absolute insult to me and to my family".

The challenges posed by the girl's behaviour meant respite care, even for the carer's birthday, was impossible to find and placed emotional strain on her every day, but even so, "I love her dearly". She feared what would happen to the girl if she were sent to residential care.

Boland said if children could not find places in foster and kinship care, "they are likely to go into residential care, and we know what that means for a child".

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Going from a home into residential care can be negatively life-changing and terrifying, she said, and was completely different to a family home.

Lighthouse Foundation, which supports foster carers with higher-needs children, was informed in June that this change was happening from July. Larger provider Berry Street Child and Family Services informed its carer community around July the Victorian government was reviewing allowances.

"Due to government budget constraints, all carer reimbursements are currently undergoing review for foster care, kinship care and permanent care," it said in its winter newsletter.

Boland said she believed that while some children were moved down from high levels of support to lower levels, there might be potential for them to be scaled back up from level 1.

“We’re still seeking information for what that means for our carers, they’re confused and we’re confused,” Boland said.

“The level of support for foster care and kinship care needs to be increased; we are working really closely with those children and their families to give them stability and a future.”

Meena Singh, the acting Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, said she had followed recent reports of reductions in the allowance for foster carers in this state and the ongoing decline in carer numbers.

“Well-supported carers and a stable care environment are essential to support children and young people who have been removed from their homes overcome the impact of significant harm and trauma,” Singh said.

While there had been significant investment in Victorian child protection and out-of-home care, the investment has failed to keep pace with increasing demand.

“If options for suitable care decline as a result of inadequate funding, we risk seeing more children in inappropriate and potentially unsafe care placements, including in residential care,” she said.

“Stability of quality care is a key factor in how children fare in out-of-home care, including whether they maintain their engagement with education and avoid being drawn into the justice system, where children and young people from a care background are already significantly over-represented.”

More investment was needed in early intervention and prevention to stop children and young people from entering care in the first place, she said.
