

# IPART SUBMISSION

## Out of Home Care Costs & Pricing

Questions for all stakeholders:

1: What are the key challenges you face in providing out of home care services?

The key challenges we face as Carers to providing out of home services to our foster children include:

- The lack of transparency and collaboration on behalf of the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) regarding the final costings of items included in the Case Plans.
  - We are Carers linked directly to DCJ and have found the process of the approval and funding of case plans to be frustrating.
  - Our experience is that once we go through the case planning process, which includes sourcing quotes and agreeing to items for inclusion in the costings for the year, the case plans go through a second departmental process. This second process is where most of the items agreed to with Carers in the case plan meeting, are slashed or deleted from the case plans without explanation nor justification.
  - With little transparency regarding these final changes to case plans, Carers are left in the dark believing the items agreed upon during the case plan meeting, will be adequately funded. This regularly leads to Carers being short changed and not being fully reimbursed for items.
  - This secondary departmental process can also take a long time, which means that for large chunks of the year Carers have no grounds for seeking refunds, as no case plans are in place. This creates unnecessary tension where Carers are funding the children and not able to get appropriate reimbursements for costs.
  - Overall, these issues contribute to an environment where Carers have their integrity challenged and are constantly interrogated about costs based on Case Plans which have either been greatly altered, are not in place, or whose final budget has not passed back to Carers for their information.

- Constant cost shifting and changes made by the department regarding the guidelines & inclusions in the Carer Payment.
  - Many times, we have sought approval and/or reimbursement for items approved in case plans only to be informed that the guidelines have changed, and these items are now expected to be covered by the fortnightly Carer Payment.
  - We have been informed by a Case Worker that the department will not provide printed copies of what items are included in the Carer Payment, as they are constantly being updated and altered.
  - How, as Carers are we able to budget and keep control of our own money when the department are constantly shifting costs onto us? It appears the department feels entitled to shift costs onto Carers with the line “you signed up for this” being used more than once to justify such things.
  - One things Carers did not sign up for is the undue and unfair pressure being a Carer places on our own finances. We are volunteers, we do not receive payment for our time, for our skills, for upskilling, nor do we receive any superannuation.
  - Alterations to the Carer Payment must be done transparently, and in consultation with Carers.
  - In practice, the department is placing its own budgetary needs squarely on the shoulders of individuals who volunteer as Carers.
  
- There seems to be a persistent and stubborn belief that Carers are “only in it for the money”, which casts a shadow over all discussions and concerns regarding the ever-increasing array of costs being shifted to the Carer Payment.
  - Repeatedly, when advocating for the needs of the children in our care, or seeking reimbursement for appropriate costs, Case Workers or their managers demonstrate beliefs that are similar to ‘Carers are only in it for the money’.
  - These kind of internal working beliefs are absolutely distressing and show a lack of understanding as to the work Carers do. These kinds of beliefs demonstrate the chasm of respect that is missing when it comes to Carers and costs.
  
- The lack of transparency and length of time and effort it takes to have funds reimbursed to Carers.
  - There is very little transparency around the process of Carer reimbursements. From the inordinate amount of time it takes to receive a reimbursement (it can be 3-6 months in some cases) to the amounts

being reimbursed not equaling the amount spent, Carers are usually kept in the dark. We rely on overworked Case Workers, to apply for our reimbursements, which are then subject to a labyrinth kind of process that even Case Workers do not fully understand.

- We do not receive any sort of remittance advice to notify us what we have been reimbursed for nor the amount. I understand that this is common practice with NGO's, but as a Carer who is directly with the department, we do not receive any notification. Given it can take between 3-6 months for reimbursement to occur, some kind of remittance advice would be appreciated.

### 1A: How has the increased cost of living impacted the delivery of out-of-home care services? What cost increases had the most impact?

- Increases to the cost of living have hit Carers hard. This, coupled with the shifting of costs to the Carers payment is a double whammy. Absolutely everything has increased, except of course, for the Carers payment. We are pressured to cover more and more costs, with little to no regard for our financial wellbeing.
  - Our own experience is one where we had a Case Worker Manager visit our home and just shrug when I said we would not put our mortgage under stress to cover services that have always been reimbursed by the department. The horrible thing is this kind of reaction isn't necessarily unheard of within the Carer community.
  - The costs that have had the most impact are everyday costs. All the extra costs added to food, to gas, electricity, transport. This kind of across-the-board increases hit hard.
  - The cost in everyday essentials has placed pressure on the extras we can afford for the children.
    - i. We are not sure if they can continue with the extracurricular activities that they love. We may not be able to afford school camps next year.
    - ii. These kinds of classes & activities are all very expensive, and while the benefits of these activities to our foster children are enormous, they are not included nor reimbursed by the department, which means we may not be able to continue to afford them in the future.

## 2: What is the most important change you would like to see come out of the review?

- There are four important changes we would like to see come out of this review:
  - The first is a substantial increase in the Carer Payment. Carers should not be expected to place their own mortgages and finances in jeopardy to continue as Carers.
  - We need transparency and realistic costs attached to the financials associated with the children's case plans. The costs must be driven by the actual costs of items and services and not figures pulled out of thin air.
  - We need a transparent process for reimbursements. Reimbursements must be made in a timely manner and if the full cost is not reimbursed, there must be an explanation for why and a process to appeal.
  - The final change we would like to see is a commitment to address the negative beliefs within the department towards Carers and the Carer Payment. No Carer should be worse off for becoming a Carer, nor should their finances be utilised as a departmental slush fund anytime they feel like changing the rules.

## Questions for Carers:

12: Is the current Carer allowance you receive for each child in your care sufficient to cover the day-to-day costs of caring for the child? If it is not, what types of things do you typically spend more of your own money on?

- No, we do not feel the current Carer allowance covers all the day to day needs of the children in our care. As our foster children grow, this becomes more and more apparent, especially as they are now pre-teens, eating like adults and needing more and more clothes to keep up with their growth spurts.
- Most of our allowance go towards groceries, transport, shoes and clothing.
- School excursions and camps are also a strain on our finances that are barely covered in the Carer allowance. These types of things are important for the kids to experience. We pay these out of our own funds as missing out on these kinds of opportunities would be very detrimental to the children's self-worth and we do not want them to feel like they miss out on anything because they are foster kids.

- There is no room in the allowance for any emergencies or extras. Any emergency extras come out of our own finances as there is little hope of the department reimbursing us.
- Birth family visits are another cost that is barely covered by either the department or the Carer Payment.
  - While the department has previously paid for accommodation and flights, Carers must cover the additional burden of meals & transport while travelling.
  - As the department barely provides any financial assistance to the birth family, Carers are often left having to pay for their meals as well.
  - We have also been informed that the department will no longer pay for two adults to attend family time but will only fund one person to attend. This adds another cost to an already costly requirement that the department places upon Carers.

### 13: How often do you need additional financial support from your agency on top of your usual Carer allowance? How easy is it to access additional financial support?

- We have learnt not to ask for additional help from the department outside of extreme circumstances. We cover all additional costs from our own finances.
- We have had to advocate for the birth family to be given financial support for family time, as the department refuses to understand the extra burden it places on people who may live in poverty, to travel and attend these important get togethers.
- We have experienced a great deal of difficulty accessing any extra financial support for items agreed upon in the case plan.
  - Even accessing extra funds for items such as prescription glasses, has been a nightmare. For instance, no child should be expected to wait 4 months for a replacement pair of glasses, when they are dependent upon them for their vision.
  - This process took so long because the costs approved within the case plan were unattainable and not within reason, and management would not approve what were our reasonable & current costs for a simple pair of glasses.