

Organisational capability - Community Visitors



community
visitors

Key functions

The financial year ended 30 June 2003 was a consolidation year of operation for the Commission's Community Visitor program which was established under the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000*. Under this Act, the program provides visitors to all residential facilities housing children and young people, including youth detention centres, respite care facilities for children with disabilities, and mental health facilities.

Community Visitors provide support to children and young people at these facilities and advocate on their behalf to help resolve their concerns. Under the Act, Community Visitors can enter and inspect facilities, talk to children or young people who wish to speak to them, and access documents held at the facilities relating to the residents or the service's operations.



Community Visitors continue to:

- build trusting and supportive relationships with children and young people in these facilities, as far as is possible
- advocate on their behalf by listening, giving voice to and helping resolve their concerns and grievances
- seek information about and ensure children's access to support services appropriate to their needs
- assess the adequacy of information given to the children about their rights
- inspect the sites and assess their appropriateness for the children's accommodation and the services they receive, ensuring they comply with relevant State and Commonwealth laws, policies and standards
- observe the treatment of children and young people, including how staff meet their needs
- assess the physical and emotional wellbeing of the children and young people
- assess whether detention centre programs adequately and appropriately prepare children and young people for release

Community Visitors are also expected to support the Commission's broader advocacy function by identifying issues relating to children and young people in their communities that do not fall within the scope of the Community Visitor functions. This enables the Commission to respond more effectively to the needs and interests of children:

- who are in, or may enter, out-of-home care or detention
- for whom there is no appropriate person to act on their behalf
- who are not able to protect their rights, interests or well being, or
- who are disadvantaged because of a disability, geographic isolation, homelessness or poverty.

Highlights

The highlights of the 2002-03 financial year include:

- a 17 per cent increase in the number of visitable sites from 159 to 187
- selecting, appointing and training six replacement Community Visitors
- initiating and trialing a mentoring program in conjunction with the Commission's Research Unit and VISE (Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education) for young people residing in supported accommodation services who are having difficulty coping with the demands of formal education
- further streamlining processes for receiving Community Visitors' reports and forwarding their recommendations to relevant service providers and Directors-General in a timely manner



Outcomes and achievements

In this twelve months, the Community Visitor program conducted 1,578 visits, 66 per cent outside of Brisbane. This is a 43 per cent increase on the number of visits conducted in the program's first full year of operation last financial year.

The Manager of the Community Visitor program succeeded in having the majority of issues addressed at the local level by the service provider or the relevant department.

The Commission received a positive response within the requested time to 74.6 per cent of all recommendations referred to Directors-General. Matters of concern brought to their attention included:

- requests from services for additional staffing or financial resources
- issues relating to the level of support provided to young people
- requests for building maintenance or modification
- issues relating to communication problems with government departments
- lack of suitable support facilities to cater for perceived demand
- requests for more appropriate placements for young people
- access to appropriate education for marginalised young people
- issues of personal safety for young people or service staff
- requests for more appropriate premises
- access to appropriate therapy for young people, and
- lack of facilitated family contact.

During the financial year, the Unit continued to monitor and advocate on several broader issues, including:

- the lack of accountability in some services, not currently required to be licensed, who accommodate marginalised or behaviourally challenging young people
- the placement of young people on youth justice or child protection orders with SAAP services

- the increasing number of homeless young people under 16 accommodated at SAAP services
- a lack of sufficient placement options to cater for demand in some areas
- the low standard of accommodation at some sites visited
- varying standards of care identified across the sites visited
- a lack of appropriate facilities to rehabilitate young people with volatile substance misuse, alcohol or other drug addictions, although it is pleasing to note that a new centre has been opened in Mackay

Departmental responses to Community Visitor report recommendations

(Commission letters dated 01/07/02 - 30/06/03)

Positive response received 74.6%		
Implemented	40	28.2%
Implementing action to address issue	39	27.5%
Noted, some assistance provided, other party to take action	18	12.7%
Will be implemented subject to funding availability	5	3.5%
Will be considered in budget	4	2.8%
No response or negative response received 23.9%		
No response received	18	12.7%
Recommended action not considered necessary	8	5.6%
Information leading to recommendation considered inaccurate	6	4.2%
No funding available	2	1.4%
Other party to instigate action	2	1.4%

Training and professional development of Community Visitors was conducted on two occasions during 2002-03. Specific sessions were provided in relation to:

- mental health issues for young people
- research into youth homelessness and substance abuse
- evaluation criteria for licensed premises
- update on the revised Juvenile Justice Act and Regulations
- communicating with young people with disabilities, and
- advocacy networks.

Outlook

The Community Visitor program will continue to grow in 2003-04 as more visitable sites are identified. The program will continue to work to establish better relationships with government and non-government service providers to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people. This will include stronger links with the Adult Guardian.

The Commission will finalise the development of a new Community Visitor database in 2003-04 to enable more efficient and timely identification of issues, trends and responses at sites. Information booklets will be produced to explain to service providers, in simple terms, the role, functions and powers of Community Visitors.

A Community Visitor will be sponsored by the Commission to accompany two young people to the Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Sydney in the 2003-04 financial year.

There will also be an update of the Community Visitors' Procedures Manual in 2003-04.

Community Visitors will continue to refer formal complaints to the appropriate Units in the Commission as they arise to ensure positive outcomes for the young people involved. In addition, the Community Visitors will remain active participants in local networks.

