



Transcript of interview with Luke Donnellan, Minister for Child Protection

Question: What is the significance of Kinship Care Week, and how have you been involved?

Well the significance is recognising the love and care that kinship carers provide – for us as a community – to their kin, to those they’re caring for. And to recognise the enormous work they do – the love, the support, the guidance they provide to those young people... It’s just so important that they’re doing this work, unnoticed by the community, and the work they do is just marvellous for our community.

Obviously, as you’d be aware, our legislative model in terms of care in Victoria for children in out of home gives priority to kinship care. So 74% of our children who live in out of home are taken care of by kinship carers, and we have more than 4,000 households which are kinship carer households.

This week we had morning tea at Kensington Town Hall. I met people from far and wide in Victoria. We had a couple of people from Warrnambool. We had a couple of people from Ballarat and Bendigo, including one lady, who said to me, “you know, I was expecting to be retired by this stage and now I’m a full-time carer again for my daughter’s children”. And, you know, how difficult is that? That you’re expecting to finish your caring obligations for your children and you really have to start again. So that just shows that sense of love. I mean, as this lady indicated to me at the time, “we were going to go travelling, we’re going to enjoy our life, enjoy the fact that we worked hard and had a good retirement. Now, we’re back into caring full time for children, but what else do you do?” As she said also, “for some years I was very critical of myself because how did we end up with a child like that, who couldn’t take care of their children?” She said, “I’ve moved on from that, I now need to just be this marvellous, loving, full-time carer.” Which she was.

Look, for me it is important that we as a government recognise the work they do, the love they provide, and the guidance they provide to those young children... whether it be through our funding for kinship care in the last budget which was about \$116 million - \$100 million of that was specifically over four years to provide support, placement stability, assessments when the children/child is first placed with the carer ... and to see what’s required in terms of counselling, how we can provide flexible brokerage for capital goods that might need to be bought for when the child first comes to the household ... so very much the government is committed to that.

We’ve also obviously funded a \$10 million program over four years to identify kin for our indigenous community – our intention is to have 80% of indigenous children cared for by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations by 2020. To do that properly we need to identify kin, and who wouldn’t want to be with the longest living civilisation in the world? That’s a pretty obvious thing to me. It’s taken us a while, to sometimes deal with the most obvious ways of providing care for our indigenous children. That’s being with your tribe and with your family, and having connection to your culture, so obviously we funded that.

For us, we know we need to provide as much care and support as we can to kinship carers... and that’s where Kinship Carers Victoria is so important. We’ve funded them to run the high teas this week and they had actually a high tea in my office the week before, but it’s important that we get that recognition far and wide across Victoria; whether it be in Warrnambool, whether it be in Ballarat, Horsham, wherever, and get the kinship carers together as well, to support one another. To go through what are the difficulties of caring for kin, which are more complicated sometimes than caring for young ones who aren’t related to you because you’ve obviously got those difficult relations you’ve got to work through. Whether it be with your daughter, with your son who might be the parent, but is not capable of caring for that child in the way we expect. But kinship care still has that

connection back to family – which, as my mother would say as a child protection officer, is just so vital. Even when parents have not been good parents the child still has that desire and wish to be connected to their parents in the first place and know they'll have an understanding of where they came from. So this is a great week... and what a beautiful group of people they are.

Question: What plans do you have for reform of out of home care for Victoria in the future?

Well, for us it's about in many ways keeping children with families, because we know we get better outcomes with families. That's why our preferred model is obviously kinship care and that's where Kinship Carers Victoria is so important to support those placements and to work with us and community service organisations to get those great outcomes.

But in many ways the model has very much changed. For many years the focus was on dealing with the crisis... so it was a crisis driven system dealing with making risk assessments of whether we needed to take the child away from the mum, the dad, the family, whatever the case may be. Those critical assessment skills are very hard to develop, but we very much want to move away from that model and provide support in the early stages when there is family breakdown. So in other words, we want to get in early, provide that support earlier, to see if we can keep the children with the family to ensure that we provide that ongoing connection to family, but also that ongoing support where families aren't capable of caring well for their children – to get in there and provide that support and skill development for those parents to ensure they're able to be better parents in the future.

As much as possible we want to keep our young children out of the child protection system and provide earlier supports for families so that we don't have to make those critical decisions. So in other words we as a government are providing different tools to child protection officers, so instead of having to make that one decision of taking the child away from the parents, are there other options to support those parents to be better parents in the future for their children? That's very much where we're intending to take the system... whether over time we can look at reunification, provide that support, provide that therapeutic intervention, for both the child and the family – the primary carers originally, or the mum and dad originally – to support them to be better into the future so that we can keep children with their parents and provide better outcomes in the long run. And we also want to provide a bit of relief to our kinship carers, because they provide so much care ...

We're also looking at when children turn 18 years of age – that's when most of our models finish. We know that children at 18 who've been through trauma and difficult times are probably going to find it difficult to be equipped in terms of employment, in terms of housing, in terms of income and the like. So what we've started is looking at putting in models like Homestretch and Better Futures to actually provide support in terms of job placement, in terms of training, in terms of income, in terms of accommodation, and in terms of the opportunity to stay with your carer, to 21 years of age. We know that if we can provide this extra support, we avoid things like young children who are struggling ending up in the criminal justice or youth justice system. Because there are so many limited options – so little support for them – so we're also trialling that. I guess you'd call it an early intervention... to provide support for our young ones who've been through that trauma to actually keep them out of the youth justice system and keep them in the community enjoying their life and provide them with that support... When we identify problems it might be through paediatricians, doctors, maternal & child health and so forth, and what supports do we need to do then? And then recognition that at 18 years of age our models have a completion date. So we've moved to extend those to 21 years of age in trials, and that's what we want to do in the future – to actually ensure that we support these young people to have a better future and to have the ... the life they want to live.