

# Caregivers speak

UNDERSTANDING THE  
EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS  
OF CAREGIVERS

NOVEMBER 2007



New Zealand Government



“OUR FOSTER DAUGHTER IS  
THE LIGHT OF OUR LIVES.  
TO WATCH HER BLOSSOM  
JUST THROUGH LOVE AND  
SECURITY IS A JOY TO SEE.”



# Introduction

*Caregiving is a hugely important role. At any one time, Child, Youth and Family is responsible for the care of more than 5,000 children who cannot live at home because of abuse, neglect or behavioural difficulties. The majority of these children and young people are looked after by caregivers who provide care 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.*

Making sure that caregivers feel valued and supported is essential to ensuring they are able to provide the best possible care and support to enable young people to lead successful lives. Caregiver satisfaction is also central to retaining carers and achieving stable placements and permanency.

Last year we undertook our first national survey of caregivers to help us to learn more about them, their perceptions and experiences, and their support and training needs. The survey was designed in consultation with the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation and was distributed through *Care Matters*. More than 720 caregivers responded to the survey. Although this response rate of 21% is not a representative sample, the survey has given us valuable information and insights.

The enthusiasm that caregivers have for their role and the commitment they have to the children in their care is evident throughout the survey. There were many comments about how caregiving enriches the lives of both caregivers and children in care, and caregivers strongly believe that they make a positive difference to the young people's lives. The survey also underlined the importance of the support that caregivers receive from a variety of sources, including family, social workers and support groups.

The feedback also highlighted areas of concern and frustration. Caregivers told us that they would like more information and for Child, Youth and Family to be more responsive to their needs. They also identified a need for greater access to support services for children and young people, and more help with managing challenging behaviour.

Thank you to all the caregivers who responded to the survey. We are now much better informed about your needs and expectations, and how we can work better with you. We are taking a number of steps to address the issues you have raised including reviewing caregiver training, enhancing the support services available for children in care, and reconsidering the support we provide for family/whānau caregivers.

We will continue to work with you, and with the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation, to ensure we can support your needs.



*Ray Smith*  
Deputy Chief Executive

# The key findings



## About our caregivers

552 (76%) of the caregivers who responded to the survey identified themselves as 'foster carers'. This term covers non-relative caregivers, covering respite carers, emergency carers, short- or medium-term carers, caregivers who seek custody or guardianship, and other types of carers. 145 (20%) identified themselves as 'family/whānau caregivers' and 29 (4%) as 'Family Home caregivers'. Women made up 86% of the primary caregivers, while 80% of the secondary carers were men.

85% of respondents were between 31 and 60 years of age, with the majority aged 45 to 60.

More than 50% of respondents had post-secondary school qualifications. 20% of primary caregivers worked full-time, while 29% did not work outside their caregiving role. 80% of secondary caregivers were involved

in paid employment, approximately two thirds of them full-time.

Just over 50% of primary caregivers reported that their annual income was \$15,000 or less and 54% of secondary carers had an annual income of \$35,000 or less. These figures compare with Statistics New Zealand data showing the average income for women as \$19,552 and \$39,208 for men.

## What caregivers think about their role

Caregivers were generally positive about their role. 97% believed that they could make a positive difference in the lives of their foster children and 77% said that fostering enriched their life. 79% reported that they enjoyed the challenges of fostering and 68% believed it had had a positive impact on their family. Many caregivers reported

that their own children were supportive and provided a stable family environment for the children in their care.

Caregivers found their role could be challenging and stressful at times. 46% found their foster children's challenging behaviour difficult to cope with and 33% felt stressed by the responsibilities of fostering. The challenging behaviour meant that fostering was not always a positive experience for the caregiver's family and some respondents reported difficulty in matching resources such as pocket money and clothing grants for children in care for their own children.

The respondents expressed a need to feel valued and many wanted more of a team approach, where their observations, experience and suggestions were taken into account in decision-making and care plans.

## Communication

Positive comments were made about the professionalism and support provided by social workers, including a view that social workers deserve more financial recognition. Some respondents noted that mistakes and oversights happen, but social workers are human. Others reported finding derogatory media coverage of social workers upsetting.

Almost 50% of the respondents always or usually felt part of the care team. Half received a visit from a social worker every two to six months. Some reported visits more frequently, some less frequently. Family Home caregivers had the highest frequency of visits, with 48% visited either once a month or every two months.

Positive comments about communication with social workers mainly related to them returning phone calls, being friendly and following through with tasks. However, some social workers' failure to return phone calls, to reply too late for the call to still matter, or to follow through on promises and service delivery was a major issue for a number of respondents. This was sometimes seen as indicating a lack of respect for caregivers. Many caregivers commented that they believed a lack of support or inadequate communication was often the result of social workers' high workload and frequent staff changes.

Some caregivers reported that there was sometimes pressure to take children who did not match their skills or family circumstances and they had had difficulty saying no in such a

situation. They also said that information about the children being cared for was sometimes lacking. More than half the respondents reported that they either never or only sometimes received care plans and other relevant information within three days of placement, and 40% said they were never or only sometimes consulted on care plans, reports and reviews. Many also said that information about their entitlements was lacking and they had to learn by experience what they were entitled to.

## Support services

87% of respondents identified their family, particularly their partner, as their main source of support. 86% received support from social workers, with many caregivers commenting positively on the support they received from social workers in general, and particularly in terms of organising payments or support/counselling for a child. However a number of respondents reported feeling left alone, with insufficient support for themselves and the children in their care.

Respondents ranked "assistance to manage children's challenging behaviour" and "more support services for children in care" as the support they would value the most. Peer support groups and respite care, either planned, regular or as a short-term response to an emergency, were identified by many as particularly important to alleviating some of the pressures that can affect their ability to manage situations. Some

respondents reported a lack of support services such as counselling for the children in their care.

Caregiver support groups were valued as an opportunity to meet other caregivers for training, information-sharing and mutual support. 20% of respondents were members of the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation, while 37% were not aware of the organisation. Some respondents offered to provide peer support to other caregivers. Others said they would appreciate the chance to have access to recreational activities for their entire family. Reassurance that they were doing a good job or a "how's it going" phone call were identified as simple but effective ways to improve caregiver morale. There was a strong perception that both service delivery and the level of support provided, including financial support, varied between regions and individual offices within regions.

## The costs of caregiving

Caregivers have traditionally been volunteers who are reimbursed for the expenses they incur through caring for a child or young person. Most respondents said they did not expect a 'professional' salary for their volunteer work, but they did expect adequate, full and prompt reimbursement of expenses. Many caregivers said they were not always informed about their entitlements or the process for reimbursement was too slow. Others expressed concerns about a perceived lack of uniformity in relation to payment policies in different regions.

Caregivers were asked whether the existing allowances and reimbursements were sufficient to cover their costs. 16% of respondents reported incurring no extra weekly costs while 75% reported facing additional costs that were not covered by existing allowances and reimbursements.<sup>1</sup>

Caregivers identified a number of hidden costs, particularly in relation to travel. Half of all respondents said they lived in rural communities, the other half in urban environments. Nearly half of all caregivers travelled up to 50km each week to transport children in their care to school, appointments, recreational activities etc. Another 25% travelled between 50 and 100km each week. 48% had changed their type of car as a result of becoming a caregiver.

Some respondents expressed concern that they would not receive the same financial assistance, or other types of support, if they took on guardianship for children in their care compared to the support provided for children who remain under the guardianship of Child, Youth and Family.

## Family/whānau caregivers

Nearly 40% of children in Child, Youth and Family's care are currently placed with family/whānau caregivers. The differences between family/whānau caregivers and non-relative caregivers are distinct. Non-relative caregivers seek to have foster children in their care. For family/whānau caregivers the placement is often the result of a family crisis. Family dynamics and the roles of family members might change considerably as a result of the placement.

The family/whānau caregiver respondents were more likely to report finding their foster children's behaviour difficult to cope with and feeling stressed by the responsibilities of fostering, and they were less likely to receive support from a spouse or partner than foster carers and Family Home caregivers. Family/whānau caregivers also placed a higher priority on support to deal with challenging behaviour (25% compared to 17% of foster carers and 6% of Family Home caregivers) and the need for other services such as respite care.

The challenges of caregiving seemed to significantly impact on many family/whānau caregivers. They were less likely to agree with the statement that fostering had made their life richer (60% compared to 81% of foster carers) and that they enjoyed the challenges of fostering (68% compared to 82% of foster carers). The number who felt that fostering had impacted positively on their family was also lower at 53% compared to 73% of foster carers. Various comments reflected the range of difficulties family/whānau caregivers faced, from embarking on raising a second family when they thought their direct parenting responsibilities had ended, to the impact on their lifestyle and savings.

Some family/whānau caregivers expressed concern at perceived rate differences between different subsidy types and many queried why they were not eligible for Working for Families benefits. Some respondents described how their own financial resources had had to be rationed or limited to accommodate their grandchildren, nieces and/or nephews.

Family/whānau caregivers reported difficulties in obtaining resources and information regarding entitlements. They were also twice as likely as non-kin caregivers to report not receiving care plans and other relevant information within allocated timeframes, or receiving irregular social worker visits.

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<sup>1</sup> The In Work Payment from Inland Revenue was not available at the time this survey was sent out.

## Support for caregivers facing allegations of abuse

A number of respondents identified a need for more support for caregivers facing abuse allegations. Their preferred options for support were family and friends (41%), caregiver social workers (29%), an independent professional (18%) or the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation (11%).

The features of effective support people that were important to respondents were:

- ⋮ having a good understanding of the reality of caregiving
- ⋮ being able to establish a relationship of trust
- ⋮ being unbiased
- ⋮ being accessible
- ⋮ having the knowledge and skills specific to allegation investigations
- ⋮ knowing what other supports were available.

## Caregiver training

The survey did not provide exact data about course attendance for training courses, but responses indicated that a considerable number of active caregivers were not attending training courses regularly and some might not have attended induction training. The main reasons for not attending training were location, which included distance and accessibility (15%), work commitments (12%), access to childcare (10%), not aware of

courses, courses not confirmed or the caregiver was new to caregiving (9%), no assessment of need for training, or lack of confidence to attend (9%).

Suggestions for changes that would facilitate caregivers attending courses included access to childcare/respite care (13%), scheduling courses within school hours (12%) or evenings/weekends (11%), holding courses locally (10%), and having correspondence or online courses (8%). Others suggested a less formal setting for training, for example integrating it into local caregiver meetings or making it home-based.

Respondents also requested more 'hands-on training', for example role-modelling how to deal with challenging behaviour. They also identified training needs that were not met currently including training specific to family/whānau caregivers, caring for infants and parental access.

## Caregivers' role in the future

Caregivers were asked for their views on the role of caregivers in the future. 70% of respondents favoured a mixture of foster care placement types in the future – voluntary, semi-professional with some financial recompense to caregivers for

their skills and abilities, and professional where caregivers were paid the equivalent of a full-time salary for their work. 33% of respondents would opt for a semi-professional status, 23% would choose to be a volunteer, 18% would want to be professional, and 25% were not sure what status they would opt for. All respondents who would opt for the status of semi-professional or professional would agree to undertake further training.

Caregivers who felt undervalued and that they were not recognised as a member of the care team often linked this to their status as a volunteer. Some respondents argued for professionalisation of foster care because the increasing complexities of the children in their care makes their management more challenging and requires increasingly specialised skills. Others said that high needs children required caregivers who were available at all times, not limited by working hours. A small number expressed concern about professionalisation, fearing people might do it for the "wrong" reasons i.e. out of financial interest.



# Meeting the needs of caregivers

*The survey has provided Child, Youth and Family with an insight into the needs and experiences of caregivers and this has informed the work programme that is in place to strengthen the responsiveness of caregiver support services. This section outlines the key initiatives that are underway.*

## **Effectively communicating with caregivers**

The survey identifies the many positive working relationships that exist between caregivers and social workers, and an appreciation of the challenges social workers face in their day to day work. It also highlights a need to improve the way Child, Youth and Family communicates and engages with caregivers in a number of areas. This is a particular focus of the work with the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation.

To enhance our service, including improving communication and information for caregivers, we have introduced systems within regions to heighten the profile of care and caregivers. Each region has a senior staff member to co-ordinate care work within the region, and each site has a Care Leadership Team. Each region develops a Care Management Plan which includes support to caregivers.



From mid 2008 our call centres will be working alongside caregiver social workers to provide regular, proactive support to caregivers.

The training and induction programmes for social workers are currently being reviewed. The survey feedback has been valuable in making sure these strongly focus on working effectively and respectfully with caregivers and children. The practice framework now embedded in all sites, supports co-ordination of services and professional relationships (including caregivers) working positively to achieve planned, child focused outcomes.

## **Support services**

Children in care often require a wide range of supports to help them achieve their full potential at school, in the community, in their personal life and with family, friends and their caregivers.

Caregivers need support so they can meet the needs of the child they are looking after. They also need support for themselves and their families to deal with the emotional and practical challenges of caregiving.

There were a range of comments from respondents suggesting that children and young people in care require more assistance from the health and education sector. Child, Youth and Family already purchases health and education services on a case by case basis. Work is underway to improve access to health and education services for children and young people in care. Funding is available for student aide resources to allow children and young people in care with challenging behaviour to be maintained in normal school settings with additional support.

The 2006 Permanency Review identified a need for increased collaboration between Child, Youth and Family, and health and education agencies, and for caregivers to be supported to develop the specialist skills needed for children and young people with multiple and complex needs.

Work has begun on developing a comprehensive health, education and psychological assessment framework for use with children and young people in the care system.

This will provide a more detailed understanding of health and education needs that will lead on to more focused planning and support to address children and young people's needs more effectively.

Child, Youth and Family recognises the importance of caregiver support groups such as the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation in providing support for caregivers. We have worked with caregivers to form peer support groups in some service centres and will help to introduce these more widely around the country. Newly approved caregivers have their fees to join a recognised caregiver support organisation paid by Child, Youth and Family.

### **Meeting the costs of caregiving**

Child, Youth and Family is working to address the concerns raised by caregivers around financial assistance. The service is reviewing the way it currently provides information to caregivers and the procedures and guidelines provided to staff about administrative matters such as reimbursement. As an immediate step, forums such as *Care Matters* are being used to keep caregivers up to date on entitlements. An example is communicating changes such as the April 2007 increases in the Foster Care Allowance (board), Unsupported Child Benefit/Orphan Benefit (UCB/OB). We will also put reminders in *Care Matters* about policy such as the deliberate damage claims scheme that reimburses caregivers for damage that is not covered by household insurance.

Some respondents expressed concern that they would not receive the same financial assistance if they took on guardianship for children in their care. The Permanency Policy implemented in March 2006 specifically provides for caregivers

and social workers to discuss ongoing support needs after they have assumed guardianship.

### **Supporting family/whānau caregivers**

The survey highlighted a need for more support for family/whānau caregivers, and for social workers to recognise and consider the unique situation of family/whānau caregivers. This is being addressed through a social worker and caregiver training review. We have also revised our assessment and approval framework to make the process of approving family/whānau caregivers more appropriate to their circumstances.

Family/whānau caregivers who are caring for children placed with them by Child, Youth and Family are entitled to the same level of financial assistance as other Child, Youth and Family caregivers. If these caregivers take on a permanent caregiving role they are entitled to continue to receive payments to the equivalent of the Foster Care Allowance. Alternatively, they can access Working for Families assistance, depending on their income and family circumstances.

## Supporting caregivers facing allegations

Being subject to an allegation and the subsequent investigation is stressful and traumatising, and can have a major impact on the whole family, regardless of whether the allegations are proved. Sensitively and respectfully conducted investigations, and the quality of support to all parties, are key factors for maintaining positive working relationships and retaining caregivers.

Since the survey was undertaken, the New Zealand Family and Foster Care Federation has introduced a support programme for caregivers facing abuse allegations. Child, Youth and Family is also revising its policy and exploring support options for caregivers. Caregiver training will be updated to help prevent abuse allegations and to prepare a caregiver for what happens if an abuse allegation is made.

## Caregiver training

Caregivers are pivotal to children's recovery from traumatic experiences such as abuse and neglect, and to their future development. Effective and ongoing training is a key factor in enabling caregivers to provide the best for the children in their care.

Caregiver training is currently provided in the form of 12 hours induction training and eight other courses. Training is not compulsory but is highly recommended.

The survey findings are informing the review and updating the content and delivery of training programmes for caregivers. In particular, the review is updating the content of the training to cover issues which are identified as important by caregivers. To help caregivers access training, a policy has been implemented that training sessions will be held as long as at least two caregivers attend.

## Caregivers' role in the future

Research and feedback from caregivers indicates that the challenges of looking after children in care are increasing. At the same time, demographics are changing and the pool of potential caregivers is shrinking. The last decade has seen a growing debate over professionalisation of foster care.

The survey findings emphasise the importance of providing a diverse range of options within foster care that meet the needs of children and young people in care. While the challenges of looking after high-needs children might present a valid argument for increasing professionalisation in foster care, the commitment, enthusiasm and love for children demonstrated by many caregivers would be argued by some as a good reason for maintaining a role for volunteer caregivers.

The concept of 'professionalisation/specialisation' of the foster care role is one that needs thorough analysis. The advantages and disadvantages for caregivers, children and young people, and their families, needs discussion. Child, Youth and

Family recognises the need for this analysis and discussion and has a comprehensive literature review on the 'professionalisation/specialisation' of care which gives a basis for future work.



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and family

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