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As parents, friends, and community members, we want the very best for our children. We want them to be able to grow up happy and healthy, surrounded by family and friends in a home that's safe and stable, where they know they are loved, cared for, and protected. We want them to grow up knowing they have an anchor in their life, a home and family that will always be there through the good and difficult times, beside them as they grow into adulthood, celebrating milestones and sharing new experiences.

Children do not want to be removed from their family, but they want and need to be safe, cared for, and supported. Parents want to be able to care for their children and give them what they need but some parents need support to be able to do this.

Sadly, there are children who have an experience of home life that is bound in fear, instability, and in some cases significant harm. This is the reality for a growing number of children in Victoria and alarmingly, over the last ten years, the number who have been removed from

their parents and placed in care outside their home has doubled.

Heartbreakingly, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children placed in care is rising by 15 per cent a year.

There have been many reports on the child and family services systems, including many reviews, Ombudsman and Commissioner investigations, and compelling reports such as the work undertaken by Social Ventures Australia. Reports, investigations, and reviews have all consistently, over the past decade and as recently as last year, called for serious reform of the system. They provide evidence of the harm to children, the failure to support families adequately and are also very clear about what works, providing many examples of approaches in other Australian states and internationally that led to better outcomes for children, families, and the broader community.

Behind every number quoted, every statistic mentioned in these reports, is a child. Behind them, a family. Every single one who matters, who is important and deserving of more care and the opportunity to thrive.

The people working in the child protection, out-of-home care, and family services sector have fiercely advocated for change over many years. They work tirelessly to support families when they most need help. They are devastated when they are unable to provide the support needed because of limited funding and program requirements that don't support them to do the work they know would make a difference. Preserving and strengthening families is such a critical part of ensuring that wherever possible we can prevent family breakdown,

and yet, it is an area of our child protection system that is significantly under-resourced. In other Australian states and internationally, funding family services to support parents intensively and early when they most need help has made the most significant difference in reducing the number of children that are removed and placed in out-of-home care.

When preserving and strengthening the family home is not possible and the determination is made that a child must be removed, people working across the system step in to protect, care, nurture, and support the state's most vulnerable children. They know that they stand as that child's parent, that child's voice, that child's hope of a safer, better future. However, they are completely overwhelmed by the growing number of children who need their care and by the despair that impacts everyone in that situation and in particular the child whose world has been completely upended.

They fully appreciate the heavy responsibility on their shoulders. Removing a child from the care of their parents, and from their home, is not something that's ever done lightly. It occurs when it is the only way to truly protect and safeguard a child. When the state makes this decision, the implicit promise is that they will care, support, and nurture that child so that they have every chance to develop and to thrive.

Elsewhere in this edition (Chapter 2) Barry and Adela have both spoken about the kind of care that is needed to ensure children can heal from the wrenching experience they have endured. They have written about the importance of trust, of relationships that foster a sense of belonging, understanding, and care.

Many children in out-of-home care have lived through events that no child should ever have to experience. For children in residential care, this is further compounded by the distress of being placed in a foreign environment, often feeling scared and alone, and struggling to understand what's happening.

Supporting children from the moment they come into state care and building trust is critical to helping children to settle into a home and re-establish relationships and connections to important things in their lives. Really getting to know them; their likes and dislikes, what interests them, their fears and their hopes, their achievements, and their disappointments are all part of creating a home within which they can grow. Providing the therapeutic care needed in stable home environments is vital to ensuring their safety and ability to develop into adults in a positive and supported way.

While there is agreement that therapeutic residential out-of-home

care is critical to achieving this outcome, reform across the entire system to achieve this has not yet occurred.

For many years in Victoria there has been commitment to building a better approach and system. There has also been some progress in some areas. However, we have not yet implemented the reforms we all know have worked in other states and internationally.

We know the current system contributes to hardship and for some, exposure to further harm and trauma. Children should not be made to tolerate this. Workers should not have to bear witness to this harm in the face of their dedication and commitment to improving the lives of the children they work with.

We know what works. We all have the evidence of it. We know the changes we would need to make to our legislation, to our child protection system, to family services, and to out-of-home care. We know exactly what this would cost, and we know

the improved outcomes we'd see. We know that if we changed the child protection system, adequately funded early and intensive work with families, and immediately moved to therapeutic residential care we would see more families supported to stay together, fewer children harmed, and fewer children in care. Our First Peoples would have strengthened communities and the future would be better one.

The evidence is strong. The commitment is unwavering. For Barry, for Adela, for the children and the families we work with, for the people who work in our services, for our community, it is time to reform this system. We have had the courage and ability to make some changes that are a great first step. It's time to make the system-wide change now — to stop talking about it and to start doing it.

People are important and change is possible. We have the knowledge, ability, and evidence to make change. We must now demonstrate the will, provide the investment and do it.

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