

SOS News

Newsletter of SOS Children's Villages Australia

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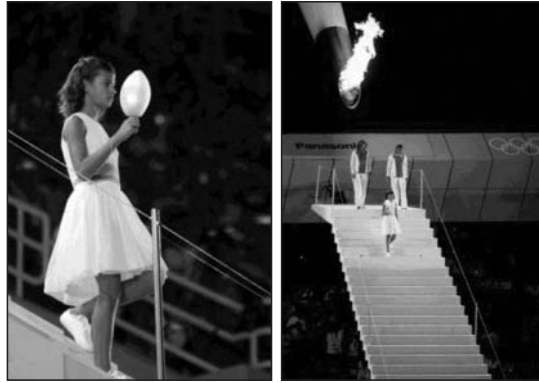
A family sized solution
to a worldwide problem

Government takeover of Seaford Rise Village

The pride of SOS at the Athens Olympics

Surely one of those special moments of the Athens Olympics was at the closing ceremony when that beautiful little ten year old Greek girl, whose name is Fotini, blew out the Olympic flame. For all of us in the SOS International family, it was even more special because Fotini is a SOS child from our Greek SOS Children's Villages at Vari, and she was selected by the Greek Government for this singular honour as a mark of support for SOS operations in their country.

Support and recognition of SOS in Greece was further enhanced by the goodwill of the Greek athletes at the games, particularly their national basketball team and their silver medal winning women's water polo team which both donated money to this SOS Village for every goal they scored.



As the President of the Australian Association of SOS watching her on television it was for me personally, a bitter sweet experience, because I could not help but compare this tangible support of the Greek Government, and other governments throughout the world for that matter, with the situation we have experienced with State governments here in Australia.

Closure of our Australian Village

Many of our readers and supporters will have heard rumours that our Children's Village at Seaford Rise has been forced to close down. Sadly, we are now in a position to confirm that these reports are true. SOS has now sold the Village to the South Australian Government's Department of Family and Youth Services (FAYS).

How this sad state of affairs could have come about is surely one of the most appalling narratives of government mismanagement (current and past) in our times. It is a story of politically correct, ideologically motivated government social workers, in what an independent social worker has called a "dangerously dysfunctional" government department (Advertiser 12 June 2004). This Department has been committed to achieving its own bureaucratic agendas to the detriment of the interests of the people they are there to serve. This, coupled with a Union, apparently determined to manifest its industrial might to the exclusion of the fallout on the lives of their members – and in our case the lives of the children in our care – have been the joint cause of the only SOS Children's Village in the world to be forced to close by Union action and government mismanagement.

But - firstly, we must apologise for taking so long to advise our supporters of the Seaford Rise closure, but our hands have been tied by processes in the Industrial Relations Commission initiated by the Australian Services Union and sensitive negotiations with the government for the purchase of the children's homes in the village.

The sale of the village homes has now been negotiated on a "walk in/walk-out" basis, and financially at least, SOS has achieved a surplus of some \$1,300,000 over our initial capital cost. Financial surpluses are not, however, our mission. Our mission is to provide children under State

protection and guardianship with an alternative to State institutional and bureaucratic care – to provide them with a "mother" and a secure, normal family home and to give them a chance to enjoy a happy and caring family environment so that they can come to terms with their past traumas and face their future with hope. We hope that this surplus and the recovery of our original capital investment can be put to good use for a future Australian SOS village.

At least the sale to the Department has achieved something, in the sense that the children previously in our care have been able to stay in their SOS family homes at Seaford Rise. Some of the younger children are still being cared for by their SOS mothers who have volunteered to stay on. However, most of our SOS mothers have now been replaced by public servant house-teams of six residential care workers working in shifts. The children in these houses are having their meals provided by commercial caterers and their houses being cleaned by commercial contractors. Hardly the normal family home environment they have previously enjoyed with SOS! To say nothing of the cost to the South Australian taxpayers for a care facility which was previously paid for entirely by SOS!

We have been reliably advised that the cost to FAYS for their first year of ownership of our village (capital and operating) will be \$5.1 million. This is seven hundred per cent more than what it would have cost SOS in that same year! Or – expressed another way – if FAYS had given us the whole of our annual operational funding to run the village in that year, they would have saved the taxpayer \$4.35 million, as well as keeping 25 South Australians in their jobs and the children in their supportive and happy village community. What a price to pay for ideological agendas and political correctness!

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Background history of SOS in Australia.

But – to start at the beginning. When I was asked by SOS International to become the first Australian National President of SOS in 1995, the request was accompanied by a plea for help from SOS International. At that stage, the SOS representatives from SOS Kinderdorf in Austria had been in Australia for almost two years trying to get a licence to establish a SOS Village. They had lodged submissions with every State Government – and had been rebuffed. With some judicious lobbying we ultimately received approval from the South Australian government, and proceeded to build our village at Seaford Rise.

I must say that during these negotiations with the Department I was confused and bewildered by the negative attitudes of the bureaucrats. Why were they not welcoming SOS with open arms? After all:

- The SOS model was a proven success worldwide – it was then operating in 132 countries and had been lauded and acclaimed by the UN with international declarations of its support for our model.
- Further – SOS had not asked for a single dollar from either Federal or State governments to establish its first Australian village.
- By their own admission, every State Government Department was suffering from a critical shortage of foster carers for children in State care.

The first sign of bureaucratic resistance to our application came in the presentation of an argument that our proposed SOS Village in Australia would be an Institution and therefore in conflict with government policy. This argument was quickly negated by the reality that the United Nations (UNICEF) had publicly declared that SOS was to be recognised and classified worldwide as a “non institutionalised placement for children.”

There then followed a plethora of arguments from the bureaucrats e.g. the SOS model is based, fundamentally, on a “mother”. As such, this terminology was politically incorrect and the only term acceptable to the Departments was “carer”. Even children in care were to be referred to as “clients” and not “children”.

The bureaucrats also argued that the SOS model, based as it is on motherhood, was too simplistic and out of date. Are they serious? Do they really believe that motherhood is simplistic and out of date? They still argue that children in care, having suffered separation from their birth families, need more sophisticated care than a mother can give i.e. case workers and social workers supported by psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, mentors, counsellors etc etc. Never mind the reality that the SOS model is a proven success for children worldwide, despite differences in religion and culture, in countries with vastly different social structures, economic conditions and, in many countries, political instability.

What was patently obvious was that the bureaucrats in every State simply did not want SOS. The reasons were hidden behind a veil of bureaucratic secrecy – a creed of secrecy, which was later, described by the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission into childcare as “misguided decisions to withhold information” by public servants.

Having eventually obtained a licence from FAYS to establish our village in 1995, we looked forward to a genuine partnership with the Department – a partnership based on mutual trust and mutual respect. What we got was secrecy, obstruction and an obvious and deliberate attempt to relegate our village into nothing more than a privately funded “branch office” of FAYS.

In particular, the treatment of our SOS mothers could only be described as shameful. In the words of one SOS mother – “the Department’s social workers treat us as nothing more than baby sitters.” Every attempt by the Village Director and our mothers to play an active role in the development of the children in the village was rejected on the argument that the department’s social workers were the only people who had custodial responsibility delegated by the Minister and, therefore, were the only people who could decide every aspect of the children’s lives.

Particularly galling, was the refusal of the Department to take SOS into its confidence on vitally important aspects of the children’s histories. Always, the argument of confidentiality was presented as the reason for exclusion. The real reason according to one frustrated senior departmental manager of FAYS (and there are some good ones) for this partnership exclusion of SOS was - “the protection of the social worker mythology.”

At last the new Minister for Families and Communities (Jay Wetherill) has recognised this reality – “Confidentiality provisions will not be tolerated as an excuse for (government) agencies refusing to share information in situations where children are at risk and need protection” – (Ministerial Policy Statement, May 2004)

If all of this sounds bitter and cynical then we do not resile from any of these criticisms, because they have been supported and validated by government commissioned enquiries, non government child care agencies, the Churches, the media and independent experts both within Australia and overseas.

Essentially, the conflicts between SOS and FAYS, which eventually became irreconcilable, and were a major factor in our decision to close down the village, were:

The “model” conflict

The SOS model and childcare philosophy, proven worldwide over 55 years, is that no child can have any hope for the future without the influence, guidance and love of a mother bringing up children in a safe and secure family home with the companionship of siblings and the assistance of a supportive community (village).

First and foremost, the SOS model offers a child a stable and secure family home. Living with a mother and siblings and with the support of the village community, children cease being “clients” and are nurtured as children, where their individuality is celebrated and encouraged and opportunities are provided for their future development on a daily basis.

The FAYS model relies on management by bureaucrats - case managers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, mentors, therapists etc. Reports indicate that the Australian average for a social worker’s commitment to any one child is twelve months.

Stability

The SOS model rests fundamentally on the argument that every child should have a safe, stable, and secure family home.

The FAYS model rests fundamentally on housing children in private foster care homes where they are then micro-managed by FAYS social workers. This policy has resulted in the vast majority of children in State care suffering multiple placements with the resulting instability causing major problems in the development of the child. We quote but two examples of children who were eventually placed in our village:

- Two brothers aged 8 and 9, who on arrival at the Village had been in 21 foster homes and 14 schools between them.
- A family of 6 children who between them had been in 48 placements in six months

And to quote Nina Weston, former President of the Foster Carers Association – “We’ve got babies going through eight placements in 6 to 12 months” - (Advertiser 28 July 2004).

Reunification with parents

FAYS policy for children in care is focussed on reunification with their birth parents as a primary objective. SOS experience worldwide is that mandatory reunification is not in the best interests of the child. Our argument has support from many sources:

- “The government’s policy to reunite children with the parents has been disastrous.” Professor Freda Briggs – child development professor, UniSA – (Advertiser 28 July 2004)
- “Any conflict that may arise between the interests of a child and the interests of the child’s family must be resolved in favour of the interests of the child.” (Crime & Misconduct Commission, Jan 2004)
- “What I am advocating is that Australians give more consideration to looking at their decisions through the prism or through the eyes of the children rather than what I perceive they are doing now, and that is the decision making process is based on what is in the best interests of parents first and children second.” (Professor Richard Gelles, visiting Professor from the University of Pennsylvania on Lateline)
- “The proportion (of reunified children) who were the subject of a transubstantiation (repeat abuse) within 12 months was 24.8%.” (Crime and Misconduct Commission, Queensland Report, January 2004)

Sibling separation

Fundamental to the SOS model is keeping birth family siblings together in the same family home. Invariably, the myriad of reports and investigations into childcare highlighted the trauma experienced by children when they were separated from their siblings.

Although we were successful in having some sibling groups housed in our village, FAYS failed to recognise this vitally important facility offered by SOS, even to the point of insisting that we limit the number of children in each home to no more than three.

The Union Conflict

The other crisis contributing to the closure of our Village at Seaford Rise was the activities of the Australian Services Union (ASU).

The essential element of this conflict was the determination of the union to classify our SOS mothers as "carers" under the Award system. SOS argued that a "mother" is a vocational commitment and that as such they could not be regulated by the provisions of an Award which was patently designed for "nine to five" social workers working in an office environment. The Industrial Relations Commission disagreed.

This conflict ultimately resulted in the ASU taking SOS to the Industrial Relations Commission, where SOS submitted

(substantiated by evidence) that as a charity for children relying on charitable donations and support from our Foundation in Europe, we could not possibly meet the ASU pay demands which would result in massive additional operating expenses.

To emphasise this reality, we wrote to the Union and stated specifically – "in an environment where we must decrease our running costs, your union is seeking new conditions of employment which, in the absence of any enterprise initiatives, can only increase our running costs. The inevitable outcome in a conflict of these two mutually opposing forces is closure of the village, and the consequent loss of employment of your members and the loss of jobs of the majority of our employees who are not members of your union."

The Union's immediate response to this letter was to issue us with an ultimatum in writing with no less than 68 claims, which included a demand for pay at double the hourly rate for carers (mothers) whilst they were sleeping overnight in their family homes and penalty rates for attending to their clients (children) out of the "nine to five" timeframe.

Coupled with the mind-set of, and lack of support from, the Department, the inevitable result was the closure of the village and the termination of employment of 25 full and part time SOS staff members – only six of whom supported the Union's actions.

Bureaucrats win – Children lose

Since the closure of the village FAYS has once again changed its name. It is now called Child Youth and Family Services (CYFS – to be pronounced phonetically, they say on their website, as "KIFFS"). This is part of what the government says is "a bold program to reform our child protection services and systems". Rather prophetically the same document qualifies this rhetoric by cautioning – "we speak the words but don't always act according to these precepts." (Both quotes from the Ministerial policy statement, May 2004).

The reality is that despite a long series of investigative reviews and reports by all State Governments, the net result is simply more of the same – more taxpayer money, more staff, more resources – but no courage to make the dramatic changes necessary to effect real change, simply because there is not the political courage to confront the entrenched bureaucratic cultures which are embedded in the system.

The only State government in Australia to demonstrate any fortitude has been the Queensland Government. Faced with the damning report of their Crime and Misconduct Commission's report, Premier Beattie immediately made a public declaration that he was scrapping the whole Queensland Department of Families and launching a totally new department – the Department of Child Safety. Of real significance, he emphasised that this new department would have "a new culture" and that the staff in the new department would undertake special training programs to ensure that this new culture would replace the seriously flawed attitudes and practices of the previous culture.

Here is a Minister with real courage – enough courage to tell the University academics that their "current university degrees were deficient in providing the necessary education" for social worker positions. (Brisbane Courier Mail, 27 September 2004). Maybe someone needs to give this same message to the educators in South Australia.

In South Australia, faced with the same challenge, the South Australian government not only maintained the old department, but gave it another \$148 million and an additional 186 new staff. Instead of dismantling the Department as in Queensland, it rewarded failure by giving its bureaucrats more money and more staff. This could be likened to trying to put out a fire with a bucket of petrol.

Harsh language, I know, but we have a very real empathy with Monsignor David Cappo (Advertiser 30 August 2004) who complained bitterly about the way his Social Inclusion Board is being treated by the bureaucrats - quote: "In a way the Board was like a foreign body to the Public Service machine, and the system in a sense wanted to expel it". A classic case of the "Sir Humphrey's" (in FAYS' case, the Lady Humphrey's) running the Minister rather than the Minister running the Department!

The only difference between Monsignor Cappo's Board and the SOS Board is that they have been successful in expelling us!

How could this happen?

If all of this suggests that we in SOS Australia are frustrated by the treatment we have received in Australia then surely we can be excused. After all, SOS is an outstanding success in 132 countries and has been welcomed and encouraged by governments and communities worldwide. We now own and operate:

- 442 Villages – caring for 43,600 children
- 175 Herman Gmeiner schools – with 85,500 students
- 268 Kindergartens – educating 22,000 children
- 337 Youth Facilities (trade schools etc) – providing training for 10,500 students
- 121 Vocational Training Centres (including staff training) –with 18,000 beneficiaries
- 214 Social Centres – 75,000 beneficiaries
- 55 Medical Centres – 350,000 beneficiaries
- 10 Emergency Relief Programs – innumerable beneficiaries
- In addition, SOS has established its own Academy in Innsbruck, Austria, for specialised pedagogical research and training.

In an extraordinary endorsement of our success, SOS has received no less than 146 International honours and humanitarian Awards from almost every country in the world. In 2001 SOS was one of the final three for the Nobel Peace Prize and last year was awarded the Conrad Hilton Humanitarian Award valued at \$1.75 million.

Only this month, the Mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, having been so impressed with our operations in the USA, announced that he had decided to build a new village of 16 family homes for SOS in Chicago and that his city would be contributing 85% of its total cost.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we have been besieged with correspondence, telephone calls and emails from around the world expressing anguish and shock that SOS in Australia has been treated so cavalierly by our government. Understandably, their image of Aussies as being a warm-hearted, generous and successful nation has taken a battering.

Australians may well ask – "How could this happen?"

Donations

Please be assured that we are very sensitive to the fact that our loyal supporters have been continuing to support us with personal donations and I hasten to assure all of our supporters that funds donated since the closure of the village can be refunded on request. Similarly, those of our supporters who are making regular monthly donations can have their contributions discontinued on request.

In this context I should say, however, that we are still in touch with the children in the village although their primary financial needs are now being met by the Department. Our Village Director is still living at the village and is maintaining social contact with the children. The operating expenses of our two remaining office staff are being met by SOS International.

If a future village in Australia does not eventuate, then all of our surplus funds, including donations, will be diverted to our other villages around the world who are looking after our most needy children.

The future

This, hopefully, is not the end of SOS in Australia. I cannot believe that any State government in a country like Australia can possibly let this situation continue. There are an estimated 30,000 children currently or potentially dependent on State care in our country and their appalling mismanagement by dangerously dysfunctional departments must eventually be confronted by our elected politicians and positive action must eventually be taken to ensure that they are given a chance in life.

As a start they must surely get them out of the hands of bureaucrats who see them as clients and start treating them like children – children who like any child need and deserve the comfort and protection of a mother and the joy of growing up in a secure and safe family home with brothers and sisters.

What is not needed in South Australia is more social workers, more bureaucrats and more processes with no outcomes. More money is not going to solve the problem – it will just exacerbate it. What is needed is a paradigm shift in policy – the courage of a Premier Beattie in Queensland to scrap the whole department and start again with new policies and new people functioning in a new culture. It needs to listen to people with the practical “hands on” experience of the real problems - those who know that the needs of the people in our community requiring succour and protection can never have their needs satisfied by public servants focussed on their own agendas as their first priority.

Let me illustrate what this means in reality. SOS is all about children. The bureaucrats and social workers in FAYS are all about clients and process. When SOS was the master of its own village, we were all about family life – fun, affection, sharing, mutual support, protection and comforting support when it was needed. SOS mothers have never been afraid of giving a child a hug



Mother and child - the face of SOS around the world

By way of conclusion I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the members of our Board who have given loyal and diligent commitment to SOS Australia in what has been a very difficult and stressful time for all of us. The SOS Mothers who have agreed to stay with their children at substantial financial and personal cost have our admiration and profound respect. They deserve and receive our sincere personal thanks and the gratitude of every member of the SOS Board. This is true dedication above and beyond the call of duty in the finest traditions of SOS.

Our thanks also to our private donors and our corporate supporters who have contributed both financially, and in spirit, to the SOS ethos. Bureaucrats may be at odds with the SOS model but there is no doubt that the community at large not only understands the SOS model but enthusiastically supports it.

when it was needed. We had a Program Director whose responsibilities included organising sport, special events, fun days, homework support and giving our children a village environment which was conducive to health and happiness. School holidays meant camping trips, canoeing, beach parties, touch football, mystery car trials with the mums driving and the kids navigating – fun!

When the village was taken over by the bureaucrats the first thing to go was the beach parties, because they claimed that our children could not go to the beach unless they were supervised by someone with a lifesaving certificate. The next thing to go was organised sport because no public servant was permitted to touch a child. I suppose, in fairness, that with media reports of a childcare public servant being charged by the Police for alleged paedophilia, this precaution is understandable. Whatever the reason, the SOS practice of touching, let alone hugging, a child who needed comforting, is now forbidden.

In this context, the Ministers charged with this special responsibility might take heed of the Diamond & Ash paper to the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference in July 2000, and I quote – “Whilst the State has an obligation to support those who parent, the State itself cannot parent. The State never recognises its own critical role is not being a parent but supporting parenting by others.”

One can only live in hope that this essential truism will finally give our elected politicians the moral courage to recognise that every child needs parenting, and that a social worker can never be a parent and can never replace a mother – even if it is not politically correct.



SOS Mother - Michelle Stevens - with one of her SOS children
“SOS mothers have never been afraid of giving a child a hug when it was needed.”

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Dr Somers and Dr Kumar – Seaford Family Medical Centre

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**Special thanks to our many individual donors and supporters
– far too many to acknowledge individually**

P.S. Our apologies to any business, organisation or person we may have inadvertently missed

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