

Christchurch Women's Refuge

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MEDIA RELEASE

Possible family violence funding cuts pose threat to child safety

A major change being proposed to the way domestic violence services are funded could mean communities find it harder to protect children from child abuse and neglect, child advocates say.

According to an article published in the New Zealand Herald on 19 March, Associate Social Development Minister Tariana Turia is pushing for the withdrawal of funding from the It's Not Ok campaign and the Advocates for Child Witnesses of Family Violence Initiative. This funding would then be reallocated to Whanau Ora initiatives.

Christchurch Women's Refuge, a specialist family violence agency which hosts the North Canterbury advocate, fully supports existing Whanau Ora initiatives but believes children's safety would best benefit by encouraging those initiatives to work alongside Child Advocates.

"An Advocate's role is very different role from that of a social worker" says Christchurch Women's Refuge Acting CEO Lyn Boyd. "The Advocate's role is to focus on prevention while service agencies often focus on intervention, when the damage has been done.

"In North Canterbury, our Advocate actively works on forming relationships across the breadth of the local community - schools, other networks or services – such as Whanau Ora – to educate the community about the complexities of family violence. Once people can understand and recognise the issue, they can begin to address it."

Christchurch Women's Refuge has hosted the North Canterbury Advocate as part of the Jigsaw national Advocates contract for five years. During that time the North Canterbury Advocate has introduced a capacity building programme to address community family violence education needs on all levels. The work of the Child Advocate has ensured that the community has been well resourced with information related to services for children and positive parenting. Expert input – such as training on the Rights of the Child and the Effects of Violence on Children, presented by the Office of The Commissioner for Children – has also been made available through the Advocate.

"Forming links within relevant sectors within the community has been vital" says Ms Boyd. "An obvious sector is schools, which have been offered assistance in policy development related to child abuse reporting procedures, and bullying.

The Advocate's work with the Karangamai Young Parents' College in North Canterbury has educated young parents on family violence and parenting, but has also provided a link to refuge services for at-risk young women. Initiatives such as Playback Theatre, with a focus on family violence as the subject material, was made available to high schools within the district and proved to be a valuable way of giving an outlet to child witnesses of family violence, as well as providing education on healthy and respectful relationships.

"Ultimately the Advocates for Children who Witness Family Violence are there to provide a voice and representation for children and young people and make children's experiences of family violence central to all conversations around the meeting table" Ms Boyd says. "New Zealand has a poor record regarding child abuse and children's rights, as a recent United Nations report reminds us. It's hard to see how reducing the voices of some of those most abused is going to improve that situation."

(Additional information follows...)

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Additional information:

- The annual cost of the Child Advocates for Child Witnesses of Family Violence Initiative is \$4.1million.
- There are 45 advocates throughout the country, hosted by local service providers. 22 advocates are Maori or Pacific.
- The roles were created in 2005 after the 2001 murders of Masterton sisters Olympia Jetson and Saliel Aplin by their mother's partner Bruce Howse. An inquiry into the murders showed there was a need to bring social services together and communicate better so that at-risk children wouldn't slip through the cracks.
- Advocates aim to make sure children are safe in any family where domestic violence is reported.
- Part of their role is to connect a wide range of community organisations and services to protect children and provide education about what family violence is and how to prevent it.

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