Staff crisis at the heart of child protection problems
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Time and again attention has been drawn to faults with Australia's child protection systems.

Most recently these include the Victorian Ombudsman investigations and the inquiry into child protection in the Northern Territory. Reports of unfilled positions, unmanageable workloads, unsupported and stressed staff, and high "churn" rates of frontline workers regularly feature in the media.

This does not give confidence that the systems in place to protect children are functional. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported that 207,462 children were subject to child protection notifications between July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009. Of these reports, 32,641 were substantiated. At the same time 35,409 young Australians were on care and protection orders and 34,069 were living in out-of-home care.

This national concern is in need of a nationwide response, particularly in light of state and territory government shortcomings. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has started this process with its "National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020". This process aims to improve collaboration between federal, state and territory governments and the non-government sector to protect Australian children.

But the national framework does not do enough to tackle critical workforce concerns. Policies to improve protection for children cannot be implemented properly without the staff on the ground, and this is the sector's major problem.

Governments, community sector organisations and commentators agree that child protection workers have one of the most difficult jobs imaginable.

Why then has COAG overlooked improving preparation, support and recognition for staff?

There are limited options to study youth work in Australian universities with only a handful of degree programs on offer. This means in most states and territories there are no undergraduate programs educating a local youth-work workforce. Just this year, for example, the University of Sydney has stopped offering a youth work course. The introduction of the student-demand driven higher education system in 2012 is unlikely to help produce more graduates because the educational offerings are simply not available. Is it any wonder then that child protection agencies have to look overseas to recruit workers?

Since July 1, to be a health practitioner in Australia, such as a nurse, dentist or psychologist, requires accreditation and registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. AHPRA recognises university qualifications and sets codes of professional practice and ongoing professional development expectations. Why is no comparative legislative arrangement in place for youth workers in Australia?

AHPRA also investigates complaints about registered health practitioners, who along with employers and education providers are required by law to report unprofessional conduct. A similar national mechanism does not exist for child protection, which could go a long way towards improving management arrangements and ethical standards. It appears that in Victoria at the moment the only serious option for those who have a concern relating to the performance of child protection is to go to the Ombudsman or the media.

The Victorian Department of Human Services is interviewing people who resigned from working in child protection to find out why they left and invite them to return. A culture of censuring and censoring child protection staff, however, seriously compromises this exercise.
The Victorian Government's Vulnerable Youth Framework identified youth sector workforce development as one of five key focus areas. However, similar to COAG's national framework, there is no mention of professionalisation of the workforce, improving pay and conditions, or tackling health, safety, supervision and support for frontline staff.

The legislation and investment needed to achieve such outcomes does not even get a look in.

If all levels of Australian government are serious about protecting vulnerable young people then it is time for a national strategy that draws on the example set by AHPRA and that will produce the quality services and capable people desperately needed.

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