

We feel that one of the roles of the voluntary organizations is as an innovator and explorer into standards and methods ... We are sick of treating the results of social problems; it would be so much more sensible and effective if we could tackle directly the causes themselves.

Anne Clemens, VSPCC President, 1971¹



Times of Change: 1960–1973

Post-war Australia was desperate to get back to the normality of life before the war. With increased affluence and access to the motor car, the suburban dream was becoming a reality for many Victorians. But for others, housing conditions, while an improvement from the slum conditions of the 1930s, remained an issue. In an effort to provide a long-term solution to post-war housing shortages, the first high-rise public housing buildings were constructed in the 1960s.²

The housing shortage was not the only problem the government was trying to overcome during the post-war years. The year 1960 saw the introduction of the *Social Welfare Act* by the Victorian parliament and the subsequent creation of the Social Welfare Branch within the Chief Secretary's Department.³ This Act, which was in operation until 1970, was a turning point in the creation of the modern child welfare system.⁴ It began to professionalise welfare services previously handled by unqualified administrative officers. Social workers were employed to work with families, as well as on planning, policy and program development in the department.⁵ It was clear there was a definite shift in government thinking towards exploring long-term preventative measures, not just short-term fixes to alleviate problems.⁶

Just as the state government began professionalising its social welfare practice, so too did the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (VSPCC). The 1960s marked the end of inspectors and the introduction of social workers. The 1960s also saw some of the highest numbers of children in out-of-home care. There were 63 government-approved homes in Victoria by 1962, being run by voluntary and charity organisations.⁷ Despite the fact that, by 1963, the Society would add its name to this list, the removal of children from families remained a last resort.

A home of their own

The year 1962 was a momentous one for the VSPCC as it finally acquired a permanent home. After years of renting and moving around the city centre, the Society was at last able to purchase its own property. An old house at 14–16 Gertrude Street in Fitzroy was acquired through fundraising,



TOP

From 1962 the Society operated from a property at 14-16 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy (far right).

BOTTOM

Robin House, an emergency accommodation home for children, was opened in part of the Society's Fitzroy office in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, in 1963.

including a £5,000 donation from the Hospitals and Charities Commission towards the cost of renovating the building.⁸

The annual report of 1961–62 recorded this significant achievement as ‘probably the most exciting thing that has happened to the Society since its formation in 1896’.⁹ Di Vaughan, later Di O’Neil, who joined the Society in 1971 as a professional social worker, has strong memories of the new location:

The office was a little tiny place in the middle of Gertrude Street. In those days Gertrude Street was a pretty rough street ... in the sense of a lot of prostitution, a lot of drinking.¹⁰

The new office in Fitzroy included a hostel for temporary accommodation for up to twelve children as well as an office for the Society’s staff and volunteers. This new hostel was:

... not intended to be merely an addition to the many fine institutional Homes in and around Melbourne, which are already providing long-term or permanent care for children ... SPCC officers and social workers generally are often faced with the problem of finding immediate, temporary care for children ... The SPCC Home is designed to meet, at least in some measure, the need for this emergency care.¹¹

The hostel part of the new premises was called Robin House, and was officially opened on 27 March 1963 by the Hon. Arthur Rylah MLA, Chief Secretary of Victoria. It was not long before the Society found itself inundated with children needing temporary accommodation:

The demand ... at the Hostel for children in need has been so great that our resources ... have been fully extended ... it is becoming obvious to the Committee that we are only touching the fringes of this work.¹²

An analysis of the reasons children ended up at Robin House showed that, in the majority of cases, children needed the emergency accommodation because of the hospitalisation of a parent. By having emergency accommodation available for the short period it was needed, it was hoped to maintain families and prevent children entering state care.¹³ While children were referred to the hostel for other reasons – including unsuitable home environments, behavioural problems, or the desertion or mental instability of parents – overwhelmingly, the support families needed was the kind usually provided by the extended family and community network. The Society also began receiving a high level of requests from working mothers needing assistance caring for their children after 5pm, reflecting the increasing number of women entering the workforce and the lack of child care options available.¹⁴

Professionalisation

The year 1963 was also significant for the Society, as it marked the beginning of the end of an era. In 1963, both long-time inspectors Robert Burke and Dorothy Rye retired. Between the two of them, they had clocked up an impressive 49 years as inspectors for the Society.¹⁵ Their retirement signaled the end of almost 70 years of inspectors providing child protection. The expense of setting up Robin House, including the salaries of the new hostel staff, meant that the Society could no longer afford to pay the wages of both inspectors and the secretary. These roles were combined into one with the appointment of Peter Hannan in 1964, but increasingly the daily running of the Society fell to the president.

Anne Clemens became president in 1964. Having joined the committee in 1961, she followed in the footsteps of her mother, Emily Turnbull, who was president from 1937 to 1948. Clemens came to the role with a strong sense of obligation and drive. Born to a privileged family in Melbourne, she spent time in Europe attending schools in London and Paris, and lived in India during the time of British rule and in Cyprus as a new bride. Clemens returned to Melbourne in 1960 and soon joined the Society.¹⁶ Since its foundation in 1896, the VSPCC executive committee was made up of women whose privileged upbringing came with the expectation of giving back to the community. When interviewed in 1996, Anne Clemens recalled:

When I left school you weren't allowed to take a job because you were taking the bread out of somebody's mouth. But you were expected to work jolly hard at all these various charities ... When I came back to Australia in 1960 I was approached by Mrs Seymour who just told me 'You've got to fill your mother's shoes you know. She was on the Committee so you've got to come on.'¹⁷

Anne Clemens's forthright style and determined attitude helped raise funds and awareness for the Society throughout her 16-year presidency. She used her wealth and influence to organise successful fundraisers and events through the Society's committee, including hosting the popular annual Derby Eve Ball at her Toorak home, *Dunraven*. Di O'Neil recalls Anne Clemens with clarity:

Anne was a person of very good intention, a passionate person, but a very rich person who had a different way of doing their business. I remember going to see the Director of Social Welfare with her one day about something she was annoyed about ... and we walked into his office ... when we went on official business she used to wear a massive fur coat ... She sort of walked up to him and sort of tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hey, young boy, listen to what I've got to say!" That was her style.¹⁸



Peg Sitlington became the society's first welfare officer in 1965 and remained in the role for eighteen years.

A case of abandonment

In 1960, a desperate grandfather sought the Society's help with his three young grandchildren, all under five years old. He had been caring for them for the past two weeks, after their mother left her whereabouts unknown. The children's father left the family two years ago. The grandfather was unable to care for the children due to poor health and went to the Society for assistance. The Society took the children to the Children's Court with the recommendation that they be admitted into care of the state.

Annual Report 1960-1961

While Clemens represented the traditional approach to child welfare and charity, she did so at a time when society was shifting away from such methods. The child protection movement in Victoria was becoming more professionalised, looking for professionally trained social workers and welfare officers over the inspectors and volunteer child rescuers of the past. Without the inspectors, the Society worked closely with female police officers, who were also authorised to remove children if they were considered to be in danger under the prescribed terms of the *Social Welfare Act 1960*.

In 1965, the very first welfare officer was employed by the Society. Peg Sitlington was born Peg Harrison-Owen in 1916, and grew up in Toorak. During World War II she enlisted, along with her sister, in the Australian Women's Army Service, rising to the rank of Captain. By the time she started working at the Society as its first welfare officer, Sitlington was almost fifty years old. She had initially applied as a volunteer for the Society, but with qualifications as a mothercraft nurse, Anne Clemens employed her as a welfare officer. Her maturity combined with her army background meant that she had a commanding and confident presence.

Peg Sitlington launched herself into the role of welfare officer with incredible energy and dedication. For the next 18 years she worked tirelessly, first and foremost caring for children in need, and secondly promoting the activities of the Society by talking to numerous groups and inspiring countless individuals to get involved and help out. Her appointment signaled a change in the practice of the Society. Sitlington did everything she could to reconcile parents and children and to avoid calling on the authorities to remove children from their families. Her gentle and compassionate approach was to try to help families see the Society as a source of support and help, rather than an authoritarian figurehead out to break families apart. If ever there was an occasion to remove children, Sitlington or the Society could call on the women police, who had the authority to remove children and taken them into care.

While Peg Sitlington had a great reluctance to initiate the removal children, she always worked with the best interests of the child at heart:

I would never, never never never remove a child! In all my years ... in my visiting homes I didn't ever remove a child without the mother ... I would take the mother and the rest of the children all piled into the car and would either go to the hospital – it was usually a hospital case ... or Robin House. There is no way on earth I could have worked any other way ... the child needed help and the family needed help itself.¹⁹

Battered baby syndrome

It was clear from the very first year of operation that there was a very great need for the type of temporary accommodation provided by Robin House. It was also clear that Robin House alone was not going to solve the problem. While operating the accommodation hostel added a considerable

increase to the Society's running costs, each child costing almost £10 a week to care for, it also channeled the Society's energies in a changed direction. The focus on temporary care and family assistance that emerged in the early 1960s contrasted with the more traditional home inspections and investigations of earlier eras.

Just as the Society was finding its feet with its new role as a temporary accommodation provider and with the introduction of its new welfare officer, child welfare, too, was undergoing a transformation. This saw a shift away from the more traditional approach to child welfare, with its moralistic overtones and close ties to law enforcement, to a new psycho-social model, which tried to respond to the individual factors present in each family that placed children at risk.

The emergence of what was known as 'battered baby syndrome' in the 1960s was a major turning point in the history of child protection. In the 1966 annual report, the Society described US medical research that documented previously undetected fractures in young infants, the result of non-accidental injuries inflicted by their parents. Two influential research papers were also published that year in Victoria; one documenting developmental delays in neglected infants admitted to state care in Victoria, and the other reporting the incidence of non-accidental physical injuries of young children admitted to the Royal Children's Hospital.²⁰ Battered baby syndrome quickly captured the imagination of the general public, which was understandably horrified and concerned. The following year, for the first time the Society included some distressing photographs in its annual report, including welts on a young child's buttocks that had been caused by beating.²¹

President Anne Clemens, while glad to see the spotlight finally on this confronting aspect of infant abuse, felt frustrated that it had taken so long. When interviewed in 1996, she recalled that the Society had a terrible time trying to get medical professionals to acknowledge the cases of child abuse the Society was dealing with, including initial resistance from some doctors at the Royal Children's Hospital.²² When in 1962 the Society finally found a supportive doctor, Anne Clemens was very excited. 'Max was marvellous', she recalled, 'he even went to the Children's Hospital with me on one occasion with a case when we argued against the hierarchy about it'.²³

Dr Max Shavitsky walked into the Fitzroy office of the Society one day in 1962 and offered his services in an honorary capacity. In an interview in 1997, he reflected on the ways in which working with the Society changed his views on child abuse. Before encountering the Society, he concedes his stance on child abuse was 'hard-hearted', but he acknowledged:

... I came to see the environment and the social issues that were involved in each individual case. It was rarely black and white.²⁴

The public attention given to battered baby syndrome was also reflected in an increase in physical abuse cases handled by the Society. From 1966 to 1970, 13 per cent of cases referred to the Society involved physical abuse, but from 1970 to 1975 this figure doubled.²⁵



Anne Clemens was president of the Society for sixteen years from 1964. She followed in the footsteps of her mother, Emily Turnbull, who was president from 1937 to 1948.

Courtesy of Charlotte Clemens

Working together

The Society received several reports from a neighbour that a five year old boy was being abused by his landlady while his father was away at work. But every time the Society visited, there was no signs of abuse or neglect, although it was the opinion of the visiting officer that the child was indeed suffering. The local policewoman had also investigated the case and while she was convinced the child was being abused, was also unable to prove any abuse was occurring. The Society tried to convince the father to move to a different boarding house, but he resisted. Unwilling to give up, the Society contacted the boy's school and asked that the teacher report any sign of abusive treatment. Finally, with evidence from the boy's teacher, the local policewoman and the Society's officers, a case was made for the Children's Court and the landlady admitted to having physically abused the boy. She was found guilty and sent to gaol and the boy was admitted to the care of the Social Welfare Department.

Annual Report 1966-1967

In response to public outcry and pressure from organisations including the VSPCC, the Victorian Government set up a Committee of Investigation into Allegations of Neglect and Maltreatment of Young Children. The Society was quite critical of this committee, which was made up of the director-general of social welfare, the deputy commissioner of police and the pediatric consultant for the Health Department, as it felt that no public servants at all should be part of the committee. Nevertheless, the Society made a number of recommendations to the committee, specifically regarding the improvement of preventative measures.²⁶

The report that was released the following year, however, in 1968, was a great disappointment to the Society, which felt that the committee had missed an important opportunity to make some significant recommendations to the government. The fact that this report neglected to recommend mandatory reporting of suspected cases of child abuse, was particularly distressing for the Society. 'Unless it is made mandatory for a doctor to report suspect cases of maltreatment of children', the VSPCC warned, 'there is little likelihood of doctors making a report'.²⁷ The Society continued to fight for this over the next 25 years. Victoria introduced mandatory reporting for physical and sexual abuse of children in 1993.²⁸

The Society was increasingly keen to work with families by helping children considered to be 'at risk' as early as possible, in order to prevent, wherever possible, the breakdown of family units. Its frustration at the committee's lack of necessary recommendations for change was clearly reflected in the annual report for that year. The executive committee cautioned that if mandatory reporting was introduced: 'investigations could be made before a child is returned home, to perhaps suffer even greater hardship'.²⁹

The Society still faced an uphill battle to raise enough funds to cover its increasing activities. Child abuse was receiving greater public attention and the Society found itself inundated with work. In 1969, president Anne Clemens disclosed this dire situation, reporting:

We have no subsidy of any sort, our finances are so precarious that we are unable to provide anything in the nature of a full service.³⁰

This meant that, for many Victorian families, their only option was to contact the police, the only other group with the authority to respond to and act upon allegations of child abuse and neglect.

Geelong Branch

From the very early days of its establishment, the Society recognised the importance of extending its reach beyond the confines of metropolitan Melbourne. In 1897, just one year after the formation of the Society in Melbourne, a Geelong branch of the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty and Neglect of Children was established. W.H. Hudson was appointed inspector and the annual report for that year reported that the branch 'has worked with very satisfactory results, the reports of the local Inspector showing a distinct improvement in many families under his supervision'.³¹ There were high hopes that this would be the first of many regional branches across the state. The Society's secretary, William Church, visited Castlemaine and Bendigo in 1898 to assess the extent of local support in these areas. However, when Hudson resigned in 1900, the Geelong branch ceased operation and the VSPCC's hopes for further regional expansion were shelved for the time being.³²

In 1927 and again in 1939 the question of establishing regional branches of the Society, particularly in popular centres such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong, was raised again. But both times the idea failed. In 1939 the reason given was that the establishment of a regional branch 'would be a risky experiment because of the possible lack of sustained interest'.³³

But finally, by 1971, it was not only clear that there was a pressing need for the services the Society could offer the people of Geelong, but that there was indeed sustained interest in tackling child abuse and neglect. President Anne Clemens approached social worker Betty Graham-Higgs and asked if she would be interested in establishing a Children's Protection Society branch in Geelong.³⁴ Graham-Higgs agreed, and once again the Society had a Geelong operation.

In March 1971, at a luncheon organised by Mrs Colman, the Geelong Regional Committee was formed. The committee was established to assist the work of Betty and welfare officer Mrs Cornford. In order to generate the funds necessary to support the work of the regional CPS branch, the committee operated an opportunity shop specialising in children's wear.

Betty Graham-Higgs became team leader of the Geelong branch from 1971 to 1979. Within the first 18 months of operation, 85 cases of suspected child abuse and neglect were handled by the Geelong branch.³⁵ By 1975 this number had grown to 284 children assisted by the Society.³⁶ It was Graham-Higgs' vision and philosophy of practice that really established the Geelong branch as a centre of innovation. She established the Family Aide program, which involved volunteer parents – with training from the Society – working alongside at-risk families to provide day-to-day support, advice and assistance about parenting and being a family. This program was soon successfully adopted across the Society and later within the Department of Social Welfare.

The Geelong community was incredibly supportive of the work the Society was doing. Betty Graham-Higgs



Lindsay Field House at 21 Aberdeen Street, Geelong, was home to the Geelong branch from 1980 until 1985. It was named after the Lindsay Field Trust, which donated most of the money to purchase the property.

established strong working relationships with local professionals including nurses, paediatricians, police and gynaecologists. Under her leadership, a professional advisory group was developed to advise the CPS team when intervention with families was necessary. This group included paediatricians, psychiatrists, social welfare officers and solicitors.

When Betty stepped down in 1979, Phillip Swain took over as team leader. He had worked alongside Betty Graham-Higgs for a number of years while he was with the Barwon Social Welfare Department, so he was well aware of the work being done by CPS in Geelong. As well as continuing the work she had established, Swain introduced an after-hours phone service. A strictly, 'emergencies only' service, the benefit of CPS running an after-hours phone line, meant that the community could call CPS rather than the police – which was the only other option. He recalls:

This was a bit of an experiment, as it did expose us (mostly me) to after hours and weekend contacts, and the potential for intrusion into personal life that this entailed ... but ... I found that there were few callers who abused this opportunity. ... most of those who called – and there were a few, though not anywhere near every night – were in real need of advice/assistance and did not want to call the Police.³⁷

By the time Phillip Swain was team leader, the Geelong CPS branch had managed to raise enough funds and support to purchase a house for the exclusive use of the Society. Lindsay Field House at 21 Aberdeen Street officially opened in 1980. Swain remained team leader until 1984 when it became clear that the future of CPS was uncertain after the release of the Carney Review. Lindsay Field House was sold in 1985 and the Geelong branch, as well as the Regional Committee, ceased operations in 1986, after 15 years of operation.

Beyond Melbourne

The Society knew first-hand some of the very real difficulties facing Victorian children and families. By 1968, Robin House had been operating for six years and had provided refuge for 571 children.³⁸ During this time the Society had increasingly felt the need to extend its services beyond the metropolitan region. From almost the very beginning of the VSPCC, the Society had been well aware of the demand for its specialised services in all areas of the state. The needs of children were not geographically localised. The Society had extended its reach in the past to Geelong, the success of this venture only thwarted by lack of financial support.

By the late 1960s, the Society again wanted to move beyond the confines of metropolitan Melbourne. It had received requests from several areas in country Victoria asking for support and services for children to be set up. The need for the services provided by the VSPCC in regional areas was all too clear. However, with finances already stretched through the establishment of Robin House and the employment of professional staff, the Society could only consider areas where financial and community support could be provided to assist in its work.

In 1968 the citizens of the Latrobe Valley raised the necessary funds to provide the Society with the financial support it needed to open Swan House, a second emergency accommodation hostel for children in need, in Traralgon. The first child was admitted on 15 October 1968, and by June 1969, 40 children had been cared for by Matron Anne Johnson and her Swan House staff.³⁹

At the time Swan House was accepting its first child resident, in Ballarat a small regional branch of the Society was formed under the chairpersonship of Mrs Torney. While the Ballarat Regional Committee did not have the funds to establish a temporary care home immediately, despite recognising ‘an urgent need’, it did appoint a welfare officer to work with children in the Ballarat region in the same way that Peg Sitlington worked with children in Melbourne.⁴⁰

By the end of the 1969 financial year, as well as assisting in the establishment of services in the two regional areas of Gippsland and Ballarat, the Society had assisted 1,291 children, and 148 children had passed through its temporary homes.⁴¹

Changing attitudes to welfare

As the new decade dawned, many of the changing attitudes and concerns regarding child abuse were consolidated in the revised *Social Welfare Act 1970*. This replaced the *Social Welfare Act 1960* and brought with it the appointment of the first Minister for Social Welfare and the establishment of the Social Welfare Department.⁴² In 1971, 25-year-old social work graduate Di Vaughan (later O’Neil) was employed by the Society, as the employment of a social worker was one of the conditions of government financial support to the Society. Reflecting on her feelings as a young social worker starting at the society, she said:



Swan House, the Society’s emergency accommodation hostel in Traralgon, opened in 1968.

A migrant family

As Australian society was becoming more multicultural, the Society found itself working with more families from diverse cultural backgrounds. In 1970 the Society was called to investigate a Turkish family with four children. A neighbour had reported that the four children, aged 9, 7, 3 and 18 months were home alone all day while the parents were at work. When the Society made contact with the family, it discovered that the father was in hospital and the mother needed to work in order for the family to pay their rent. The mother had the two eldest children looking after the younger children while she was at work. This situation lasted for two weeks until the father returned to work. The eldest children went back to school and the mother remained at home caring for the younger children. The Society's welfare officer was able to develop a friendly relationship with the family and provide warm clothing for the children. The family introduced the Society's welfare officer to another Turkish family with two deaf children, who needed assistance but did not know where to go. In 1972, the Society employed its first social worker specifically to work with migrant families.

Annual Report 1970-1971

I was certainly making it up. I don't know that I felt a pioneer, I probably would have if I was a bit older, I just went in to do the job basically ... I think because I was young I didn't feel necessarily daunted by it, and I was prepared to give it a go.⁴³

A typical day for the Society's social worker could involve visiting up to four different families in different areas of Melbourne, anywhere from Dandenong to Coburg. Due to the far-reaching nature of the work, the Society purchased a car, after years of organising car pools to drive the inspectors and welfare officers around.

For the first year, Di O'Neil and Peg Sitlington worked closely together as social worker and welfare officer, alongside local female police officers. O'Neil recalls, 'It wasn't like a mother-daughter relationship but there was an element of that in there. I knew what she was doing and she knew what I was doing all the time'.⁴⁴ O'Neil's philosophy, quickly shaped by her work with the Society and the families she met, was one of hope, reflecting the changing practice of child protection:

I built my practice around hope ... when I met somebody I was looking as much for what was working as what wasn't working, and thinking how that could be extended. I think the inspector role before was to go out, have one look, and disappear, whereas if there's going to be hope you might have to go a couple of times, you might have to build a bit more around people. So I think I was doing much more of a social work intervention than just checking to see how things were.⁴⁵

In her first report for the Society in 1971, Di O'Neil articulated this shift in attitude and practice, by stating that, of the families the Society was working with, 'their problems can't be solved by telling them the answers'.⁴⁶

That same year saw the establishment of the Society's activities in Geelong. In March 1971, at a luncheon at the home of Mrs Colman, the Geelong Regional Committee was formed with Robin Gubbins as president. To fund its activities, the committee decided to open and staff an opportunity shop specialising in children's wear. The primary aim of the committee was to assist the work of newly appointed social worker Betty Graham-Higgs and the Society's work in the Geelong and Barwon region. Welfare officer Mrs Cornford was also appointed to assist with the work in the region. During the first 18 months of operation, there were 85 cases in Geelong involving 220 children.⁴⁷

By 1972 Di O'Neil and Peg Sitlington found themselves part of a much wider team of support workers. Mrs Lustig joined the Society as a social worker employed specifically to work with migrant families. Betty Graham-Higgs and Mrs Cornford were the social worker and welfare officer for the Society's Geelong branch, and Sister Betty Johnson and Mrs Armstrong both welfare officers for the Ballarat arm of the Society.⁴⁸ These appointments were made possible through the significant

fundraising efforts of the Society and financial support from the William Buckland Fund and the Myer Foundation.⁴⁹

In her report for 1972, social worker Di O'Neil wrote about how the services being offered in Melbourne were changing:

Investigating alleged child neglect and ill-treatment is still the main function of the agency, but once neglect and ill-treatment have been detected we are able to offer these children and their families more professional counselling services.⁵⁰

The report went on to argue that a multifaceted approach to child welfare, involving working with the emotional, psychiatric and economic issues affecting families, could help to keep families together.

The Society was keen to provide Victorian children and families with the best treatment and services according to their needs. In her president's report in 1972, Anne Clemens wrote that voluntary organisations, like the Society:

... should be constantly reassessing their role; being more flexible than statutory bodies, they should initiate new services and try to plug holes where services do not reach.⁵¹

What's in a name?

In 1971 the Society became part of a research project examining the Children's Courts and the problems associated with the institutionalisation of children as part of a wider study being undertaken by the Criminology Department at the University of Melbourne.⁵² Around the same time the Society began to support social work students from the University of Melbourne, as part of the field training aspect of their course work.⁵³

That same year the Society changed its name from the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to the Children's Protection Society. It was a simple, but significant, difference. Almost from the moment of her arrival at the Society, Di O'Neil pushed for this name change. The old name was an immediate barrier when dealing with families, who interpreted the visit as a 'judgment on their ability to cope'.⁵⁴ Earlier inspectors, including Dorothy Rye, experienced hostility when introducing themselves and the Society. In a newspaper interview Rye said every time she would introduce herself as being from the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 'it is usually met with anger. I don't blame them ... I'd feel the same myself!'⁵⁵

The very first annual report after the name change reflected the positive difference it was having for the Society:



The Society's first social worker, Di O'Neil, who was employed in 1971.

Herald, 22 May 1973, courtesy of Di O'Neil

Learning to cope

A deserted wife with two young daughters, Wendy aged twenty-one months and Debbie aged three months, referred herself to the Society when she found her frustrations had led her to hit Wendy's head against the wall. The mother's own childhood had not been a happy one and she had many dependency needs that left her vulnerable to exploitation by would-be friends. She was constantly being disappointed by her attempts to form trustworthy personal relationships. Along with a stressful economic situation, the mother was left with a constant feeling of frustration, and when her children did not react as she wanted them to, she felt she was being rejected by them. At these times the children were at risk of being physically hurt and it was important that the Society's social worker could be available to visit at short notice.

The mother was highly motivated to overcome her difficulties and to learn to cope with the children, whom she did love. Gradually this mother was learning to cope with her problems and provide more adequately for her children's needs.

Annual Report 1971-1972

Already we are seeing the benefit ... Our client group is much less threatened with this new title and much more ready to seek our assistance.⁵⁶

The development of the regional branches of the Society was well underway by the early 1970s. The need for temporary emergency care in Gippsland was clear and by 1971 the Gippsland Regional Committee had made progress towards establishing a permanent home in Sale. Through a combination of fundraising, donations and government grants, a new purpose-built home was established and opened by the new Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Ian Smith, in 1972.

Work in Geelong was increasing too, and by 1972 the Geelong Regional Committee was sharing office space with the Barwon Regional Social Welfare Department.⁵⁷ Philip Swain was employed with the Barwon Regional Social Welfare Department in the late 1970s and worked closely with CPS team leader Betty Graham-Higgs. He remembers this co-location was:

... convenient in some ways but hardly ideal, as it added to public confusion as to whether CPS was really part of the SWD [Social Welfare Department] – though it did probably mean greater interaction and understanding between CPS and SWD staff.⁵⁸

It was clear that in the near future, the CPS Geelong branch would need its own space.

By 1972 there was some financial recognition of the work the Society was doing in the form of a government grant of \$10 per week for each child residing at either Swan House or Robin House. This was a start, but as Anne Clemens pointed out in her president's report for 1972, the Society was operating reception centres that helped children who would otherwise end up in a government-funded place like Allambie. The new Minister for Social Work estimated the cost of accommodating a child at Allambie at \$54 per week, so the grant of \$10 to the Society, while helpful, did not nearly cover the costs of caring for these children.⁵⁹

On top of this, it was becoming apparent that there were not enough places in the Society's existing emergency accommodation houses. By 1972, both Robin House and Swan House were virtually at capacity for the entire year. Robin House had been home to 90 children for an average of three to six weeks per year and Swan House had seen 157 children pass through its doors.⁶⁰ Change was needed. The Society received a grant from the Alys Key Trust to establish a nursery in Heidelberg to help ease some of this burden. Considerable time was also spent developing a pilot Temporary Emergency Foster Care project, coordinating 25 families in the eastern suburbs to temporarily care for children in need.⁶¹

But by 1973 the Society found itself in crisis. With the expansion of regional services and the demand for emergency accommodation growing, it became all too obvious that the current method of operation from a centralised base in Fitzroy and with government subsidies that did not cover the real cost of its services, was not sustainable. The Society needed localised support and operation.

If the services were closely incorporated into the local community, it would be much easier to build trust, confidence and coping skills within families. In her report for 1973, president Anne Clemens advised:

The Children's Protection Society has reached a crisis point where it is necessary to review and assess our role in the community ... No longer can we successfully operate from a centralized base. There is now a crying need for welfare agencies to operate more closely to the local regions.⁶²

On top of this, the increased professionalisation of the Society meant that the blurred boundaries between roles – such as the combined secretary/caseworker or CEO/president/fundraiser – which were typical under Anne Clemens' leadership, were no longer sustainable. With increased diversification and regional activity, and a desperate need for more government-assisted funding, many within the Society felt the need to review and reassess its role. Di O'Neil said in 1973 that all these transformations meant the Society had changed from that of a voluntary charity to 'a complicated welfare industry'.⁶³ She, and others, began to call for the appointment of a director – a paid employee with management experience, who could coordinate the many, growing responsibilities of the Society.⁶⁴

By 1973, the Children's Protection Society was an organisation on the edge. It was no longer the voluntary charity its founders had established, but a thriving, yet financially unsustainable agency providing a valuable and unique service to vulnerable children and families in Victoria. The Society worked with local female police officers in the apprehension of children when necessary, but was reliant on self-raised funds, government grants and philanthropic donations to care for them. It was clear that something would have to give, and soon.



In the early 1970s the Society became involved in a research project examining the Children's Courts and conducted by criminology researchers at the University of Melbourne.