

ABC NEWS

Bendigo foster parents support new Victorian Aboriginal Guardianship program

ABC Central Victoria By Larissa Romensky

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PHOTO: Suzie Oogjes (left) with her partner Yorta Yorta man Simon Penrose (right) with their children. (ABC Central Victoria: Larissa Romensky)

One couple share their experience of the dramatic new child protection approach, being trialled in Bendigo, known as Section 18 or Aboriginal Guardianship.

Yorta Yorta man Simon Penrose said it was important Aboriginal foster children have access to culture.

"It's part of their development and wellbeing," he said.

"It's hard to teach Aboriginal culture and what it is if you're not a part of that society."

Mr Penrose and his partner Suzie Oogjes have been foster parents for just over two years but, for the past six months, the couple have been dealing with a local Aboriginal organisation under the new Section 18 Rural Pilot or Aboriginal Guardianship program — the first of its kind in rural Australia.

The new trial approach to Aboriginal children in care tests whether Aboriginal groups should have a greater level of involvement with and responsibility over those children.

Previously all children in care worked solely with the State Government through the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

The Bendigo couple describe the difference in approach as "massive" and said one of the advantages in working with Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative (BDAC) was the increased level of support by Aboriginal staff members.

"It's that sense of cultural responsibility that as an Aboriginal person you take on that role," Mr Penrose said.

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He said with Aboriginal staff members already involved in their community there was an increased "care factor" resulting in the delivery of a more personalised service.

"It's a sense of responsibility and that [staff] have to work in that space to support reunification for their family, that they're close with," Mr Penrose said.

"In Aboriginal culture, the way I've been brought up, and the way that I understand my own culture is that we're all family and it doesn't matter who you are and how long-distance related you are or even if you're not related.

"They're all my brothers and sisters, Uncles and Aunties, I'm just fulfilling my cultural duty as an Aboriginal person."

While there are non-Aboriginal foster parents in the program they have all received cultural training and work closely with case managers.

Importance of culture in keeping connected



PHOTO: Father and foster parent Simon Penrose works as a Koorie Engagement Support Officer in Bendigo. (ABC Central Victoria: Larissa Romensky)

The over representation of Aboriginal children in care means the Bendigo couple have chosen to foster only Aboriginal children.

The number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care far exceeds the number of non-Aboriginal children.

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies figures, the national rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care was 10 times the rate for non-Aboriginal children.

In Victoria alone the number of children in Victoria's child protection system had risen by 70 per cent last year in three years.

This over representation of Aboriginal children was the reason a new approach was called for by Aboriginal leaders.

"It's around trying to keep our kids in our community and in the care of our own people," Rayleen Harradine, chief executive of BDAC, said.

The pilot project, which has been running for the past 14 months, saw the organisation oversee the guardianship of Aboriginal children at home and in care while supported by DHHS.

"It's about an Aboriginal organisation having a range of services across the organisation to be able to have options for our children and our community," Ms Harradine said.

"We provide lots of services and link them in with our internal programs that we have within our organisation but also externally, and we work with the families to say what's going to work best for them and how we can be there for them ultimately."

According to Ms Harradine, alongside a safe home environment, cultural wellbeing was central to belonging.

"At the end of the day it's about feeling connected and that's the vital thing that we have as an Aboriginal society or people; it's around feeling connected with your mob and also you know the extended family."

Goodbyes are hard



PHOTO: When Susie Oogjes is not being a parent or foster parent she works as an adult support worker. (ABC Central Victoria: Larissa Romensky)

Between them Simon Penrose and Suzie Oogjes have four children between the ages of two and 11, but they had always wanted to become foster parents.

They said team work and communication were the keys to taking on more children.

After initially signing up for respite work they eventually fostered an infant for the first two years of his life.

But when he left two weeks ago to go back home to his mother the couple missed him.

"It was incredibly, incredibly hard emotionally, he was only two months younger than our youngest boy, so it was like we had twins for that time," Ms Oogjes said.

"He's as much a part of our family as any other of our children," Mr Penrose said.

"It kinda breaks your heart when they do go home because you have them for such a long time, but it's bound to happen."

However, through the program the couple were able to form a "good relationship" with the mother and kept in regular contact.

"We're having him for a play date tomorrow," Ms Oogjes said.

"We've been told by Mum we'll always be Aunty and Uncle."

Topics: community-and-society, family-and-children, children, indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, aboriginal, bendigo-3550