

New program for kids in care but others cut

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Sunday Mail

Sunday 17th January 2021

393 words

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HUNDREDS of young children in state care could be returned to their parents through an \$18m program to run over the next seven years.

It is the latest initiative announced by the State Government to reduce the number of children stuck in care.

But other programs are being scrapped or face funding cuts, and welfare groups and children's advocates argue not enough money is allocated to intervening early before families become tied up in the system.

There are almost 4500 children living in state care and the number has been steadily rising. Last financial year, children were reunited with their parents in 208 cases.

The latest program will work with parents of up to 314 children, aged six or younger, who may be able to regain custody by taking part in regular activities over 18 months.

Uniting Communities will run the Newpin program, which is jointly funded by state and federal governments through social impact bonds.

The organisation must reunite 46 per cent of the children involved to receive its full funding and will be eligible for extra payments if it exceeds that target.

Child Protection Department analysis shows existing programs worked with at least 6900 children, 2800 families and another 3600 individuals last financial year.

Overall, the State Government says it has allocated \$50m to initiatives to keep families together, including three new programs announced in the past month.

But elsewhere, there have been defunding, outsourcing and restructuring.

This includes the Infant Therapeutic Reunification Program, which worked with neglected babies and toddlers but lost funding in August.

The public sector union has raised concerns "realignment" in the department has meant the loss of specialist teams working on reuniting families, supporting Aboriginal families and finding Aboriginal carers.

Human Services Minister Michelle Lensink said the government was "redesigning the way we support vulnerable families and children, using evidence to prioritise those families who need help most".

But Opposition child protection spokeswoman Katrine Hildyard argued it was "cutting or outsourcing existing (programs) with a proven track record of success".

Children's Commissioner Helen Connolly said there were fewer "grassroots" programs and focus had "shifted to the harder, more complex and chronic situations".

Ms Connolly said that the government was "trying to put in place some better responses ... but those programs are quite new".