



OCG/01245

**FILE NOTE**

<b>Contact:</b>	<b>Visit to HACS by SPO Alii Prior and PPO Larissa Johnson</b>
<b>Agency:</b>	<b>Hunter Aboriginal Children's Services (HACS)</b>
<b>Issue:</b>	<b>Discussion of interim management arrangements</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>27 April 2011</b>
<b>CG Staff:</b>	<b>Larissa Johnson and Alli Prior</b>

**Notes:**

LJ and AP met with Karen Elphick (Chair person) and Len Anderson (Deputy Chair person). The meeting was also attended by Andrew Hunter from Community Services on behalf of Janet Vickers, who was unable to attend.

Some staff were hearing about the situation with SL for the first time and staff were visibly emotional and upset and angry. HACS has employed two security guards as there has been a concern about media interest and possible community anger.

KE advised that the Board has retained a solicitor and was receiving legal advice about how to manage employment issues with SL. SL is currently suspended with full pay and has also been offered counselling support. He is currently on bail to his parents' house. They also advised that they have become aware that this is not the first time SL has been before the courts on similar charges and has had previous WWCC that had been 'red flagged' but claimed that these were related to another person with similar spelling of first name and consequently the issue was not pursued. These charges were related to SL's employment in the NT.

They have prepared a letter that they will forward to all foster carers, biological families and other community stakeholders. They gave us a copy of the letter and it will also be made available on their website. They have made available a 1800 number for people to contact KE or LA.

KE and LA had been at HACS since 8 am that morning and were taking staff through a number of steps, including counselling and a police briefing. Staff who were on leave have been called in to attend. Specific cultural counselling was also being provided and the cultural counsellor was on the premises. Both KE and LA stressed that HACS would be operating business as usual and they have emphasised that to staff. They also advised that staff were very concerned about their jobs and the sense of uncertainty in the office. Counselling will also be offered to carers.

Initially KE and LA advised that due to financial constraints (continuing SL on full pay) they had thought that the Committee would support KE in the position of PO and this would be on an ongoing basis as it is clear that the court process could go on for a number of years. LJ and AP talked this through with them and discussed the practicalities of trying to make that work. This included talking through the implications for them personally as the position of PO is a full time position and

both are currently employed full time. Their current plan is to attend the office during lunch breaks, before and after work as required and the sustainability of this option was discussed as well. Also discussed was the importance of having strong leadership at this vulnerable time and that the Committee's role would be extremely valuable in supporting staff rather than leading the agency through this difficult time. It was acknowledged that there were no committee members with a strong OOHC skill set.

KE and LA advised that weekly managers meetings would continue and they would be on call 24/7. She also advised that the Board usually meet every 2 months but are planning to meet every month.

LA advised that if the position were to become available he would apply for it and feels he has the necessary qualifications for the position.

Adrian Elliot attended the second part of the meeting and he suggested that the three Managers continue to undertake their jobs in the absence of a PO. This was discussed and again the importance of the role and responsibilities of the PO was reiterated. All in attendance felt that given SL's regular and often lengthy absences, they would have no difficulty continuing in this capacity.

Both KE and LA were very opposed to an external person coming in – even in a “supportive” role but said they would start to think about possible ways and options of moving forward. Helen Keavers from Ben Soc has been supporting them over the past week and has offered to continue doing so. AH discussed the fact that CS were prepared to approach someone from another agency with OOHC experience who would be able to step into the role. Again both KE and LA felt that this would not be appropriate and that staff would be opposed to this and that a lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity would also be a barrier. They also felt the Board would not support this either.

LJ advised that it was clear that the Board were working hard to support the staff and the agency but that it was a critical time and there was still work to be done within the agency to strengthen their systems.

KE and LA asked if the CG staff could talk to the Committee about accreditation and the relative strengths and weaknesses of HACS as they were not too familiar with the process. LJ advised that would be possible and that the Report from the March two day onsite would be available in the near future.

LJ asked if KE was aware of her responsibilities as acting PO and with that the responsibilities of PR. An extraordinary meeting was held with Community Services on Tues 19 April and PR was transferred to KE. KE said she was aware that she had PR for some children but was clearly not aware of the specific responsibilities. It was unclear if she knew which children and young people.

At 2.45pm AP and LJ attended a Police Briefing with the HACS staff and Janet Vickers from CS also attended. The Police repeated the charge and also advised of bail conditions. SL court date has moved to 22 June and the Police (Nathan Abbot) advised that it may take years. He said there was a likelihood that further charges would be laid. He also advised that he would be speaking to staff for statements and that in all likelihood children and young people would be interviewed.

JV from CS advised HACS staff that the message from CS was one of support and there was no likelihood of them being closed down, but will continue to grow.

Following the briefing LJ and AP spoke briefly to JV. JV advised that she did not believe that there were any internal staff or Committee members that skilled and experienced enough to take on the PO role. LJ and AP advised her of HACS financial concerns. Also advised her that KE did not appear to have a clear understanding of her responsibilities around PR.

Contact Details

Karen Elphick: REDACTED

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