

ISSUE: Update re Hunter Aboriginal Children's Services Inc**SUMMARY:**

Hunter Aboriginal Children's Services (HACS) provides foster care for Aboriginal children and young people in statutory out-of-home care. Under Clause 22A of the *Children and Young Persons (Savings and Transitional) Regulation 2000*, as an agency providing care at the time the accreditation system was introduced, HACS was eligible to participate in the Quality Improvement Program (QIP) as the *Regulation* declared it an Interim Accredited Agency. Interim Accredited Agencies participating in the QIP must achieve accreditation before the legislated cut off date in July 2013. HACS has not yet reached accreditation.

The Children's Guardian has worked closely with HACS since 2003 to monitor their progress in the QIP and has introduced a *Program to meet accreditation criteria* which requires evidence to be submitted for identified areas in accordance with a timeframe, aimed at the agency achieving accreditation by 2013.

The Children's Guardian's most recent assessment against this program (March 2011) found no evidence to confirm that the then CEO/Principal Officer, Mr Steve Larkin had been subject to the same level of assessment and approval as other authorised carers. This matter was brought to the attention of HACS. Since then Mr Larkin has been charged with serious child-related offences, and has been stood down from his position.

The Children's Guardian's has made enquiries of the Commission for Children and Young People and Community Services to ascertain whether Mr Larkin had undergone a Working With Children Check (WWCC). The Children's Guardian understands that a previous WWCC identified relevant criminal records for Mr Larkin.

The Children's Guardian is continuing to assess HACS inline with the *Program to meet accreditation criteria*, and is monitoring arrangements in place for management of the agency to ensure that the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people in its care is maintained. The Children's Guardian has asked Community Services to suspend referrals of children and young people to HACS. The Children's Guardian also asked HACS to submit an action plan for moving forward, including appointment of a new CEO. The Children's Guardian understands that Mr Adrian Elliott has been formally appointed as acting CEO of HACS, effective from 10th June 2011.

On 16 June 2011, the Children's Guardian provided information to the NSW Ombudsman upon request, including the Children's Guardian's assessment feedback reports for HACS and associated correspondence for the period March 2009 – April 2011, and a list of names of children and young people with parental responsibility allocated to the Principal Officer. The Children's Guardian understands that the Ombudsman's Office will be forwarding this information to the NSW Police.