

MEDIA RELEASE

Australian Association of Social Workers Calls for National Registration of Social Workers to Protect Children and Young People following release of NSW Auditor General's report: *Oversight of the child protection system*.

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The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) calls on Australian state and territory governments to prioritise the national registration of social workers following the release of the NSW Auditor General (AG) report: *Oversight of the child protection system* in June 2024.

The Auditor General's report stated that the NSW child protection system is "inefficient, ineffective, and unsustainable". In particular, it was reported that the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) "is not meeting its legislated responsibility to ensure that families have access to services and to prevent children from being removed."

The AG report identifies a range of concerns relating to practice and system processes:

- Lack of a home-based safety and risk assessment for three-quarters of the 112, 592 children presumed to be at risk of significant harm
- Closure of cases where children were presumed to be at risk of significant harm without any follow-up services, and their outcomes unknown
- Failure to monitor and assess the mental health and well-being of children in out-of-home care
- Lack of data about the therapeutic service needs of children and families
- One quarter of children in emergency care are not directly cared for by social workers, and data are not collected on the qualifications of shift workers providing care to these children.
- High re-report rates of children who receive caseworker support

In the last ten years, there have been 12 major reviews and reports into the child protection system in NSW, with over 200 recommendations. Despite these earlier independent reviews, DCJ has not moved to a recommended early intervention model that supports families at the earliest point in the process.

The AG also released the findings of another concurrent audit: *Safeguarding the rights of Aboriginal children in the child protection system*. This report found DCJ had insufficient governance and accountability arrangements, which contributed to its failure to comply with statutory safeguards for Aboriginal children and their families.

These failures to protect children and young people underscores critical gaps in the current support and intervention systems. It demonstrates the importance of well-resourced government agencies with qualified, registered professionals working to nationally consistent standards and best practice.

Social workers are integral to the child protective services workforce and decision-making. They also work in other areas of high risk, including mental health and family violence systems. As governments focus on addressing these social and systemic issues, we must ensure the workforce is qualified and adheres to national standards of practice. The South Australian Government has legislated Australia's first Social Worker Registration Scheme to commence on 1 July 2025. Now, we need to move towards national registration for consistency across Australia.

CEO Cindy Smith highlighted the pressing need for enhanced regulatory measures to protect vulnerable children, stating, "The damning findings of the Audit General's report *Oversight of the child protection system* is another impactful reminder of the critical need for more robust and proactive interventions.

"This is a stark reminder of the imperative to uphold the highest standards of care for every child in our society. The time for national registration for social workers is now."

The AASW stands firm in its commitment to advocating for the safety and wellbeing of all children. Smith emphasised, "We are at a critical juncture. Implementing a national regulatory framework for social workers will better empower us to protect vulnerable individuals and families nationwide. Governments must progress national registration of social workers."

About the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing social workers. Our mission is to advance wellbeing and social justice, empowering the social work profession to make a difference, to foster change and advocate for the community.

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