

Keeping families connected

OzCHILD GETS STATE FUNDING TO KEEP CHILDREN OUT OF FOSTER CARE, AND STAY SAFELY WITH OWN FAMILY

By Rosa Ritchie

An innovative family therapy program with a 95 per cent success rate is coming to the Goulburn Valley, with the aim of curbing growing rates of children entering out-of-home care.

Leading child welfare organisation OzChild has received three years of Victorian Government funding for its evidence-based functional family therapy program, which focuses on child welfare.

OzChild Goulburn region program manager Liz McPhillips said her team of 10 would assist 60 families referred by Child Protection per year, with the potential to keep up to 600 children safely with their families over three years.

“With the program about to launch, OzChild will be recruiting a new team based out of the Shepparton office,” she said.

“This is an exciting opportunity for workers in the sector to become involved in something innovative and new, right from the start.”

OzChild chief executive Lisa Griffiths said the Goulburn Valley program would provide expert, intensive hands-on support to families.

“The City of Shepparton is one of the most disadvantaged areas in the state and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made things even tougher for vulnerable



Safe family homes: OzChild Goulburn region program manager Liz McPhillips says the program has the potential to prevent up to 600 children from entering foster care. Picture: Megan Fisher

families,” Dr Griffiths said.

“Instead of the typical option of a formal intervention and the placement of children in out-of-home care, this program builds upon the strengths within a family to help them address issues and keep their children safely at home.” Organisers say the

Goulburn Valley program could revolutionise how thousands of vulnerable children and young adults are supported across regional Victoria.

The rate of Victorian children entering out-of-home care is growing by 10 per cent per year, according to a 2020 study

commissioned by Berry Street.

And an alarming 10.2 per cent of Greater Shepparton children are living in circumstances with high levels of family stress, according to a 2019 Greater Shepparton City Council report.

The type of child-focused functional family therapy offered

by OzChild has been successful internationally and in Australia, where 800 families have successfully completed the program across NSW, ACT and Victoria.

On average 95 per cent of children and young people from those 800 families remained safely at home.

Victorian Child Protection Minister Luke Donnellan said an investment of \$2 million per year for OzChild family therapy programs in Shepparton and outer-eastern Melbourne would help keep families together safely, which was “far and away the best option”.

“Wherever appropriate, supporting families to stay together delivers the best results,” he said.

Importantly, OzChild’s functional family therapy sessions take place within the home, and experts also connect with the extended family and wider community.

OzChild team leader Barak Ben Or said connecting with the whole family produced better results.

“We see all family members for each session because we know the strengths they all bring to the table helps them work on the concerns they were referred for,” he said.

“We then build on those strengths to teach the family new ways of understanding and relating to each other.”

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