

IMPORTANT NOTICE: CONFIDENTIALITY AND LEGAL PRIVILEGE

This statement may contain legally privileged and confidential information. If you are not intended to view the contents of this document, you are notified that any transmission, distribution, or photocopying of this statement is strictly prohibited. The legal privilege and confidentiality attached to this document is not waived, lost or destroyed by reason of a mistaken delivery or production to you. If you have received this document without authorisation, please immediately notify Crown Law by telephone on 07 3031 5600 and return the document to Level 11, 50 Ann Street, Brisbane QLD 4000.

**CHILD SAFETY COMMISSION OF INQUIRY
STATE OF QUEENSLAND**

PROACTIVE STATEMENT No. 12

BRIGITTE SVENDSEN

I, **Brigitte Svendsen**, of care of Crown Law, Level 11, 50 Ann Street, Brisbane, Senior Child Safety Office, Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety **(the Department)** in the State of Queensland state as follows:

1. My qualifications include a Masters of Social Work degree conferred in 2017 from the University of RMIT Melbourne. I am also a certified trainer of the Safe and Together Model.
2. I am a Senior Child Safety Officer with the Department in the Cairns Child Safety Service Centre (CSSC), Far North Queensland Region. I have been employed by the Department since November 2019.
3. Prior to this appointment I held the positions of:
 - a) Associate case worker Salvation Army Centennial Lodge (emergency housing shelter) 2017 – 2018;
 - b) Community Mental health practitioner Mind Australia at the Cairns Community Care Unit and the Adult Step up Step Down June – September 2019; and
 - c) Support Co-ordinator with Centacare, previously known as Partners in Recovery.
4. Since 2019 I have held the following roles within the department:
 - a) Child Safety Officer Far North Queensland Investigation and Assessment Unit;
 - b) Senior Team Leader Far North Queensland Investigation and Assessment Unit; and
 - c) Senior Child Safety Officer Far North Queensland Investigation and Assessment Unit.

5. As a Senior Child Safety Officer (SCSO) in ongoing intervention, I am responsible for ensuring the safety, belonging and wellbeing of all children and young people throughout the child protection process as prescribed in the *Child Protection Act 1999* (CP Act). My practice and application of the CP Act is guided by my profession, the Child Safety Practice Manual, and relevant policies, procedures, and guidelines.
6. I do not have the direct responsibility for the development of departmental policies, procedures, or practice guidelines within my role.

ROLE

7. The key responsibilities of my role as a SCSO are to:
 - a) Deliver accountable and collaborative integrated child protection services for complex and sensitive cases including assessment, intervention, casework, and case management in a manner that respects the culture and context of each child, young person, family and community in accordance with legislation, practice guidelines, and a strength-based practice.
 - b) Work collaboratively with colleagues, stakeholders, including children, young people and their families, Non-Government Organisations, service providers, medical professionals, police, and others to provide high quality strength-based child protection practice.
 - c) Draw on professional practice experience in relevant child protection fields to provide mentoring and support develop the skills and knowledge of newly appointed and less experienced Child Safety Officers (CSO) and Child Safety Support Officers (CSSO).
8. When planning and reviewing my work and seeking approval for delegated decisions, when required, I report to both the Senior Team Leader and Manager of the Cairns CSSC. The Senior Team Leader and Manager make decisions around family contact and placement. Examples of decisions that require higher delegations than that of the Senior Team Leader or the Manager include complex medical decisions or decisions relating to international travel.

WORKING IN FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND

9. The Cairns CSSC within the Far North Queensland Region provides a unique experience working rurally, regionally, and centrally. The geographical area covered by Cairns CSSC incorporates the greater Cairns Central Business District, west to Koah via Kuranda, connecting with the boundary of Atherton CSSC; the southern boundary defined as the suburb Earlville, connecting with the Cairns South CSSC (previously known as Edmonton CSSC).
10. Working as a SCSO in Far North Queensland means no day is the same. It means that I get to learn something new every day and work towards helping children and/or young people and their families.

11. It also requires having a good understanding of the challenges faced by children and/or young people and their families in Far North Queensland.
12. I work on the reunification team. The team works with children, young people, and their families to address risk factors and return a child to live safely at home. Some of the activities I undertake include:
 - a) I currently case manage fifteen (15) complex cases for children, their families, and carers to provide coordinated, culturally sensitive integrated and targeted services to meet the needs and goals of children and their families. This involves a process of assessment, planning, implementation, and review until case closure.
 - b) Whilst there are fifteen children on my caseload, I work with approximately thirty parents, thirty step parents, sixty grandparents, uncles, aunties, foster carers, and foster carer support agencies and services.
 - c) I develop case plans with each child and/or young person, their families, and stakeholders to meet the child's safety, belonging and wellbeing needs. This is an opportunity for me to work with the children, young people, their families, carers, and stakeholders to develop achievable goals of ongoing intervention and identify the agreed actions that children and young people and their families will take to meet the goals. For example, in a case where substance misuse is an issue for family members, I may request regular drug testing be undertaken and/or attendance at support programs provided by Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Services.
 - d) The Cairns CSSC has a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the area as well as multiple ethnic groups. I work with Cultural Practice Advisors to ensure my casework and case management is culturally safe and responsive to family and community needs including upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's rights under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle to ensure they maintain a connection to family community, culture and country.
 - e) Working with the child and/or young person and their family to gain the skills and sense of wellbeing that will allow them to realise their potential and positively participate in the wider community. This could include referring the child and/or family to service providers within the community that will provide early intervention or family wellbeing services.
 - f) Preparing affidavits for use within court proceedings to assist the magistrate in making a decision in relation to a child protection order.
 - g) Mentoring and developing the skills of new and less experienced CSOs and CSSOs. In the Cairns CSSC there are approximately six (6) new CSOs (at the time of writing this statement).

- h) I am not required to deliver formal supervision to staff within my role.
- 13. I make recommendations based on the evidence that I have gathered in relation to family time (i.e. family contact), placing a child in an approved placement or making an application for a Temporary Assessment Order or Court Assessment Order. The Senior Team Leader or Manager approves these recommendations as per the Child Safety and Family instruments of delegations under the CP Act.
- 14. As the applicant, the Director of Child Protection Litigation may agree with the recommendation in relation to order type made by the department or may decide to apply for a different order.

CHALLENGES

- 15. I enjoy coming to work and I feel that the Cairns CSSC offers a good work culture. This allows me to feel connected to my work and motivated to achieve safety and positive outcomes for children. For example:
 - a) I feel very supported by my Senior Team Leader and the Manager of the Cairns CSSC. They have created an environment where staff members in my opinion are heard, and our opinions are respected and valued. They value co-design where they want to hear from myself and my colleagues about ideas to improve work practices. For example, when a situation arose, I suggested that a workplace health and safety working group was created within the Cairns CSSC to meet regularly to share ideas and ensure the safety of the staff of Cairns CSSC. This was soon implemented.
 - b) The Cairns CSSC has also created a positive work culture through collaborative engagement including fun competitions such as holiday decorating and holding Angel weeks (an idea where we uplift another staff member through positive affirmations or gifts).
 - c) Cairns CSSC also provides regular team meetings and staff meetings to ensure we feel fully informed in what is happening.
 - d) At the Cairns CSSC we have the ability to use flexible work arrangements including the ability to work compressed hours or work from home to support staff as required.
- 16. In my opinion working in Far North Queensland also presents significant challenges including:
 - a) Staffing and Workload;
 - b) Training;
 - c) Service provider capacity;
 - d) Psychosocial-hazards;

- e) DCPL (the Director of Child Protection Litigation).

Staffing and Workload

17. I have observed that there is often difficulty in attracting and retaining experienced CSO's to work in Far North Queensland resulting in additional pressures in workloads. I believe this is because of:
- a) The rural and remote location.
 - b) Remuneration for working in these areas are low compared to non-government organisations (NGOs) where salaries and incentives are higher. For example, through salary packaging we are only able to utilise novated leasing where it is my understanding that some NGOs provide significantly more in their salary packaging offers.
18. It has also been my experience that new staff who are employed sometimes have no prior experience in the sector, or minimal to no experience working in a rural or remote community or experience working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. It takes time to be able to learn how to respectfully and effectively work with families.
19. Furthermore, since I have been employed with child safety, it is my opinion that the complexity of cases has increased. For example, the number of parents using large amounts of methamphetamines and the proportion of fathers using high risk domestic violence including lethality factors (strangulation, use of weapons, threats to kill) has increased. I have observed new and lesser experienced staff struggle to manage caseloads that involve a high level of complexity. It is my opinion that due to the complexity of the case-loads, lack of in field training, and exposure to psychosocial injury that this contributes significantly to staff turnover. I will expand more upon these ideas in the rest of my statement.
20. In my role as a SCSO, I mentor and develop the skills of new and less experienced CSOs and CSSOs whilst managing a complex case load. The Senior Team Leader is also responsible for providing supervision to new staff. There are two SCSOs in the Cairns CSSC.
21. It is in my opinion that we do not have enough hours to train staff whilst holding a complex case load. I have observed that if staff do not receive the appropriate training, they can become overwhelmed, and it is my experience that they often resign within the first year. It makes me feel distressed to contribute large numbers of hours to training new staff alongside managing a complex case load, only for staff to resign.
22. Now that I am unable to ask a child safety officer from the service centre closest to the family to visit them (referred to as a task-request), it means that I have to undertake additional hours of travel to localities outside of Cairns – some of these locations are a two (2) hour drive one way to a family's home. Being out of the

office to visit one family means that I am unable to undertake direct work with other families in this time. This also contributes to fatigue. I was not consulted about this decision that directly affects my workload (the decision not to be able to request task-requests) and I am unsure who decided this or the rationale for the decision.

23. Prior to July the Cairns CSSC had two (2) full time para-legals that had been employed to provide frontline staff with support to develop and complete affidavits for court proceedings. With my current case load of 15, I am now completing approximately 15 affidavits every 3 to 6 months which takes time away from working with the child and/or young person, their families, and carers.
24. Cairns CSSC also employed a number of case support workers. However, we now have less case support workers than we previously had. This means that there is additional administrative burden on me to complete administrative tasks such as referrals and requests for information which take my time away from working with vulnerable children.
25. During 2025 there have been approximately 18 staff who have left the Cairns CSSC – whether to transition to a new role or to resign or to take leave.

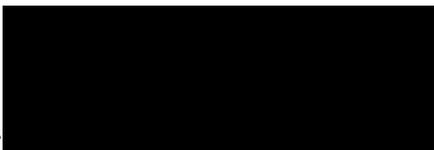
Training

26. New CSOs attend the Department's learning and development program *GRO* as part of their mandatory role-specific induction program, there are also opportunities for ongoing online and in-house training. Limited mentoring support is also provided in person, online or on the phone. There is, however, no formal in-field training process for a new CSO.
27. I believe that there needs to be a formal in-field training process for new staff which is specific and measurable within the probation period of new staff.
28. Formal in-field training would include having an allocated worker/workers with no case load to provide in field training specifically to new staff. It could also include ensuring new CSOs needing to complete their training and demonstrate competencies within a probational period before they are given a case load. Competencies would be tied to core parts of the role such the ability to engage with children, young people, their families, and their carers.
29. It is my opinion that unless such a program is developed, new and lesser experienced child safety officers will continue to experience burnout and fatigue and will continue to leave child safety. Until such an approach is implemented it is also my opinion that existing staff may feel burned out and fatigued, training new staff and seeing large numbers of staff leave the department.

Psychosocial hazards

30. The following elements contribute to psychosocial risk and injury in the child safety officer role: high job demands, fatigue, continued exposure to traumatic events and material, and being exposed to violence and aggression.

31. I find it distressing to see my colleagues get physically hurt and upset. I have seen my colleagues be punched in the face, threatened including threatened to be killed or speared in the street, and called vulgar derogatory language including bitch, slut, and cunt on a regular basis. I further become distressed when my colleagues are having to take substantial amounts of unplanned leave or sick leave as this not only then impacts on the workload of the CSSC but also the physical wellbeing of my colleagues.
32. I also find it distressing to hear of my colleagues working on the weekends or working from very early in the morning until very late in the afternoon in order to manage the excessive demands of their workloads.
33. Within the Cairns CSSC I have seen the following put in place to support and to ensure staff safety including:
- a) Issuing conduct letters that outline inappropriate client conduct and the CSSC's expectation of behaviour moving forward including how staff are to be treated.
 - b) Texting staff members to avoid an area such as the reception if an incident is occurring.
 - c) Calling police for support.
 - d) Going offline to have administrative days.
 - e) Having access to the Employment Assistance Service (EAS).
 - f) Introducing flexible working arrangements.
 - g) These measures are not enough and do not mitigate the level of violence and aggression that Child Safety Officers experience. As ongoing intervention workers, most workers go to visits on their own and there are no formalised risk assessments around whether it is safe for workers to go to certain homes.
 - h) If workers do not have enough experience to determine their own safety assessment, they can sometimes go to homes where they are threatened or hurt or deliberately prevented from being able to leave a home.
 - i) I have been physically prevented from leaving a home when I was with a second officer previously. I have been threatened to be killed, speared in the street, called names such as bitch, slut, cunt, and had my family threatened.
34. I am aware that current administrative practices to ensure workplace health and safety include:
- a) Workload management tools are completed and forwarded to the Manager and Senior Team Leader. These are helpful to document a pattern of ongoing psychosocial injury, however they are time consuming to complete and they often do not result in any structural changes.



Brigitte Svendsen



Witness

- b) A workplace incident reporting form (WIRF) is also completed upon a psychosocial injury. These forms are often time consuming to complete and do not result in any structural changes.
35. In my opinion these administrative practices often are for documentation purposes and do not result in structural change and provide more administrative burden on workers.
36. Introduction of psychosocial risk assessments in the role of a CSO and SCSO would benefit in understanding the rates of fatigue, and burnout within the CSO and SCSO role.
37. I have turned down team leading opportunities on multiple occasions because I have requested my case load be distributed so that I can do the team leading role without holding a case load. I have been advised it is not possible to redistribute my case load to allow me to complete the team leading role. I have decided that it would be a detrimental risk to my emotional and physical wellbeing to attempt to do dual roles at the same time as it is very difficult to manage a complex case load, in addition to supporting a team of staff.
38. In the Cairns CSSC in 2025, staff were directed to come to work on the same day that there was a planned protest. Whilst this protest was reported to be peaceful, attendees banged on the windows and staff were escorted by police off the premises. I made the decision not to come to work on this day as I was worried that the protest would not be peaceful and may pose a risk to my physical and emotional wellbeing.
39. It is my opinion that this incident made me feel that decisions that are being made are not taking into consideration the physical and emotional wellbeing of staff.

Service Provider Capacity

40. In my experience government funded service providers in Far North Queensland sometimes report being at capacity when I send referrals to them. This presents a challenge when referring children and/or young people, their families and carers for support including early intervention or family wellbeing services.
41. As a SCSO, I do not have the capacity and time to provide four to six hours of direct support work to support families in their home. When services report as being at capacity, I apply for a paid package to access a service provider to provide the support needed to keep children safe in their home.
42. For example, recently when sending a referral to a service provider to support a child at risk and their family, the service provider advised me that they could not allocate the case advising there was a wait list and recommended another organisation. The recommended organisation was not culturally appropriate. After three months the service provider advised they had capacity however I had already applied for a paid package as support needed to be provided straight away to ensure the safety of the child. Until an intensive support service is engaged with the family, they rely upon

me as a single child safety officer to answer their questions and provide them support until a service can become engaged.

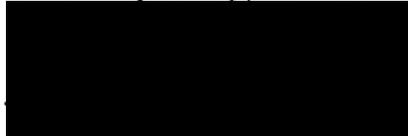
43. I hear from First Nations clients that they do not want to work with the largest funded culturally appropriate service in our town because they are concerned that their case will not be treated confidentially, and they have had poor experiences previously and have a low level of trust in the service.
44. When I have sent referrals to the largest funded culturally appropriate service in Cairns there have been lengthy delays to allocate the case, no capacity to allocate, and I have struggled to receive correspondence about the work they are doing with families. There have been many times where I have to finalise an assessment with a family as I have not been able to gather any information from this service in order to inform the assessment, and this could include positive information about things the family are doing to address the worries.

DCPL

45. In my experience, a number of matters have been delayed within court due to DCPL applicant lawyers not having enough time or capacity to review affidavits, or provide feedback to me in a timely way due to their own workload pressures.
46. This means that if I receive a reviewed affidavit I have a very short timeframe (sometimes three (3) business days) in order to review the affidavit and return it.
47. I have to manage the competing priorities of my workload, training new staff and trying to support them, and completing updating affidavits in order to be able to return affidavits so that the matter is not unnecessarily adjourned.
48. If the matter is adjourned on a number of occasions, this may mean that I have to complete more updating affidavits to reflect the case work I am doing with the family. This creates additional workload pressures for me.

I make this statement of my own free will believing its contents to be true and correct.

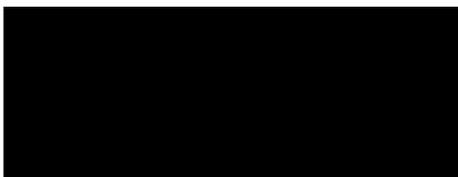
Dated this 8th day of September 2025.



Brigitte Svendsen



Witness



Brigitte Svendsen



Witness