



Helena's story

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There have been a lot of staff wellbeing issues at the Child Safety Centre since I started working here in 2023. The workload has been excessively high and there is extra stress as a result of the extensive area the office covers – a lot of travel that eats in to the time we have to dedicate to actual working with our families.

I have been a strong advocate for reducing workload stress within the office. We decided to take further action as a union late in 2024. The main issues raised were:

- Child Safety Officer case loads being double the trigger point.
- Remote work – inferior accommodation, complexities of cases. Our union organiser stated that staff indicated that remote work was a primary factor in staff seeking work in other service centres rather than remaining.
- Accrued Time, lunch, breaks etc – limited breaks, eating at workstations and being unable to access accrued time. The organiser stated that culturally this creates an unsafe workplace as new staff consider this work ethic to be the norm.

We received some relief from the Department with additional positions becoming available and a team of workers coming up from Brisbane to assist with mentoring and training new staff (this initiative has now ended). But the culture of the workplace has not changed.

I returned from leave and commenced my role as a CSO. I tried very hard to return with a positive attitude and embrace a new challenge but almost immediately I started to feel overwhelmed with the amount of work that is required to properly support the children in our care. It is difficult to put into words the complexities of a CSO role, the responsibilities we have to the children, parents, children's court, various stakeholders (education, residential placements, NDIS, youth justice etc) and to our legislative requirements. There are not enough hours in a day or a week to complete all of our work to a high standard. We have competing priorities and court work takes up a lot of time – writing affidavits is a massive task. I started to feel overwhelmed within the first week and I was no longer taking lunch breaks, I was starting work early (usually around 8 or 8.30) and finishing late and I still was not able to get the work required done.

My moods started to be affected, I was going home from work exhausted and had no motivation to do anything around the house. I was unable to have a good night sleep as I was thinking about all the work that waited for me the

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following day. I was too unmotivated and exhausted to even wash my hair at times and complete other basic hygiene tasks. I stopped eating because my stomach always felt sore and I started smoking again even though I had given up 6 months prior to going back to this role.

It was not just the amount of work that was required to support our children and families but I also found that the office culture was still the same as it was when I was previously in a CSO role. Around 97% of our case load is made up of First Nations families and the attitudes towards these families from some staff and management was terrible. I was working with one family where one of the children was placed with a white general foster carer who made lots of unsubstantiated complaints about the mother of this child which significantly impacted reunification planning for the child. This was the catalyst that broke me. I had a meeting with my Senior Team Leader and the Acting Manager and they advised they were suspending contacts between the mother and the child until further investigations could take place, even though none of the complaints from the carers could be substantiated (the carers have continuously complained about every CSO who has worked with them and also about the Carer Support Team). I felt that I was not being listened to even though I was the one who was on the front line doing the work with the family and I walked out of the meeting.

After I walked out of the meeting I went to my car and broke down in tears. I could not move and I had another panic attack. I thought I was going to die as I stopped breathing and I could not figure out how to breath normally again for around 15 minutes. I rang my partner after I was able to regulate my breathing more and let him know what had happened. He advised to go to the Doctor to make sure I was ok. I got an appointment for that afternoon and the Doctor was fantastic.

I believe the Child Safety system is so broken. Staff are at breaking point and cannot support families and children in any meaningful way. Staff are at breaking point and cannot support families and children in any meaningful way. Without significant changes to the system, there is no hope.