

## **Opinion Piece**

### **Grand parenting becoming harder**

Many of us work hard throughout our lives, and expect that our later years will be spent reaping the rewards of this hard work – perhaps travelling, mastering a new skill, and spending times with our loved ones, particularly our grandchildren.

But this idyllic dream isn't realised for many older Queenslanders, as an increasing number of grandparents are denied contact with their grandchildren due to family breakdown, parental drug use and domestic violence.

Alternatively, grandparents may be forced to take on a larger role in their grandchildren's lives due to working parents and increasing costs of childcare.

Part of the problem is the growing issue of drug use in regional Queensland, in particular ice which can cause parents to completely disengage from all activities. Their drug use can mean that they are not a fit and proper parent to their children.

Sometimes parents are in prison or 'disappear' due to drug taking binges.

Grandparents are being relied upon by the governments as alternatives to parents who had substance abuse issues, were in prison or who were experiencing domestic violence.

In some instances, parents turn up to their grandparents' home, leave the children and often don't return for several months and when they do they demand that their children be returned to them.

Parents often become violent when under the influence of drugs and alcohol and grandparents are exposed to family violence when they try to step in and protect their grandchildren from their own parents.

It is not uncommon for community lawyers to see grandparents applying for domestic violence protection orders against their own children when grandchildren are involved.

Without a formal parenting order in place grandparents may be unable to obtain financial family assistance, access Medicare, open a school banking account, obtain a passport or even apply for a birth certificate.

When they are affected by drugs or subjected to violence, parents can choose not to participate in mediation or consent to formal parenting orders.

The grandparents are left with no option than filing a contested application in the Federal Circuit Court for parenting orders.

This is complex, time consuming and can take up to 18 months to finalise. Given their chaotic lives, these parents can dip in and out of the court process, which causes significant delays. This arduous process can take a toll on everyone involved.

Too many of these grandparents are unable to afford legal help to navigate these complex and traumatising legal processes, so many turn to community legal centres for free legal help.

Unfortunately only half of the people who contact one of Queensland's community legal centres are able to get the help they need. The remaining 50% are turned away because community legal centres just don't have the resources to provide help for everyone who qualifies.

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In July this year the Commonwealth Government will cut almost 30% of funding to community legal centres across Australia.

Malcolm Turnbull and George Brandis must reverse these funding cuts to community legal centres, to ensure grandparents get the legal help they need and the protection they deserve.

***Opinion of James Farrell, Director, Community Legal Centres Queensland***

**Ends**

**NOTES:**

1. Community Legal Centres Queensland Inc (formerly QAILS) is the state-wide peak body representing community legal centres in Queensland. Queensland community legal centres have 40 years of service delivery experience providing free information, advice and referral, casework and representation to the community. [www.communitylegalqld.org.au](http://www.communitylegalqld.org.au)

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