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Page 1 of 2

 [back](#)

Ice is ripping families apart



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THE drug ice is tearing Sunshine Coast families apart, increasingly forcing grandparents to intervene through the Federal Circuit Court to secure custody of young children in peril.

The Suncoast Community Legal Service at Maroochydore has, in the first two months of 2017, seen 14 sets of grandparents wanting to take formal charge of children exposed to the impacts of substance-abusing parents.

University of the Sunshine Coast Lecturer-in-Law and solicitor Kirsty Mackie says the children were often the forgotten victims.

The service is also seeing two to three cases a day of people seeking advice on separation from drug-addicted partners or who themselves are coming out of addiction.

Ms Mackie said many grandparents simply didn't have the \$50,000 to \$60,000 cost of engaging legal representation themselves.

Instead, they turn to government and community-funded services to guide them through what can be a fraught process.

Without formal parenting orders she said they can be left to struggle on without Medicare access to raise

children on their aged pensions, by returning to work or through re-mortgaging their homes.

The situation is made all the more difficult by the guilt grandparents feel about their children going off the rails.

"Some grandparents admit responsibility for working too hard and not spending enough time with them when they were young," Ms Mackie said.

"But all ask the same thing of us. They want help preparing court documents relating to the care of their grandchildren.

"We find that the parents at risk of losing custody of their children come into court with guns blazing on the first occasion but then see the paperwork involved and instead turn to 'litigating by Facebook', using Messenger to threaten their own parents."

She said it was not uncommon for grandparents to seek specific orders from the courts restraining parents from harassing them and from posting pictures on social media of their at-risk children.

"Stalking and harassment via social media is a real problem," Ms Mackie said.

"As soon as you close access to one Messenger site, they use another. The courts and police struggle with it."

She said tragically parental motivation to fight for continued custody often appeared to be focused on "incredibly attractive" Centrelink benefits.

"It is certainly not the child's care," she said.

Those Centrelink payments can be required to meet the special needs of children with developmental

impairment, cognitive and other problems caused by foetal alcoholism and drug use during pregnancy and domestic violence assaults on pregnant mothers.

In such families, neglect was common as children hovered constantly on the verge of homelessness.

Ms Mackie said in one case a young girl's hearing problems had become

irreparably acute simply because steps weren't taken by inattentive and indifferent parents to have them addressed while she was a baby.

"If I had a solution I would certainly be advocating it to our politicians," she said.

"Neglected and abused children are the side effects of drug abuse.

"Fortunately Federal

Court judges are aware of the problem and are handing down sensitive orders."

She praised the efforts of "wonderful" social workers, foster parents, counsellors,

grandparents and a school system that works very hard in the interests of the child.

"In these cases it takes a community to raise the kids," Ms Mackie said.

 **It takes a
community
to raise the kids**

— lawyer Kirsty Mackie



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Page 2 of 2


back



DEADLY SCOURGE: Children are the forgotten victims of the ice epidemic on the Sunshine Coast.

PHOTO: KAARSTEN