

After ABC TV’s [Four Corners](#) aired horrifying evidence of abuse and mismanagement in the out-of-home care system for foster children, New South Wales Premier Mike Baird announced what he [called](#) the “single biggest reform to child welfare in NSW”.

While I have no doubt Baird is trying to improve the lives of children, his “solution” is a re-run of failed promises made by the Carr government more than a decade ago.

### **The NSW department failing to meet industry standards**

The [Wood Royal Commission](#) into police corruption in the late 1990s exposed evidence that police and the child welfare sector were ignoring cases of paedophiles abusing children in out-of-home care. As a result, the NSW government introduced new standards that child welfare agencies were supposed to meet to prove they could properly care for children. This was known as “accreditation”.

The huge disaster here is that the biggest player in the sector – the NSW government’s own department in charge of child welfare, Family and Community Services – has never itself received accreditation. This was highlighted in a report released after the Four Corners program by the [NSW Audit Office](#), which also criticised the department’s inability to track what happens to children in care.

The fact that Family and Community Services has not achieved accreditation, after so many years, shows how deeply flawed the system is.

### **A cause for action**

The Four Corners [program](#) exposed the sexual abuse and wholesale neglect of children in residential care, leading authorities to order [safety checks](#) on young people under the care of agencies featured in the program.

Baird was forced to [admit](#) that the out-of-home care system:

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... is failing to improve long term outcomes for children and to arrest devastating cycles of intergenerational abuse and neglect.

Appalled that 60% of homeless people have been in care, he [declared](#) the dismal prognosis facing the state’s children was:

... not just a cause for concern but a cause for action.

But actions, and dollars, only count if they’re directed at programs and reforms that work.

### **A multi-billion-dollar industry**

Providing care to vulnerable people is a multi-billion-dollar industry. In NSW last year alone a [reported](#) A\$2.8 billion was directed to non-government agencies.

The announcement that further funds would be channelled into fixing the broken system is a response to a damning assessment by respected public servant David Tune. The review is yet to be released in full, but you can read a summary [here](#) .

The Tune report found that A\$300 million per year is being spent on support programs without any evidence that they actually work. [According](#) to the NSW government, this is now set to change, with new models of evidence based, individually targeted support packages to ensure that children and families will receive the help they need.

Children have been raped and have died while in the care of the state. The need for concrete action is very real and the commitment to reform is to be welcomed. But these children deserve more. The NSW government’s belief in its reform package should not be doubted, but what’s been announced appears unlikely to fix the problem.

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In the late 1990s, the Carr government also pledged reform of the child welfare system. It launched a multi-million-dollar Families First program (later renamed [Brighter Futures](#) ).

This program, then-premier Bob Carr declared, would provide early intervention and assistance to at-risk families. It would involve comprehensive training for child welfare staff, systematic and usable data collection, and – most significantly of all – would be thoroughly evaluated.

Within five years, its own architects had [condemned](#) the [program](#) for wasted money, confusing overlap and missed opportunities.

Carr was forced to head off mounting public concern about the outcomes for children in care by [injecting a further A\\$1.2 billion](#) into the department just weeks before the 2003 state election. He replaced the minister and the child welfare department’s director-general at the same time.

Labor won the election, but just five years later the [Wood Special Commission](#) into child protection once again highlighted the inability of the system to keep children safe.

## **Can failed agencies reform themselves?**

The real challenge for Baird lies in how the out-of-home care agencies will implement his grand plan. Details are still sketchy, but there was no talk yesterday of starting over with new providers. It appears the reforms will be carried out by the same agencies that currently dominate the system.

In many instances, these are the same players that have shaped child welfare in NSW for the last 100 years. In many instances, they are the same agencies that have featured before the ongoing [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

This is the crux of the problem. Historical funding models, long standing religious and charitable loyalties, a belief that agencies that provide care to children in turn care for children, and the sheer difficulty of simply beginning again, means the same agencies that have failed to live up

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to previous government agendas will be the ones expected to now usher in the newest “single biggest reform to child welfare”.

Care-leavers (people who were in care as children but are now adults) have been telling governments for decades that there is a problem. For example, John Murray [told](#) a Senate committee in 2004 that:

... the social services on offer are generally run by the very organisations that failed us in the past ... we should no longer have to suffer at the hands of rank amateurs.

Will Baird be the premier to stop the intergenerational cycle of abuse and neglect of children in the care of the state by the very agencies entrusted to care for them?

If that’s the legacy he is striving for, he’ll have to do more than he’s promised so far.

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