

Submission to the Parliament

By: The Amazing Grace Children's Centre and Peace Haven

Subject: Support for the Recommendations made by the Committee of Enquiry

INTRODUCTION

My name is Grace Mashaba. I am founder and director of two Mpumalanga based non-profit organisations; The Amazing Grace Children's Home, a place of safety for orphaned and/or vulnerable children and Peace Haven, a life-skills training and home-based care organisation for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Because of the tremendous needs of the transforming new South Africa, many non-profit directors (field workers) act as the voice for under served populations and communities. In my region, the organisations I direct serve over 1.5 million people.

Challenges include poverty, education, access to medical care, HIV/AIDS, TB and Cholera. This gives me a unique perspective on challenges and potential solutions and best practices.

The successes we have found through our organisations have been based on a foundation of participation, cultural sensitivity and sustainability. It is my belief that the recommendations I will present shortly have been based on that same foundation.

Since we are talking about children's issues today, let me outline a little more about Amazing Grace Children's Home (AGCH) and our projects.

The Amazing Grace Children's Home is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to ensuring that every orphaned and/or vulnerable child has a safe, nurturing and educational environment to ensure positive development until the age of 18. To accomplish this, we provide resources to children, families and communities that contribute to increased direct support and positive development of children.

We accommodate and ensure that each and every children does have enough clothing, food, education and shelter, love, care and emotional support.

We started with 7 children from the street in 1990 as a feeding scheme. Four of them finished their schooling, went to agriculture college in Nelspruit and now they are working.

We now have 79 children in the Centre. We receive a subsidy from the Provincial Department of Social Development of R20/child/day. (R300 per month). This money must cover their food, clothes, school uniforms, school stationary, school books and transport to hospital (45 km). It must also cover the water and electricity and rent (R800/month to the municipality) for the Centre.

However as we are registered as a "home" and not a "place of safety" we only receive a subsidy for 35 of the children. We are busy registering as a "place of safety" so that we can get a subsidy for all of the children. We sent our registration forms to the Department at the end of 2002 but have not get been registered. The form is complicated and the criteria is changing each time we go to the Department's office.

The number of children is growing every day because we are the only children's home in the Nkomazi region in Mpumalanga. There are approximately 1, 5 million people in this region with about 85 villages.

The numbers are also increasing because there is an increase in the numbers of children being physically abused and raped. This seems to be because their parents leave early for work and come back late and the children have to walk on their own through the sugar cane fields. There are many young men who don't have jobs and they stay at home and some abuse the children. There is nothing for them to do so some abuse the children.

We want to start an after school programme to keep them safe and help them with their homework. We also want to start a pre-school programme for the children of the women who work, especially the hawkers as it is not good for the children to grow up on the street. They end up liking that life and don't want to go to school.

The projects at The Centre are available to families, children living without a parent/guardian, children with HIV, children being abused sexually, physically or emotionally, and/or street-children.

Projects are focused in three main categories:

Temporary shelter for abused children

Family Preservation

Training

Reintegration

Life skills

Orphanage for orphans

COMMENT ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY

Child Support Grant and the Income Grant

1) We support the need to extend the child support grant to children under 18 years. In Malelane they have just closed a factory. 85 people have lost their jobs. They have children who need food.

2.) Children in the centre who turn 18

The Child Care Act defines the age at which a child in a centre should be given support to end at 18. The subsidy therefore stops at age 18. This is another challenging problem that needs to be looked at very carefully.

That's when the child is no longer under the legal category of "child" but continues living in a child care centre because he/she does not have enough skills to help him/her find an adequate job and earn a living wage. This problem is made worse with the lack of vacancies in our local job market.

As a result of the above mentioned situation, these young people become vulnerable to crime, and victimisation in turn erodes the human and social capital and undermines access to employment.

The shock of being victimised by poverty makes the poor more vulnerable. In some cases, heightened vulnerability may force victims to resort to criminal activities or prostitution as means of survival.

One living story I witnessed last year is when a young boy, who left my centre because he was too old to continue staying at The Amazing Grace Children's Centre. He went back to his family. He decided to move out to the streets and few days later he committed suicide because could not

handle the hard life on the street. This is one of the memorable experience that makes building a caring society, South Africa's primary priority.

The income grant combined with skills training will help these young people. This type of income although is not enough to live on can help a person to start planning around that R100.00 to start or find other means of generating a small income

3) Street children

Many children end up going to the street to look for food when there is no food at home or their granny dies.

Families and extended families need to be supported to be able to practice ubuntu and take children into their homes. The income grant will help support them.

4) Child prostitution

There is a truck stop in town and the drivers pay young girls from R50 for sex. Children also come with the trucks from Mozambique, Swaziland, Cape Town. They are being trafficked by the truck drivers for sexual favours.

The girls need a home or temporary shelter plus skills training. Also if they had R100 a month each, this would also help, especially if they are over 18 as we can't get a subsidy for them.

5) Better access to services

Having a small income means that people will have better access to employment supporting services, health and access to the education system could be improved.

CHILDREN AFFECTED BY HIV/AIDS

In the Centre we have 25 children who are infected or affected (parents have died) by HIV/AIDS. 10 of them their parents died, 15 of them their parents are terminally ill. Some of them are HIV positive themselves.

We also do outreach work with 21 volunteers to care for the orphans living outside the centre.

In many families, children become the main breadwinners for people who are ill with AIDS or illiterate. Older children also often play the parenting role for younger ones. The Amazing Grace Children's Centre and staff have been targeting these children for training and support. We provide this support to them in their homes (they are not living in the centre).

Here are some of the things that we do:

- 1) At The Amazing Grace Children's Centre we educate children about HIV/AIDS, counsel the children and teach them basic methods for washing and looking after themselves.
- 2) Make sure they are in school
- 3) Make sure that they are able to survive. We get food and clothes to the children living in the tribal trusts. Help them to get access to grants and things like parent's bank accounts.
- 4) Counsel them and talk to them about their fears and answer their questions. Invite older children to family support group meetings. Make sure the ill parents make memory boxes and have all their documents in order. Talk about the future and help make arrangements to look after the children after their parents death - most children are terrified by the uncertainty of what will happen to them when their parents die.
- 5) Make sure they are registered with Home Affairs and apply for ID books. We recently helped with the Soul City/ACCESS Jamboree early this year to register children.
- 6) Children need belonging -to have a home. If their parents work on farms and they die, the children lose their homes because the farmers don't give them homes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To continue this work, we need the government to extend the subsidies for

the centre so that we can employ more staff. We have four staff and myself as Director. One social worker, one counsellor, two auxiliary social workers. We receive a subsidy of R1200 per staff member per month from the Department of Social Development.

It is important that the social security system includes subsidies for children's homes and places of safety. The Report does not look into the funding of children's homes and we therefore recommend that the Portfolio Committee adds this to their Report. The churches, social workers, and the police continue to bring us children but the subsidies do not increase. This needs attention.

The Centre has been around for a long time and the Department and Social workers know us well. They come to visit and they bring the Minister to visit us too. We can't understand why we have to register again and fill in more forms. They know what we need. They need to help us with the registration process. We are struggling to get more subsidies.

FOSTER CHILD GRANTS

My personal experience

I have four children living with me. They are not my own but I am their mother and they are registered as Mashaba's. Grace is 7, Thabo is 6, Lizwi is 3 and Hope is 9 months old. I am receiving a foster child grant for Grace but not for the other three. I have been trying for four years to get a foster grant for Thabo.

Experience at the Centre

We try to find foster parents for the children in the Centre. We go talk to the churches, women's societies and parents meetings at school. We

also have functions at the Centre to talk to the community. It can take a year to find one appropriate foster parent.

We then need to train the parent and help the child to get to know the parent. We let the child visit for week-ends and school holidays and see how it works.

When we have found a parent, the government social worker takes over. They screen the parent and do a Report and then go to Court. This can take another year because social workers hands are full. We have to check up all the time to make it go faster. While this happens the child stays at the Centre or the child stays with the new foster parent and the Centre pays them R250 per month because they can't get the foster grant until the social worker has finished the Report and Court process.

We manage to place 3 children with foster parents each year and two of them get a grant.

The majority of children stay in the Centre until they are 18 and then we try to help them find training and a job.

The foster care process takes too long. Foster parents must be helped by the social workers and social services offices should be where the people are. People can't afford the transport costs to go through the whole process.

CONCLUSION

Thank-you for the opportunity to make this submission and we wish parliament well in its future deliberations on the social security policy

reform process. The future stability and prosperity of our nation depends upon the formulation and implementation of a comprehensive social protection programme that can effectively eradicate extreme poverty and diminish economic inequality and lay the foundation for broad based development.