



GSASG

SUPPORT-INFORMATION-ADVOCACY

West Australia inquiry into forced adoption

Submission

Great Southern Adoptee Support Group

GSASG – small beginnings

The Great Southern Adoptee Support Group (GSASG) formed in April 2023 in response to the growing need for a safe space for adopted people to build a community and share their lived experience in a supportive environment.

The seed for this peer led support group was planted when Danae Witherow a late discovery adoptee found Jennifer McRae via Facebook, after a local reporter from the GWN 7 News aired a story about the push a WA parliamentary inquiry into forced adoption on Father's Day 2022. The two women formed a strong camaraderie and Danae joined the advocacy for the inquiry, attending the pivotal meeting with the HON Simone McGurk in December 2022, which finally led to the minister's support for the state inquiry investigating forced adoption policies and practices.

With the inquiry announcement in February 2023, local adoptees began to seek each other out via social media and the time to launch the support group became increasingly evident.

Facts

The GSASG is Western Australia's only adoptee peer led support group operating outside the metro area. We are aware of just one other adoptee support group in Perth that formed in response to Jigsaw's closure in December 2023. We are the only WA adoptee led support group that's engaging in a pathway to become incorporated.

There is currently no adoptee led support groups offered by any post adoption service in WA.

ARMS WA Inc holds a monthly support group at the FASS Belmont headquarters, for both mothers and adoptees. This group is a decades old independent organisation that holds their meetings at Belmont, at the invitation of FASS, after ARCS evicted the support group from using their rooms for meetings in the post national apology period. ARMS WA Inc. is not a subsidiary of FASS.

The GSASG hosts between 5 to 9 attendees at The Premier Hotel, on York Street Abany, every month from 11am – 1230pm. We have a coffee and share a plate of scones.

The demographics of the attendees include.

- Plenary (newborn)
- Domestic
- International (Scotland, American, England)
- Interstate – QLD, Victoria
- Late discovery
- Private adoption
- Government instigated adoption
- Adoption facilitated by a religious institution/order/affiliated– The Salvation Army, Sisters of Mercy, Ngala.
- Many of us were held at a mother and baby home for extended periods of time, or in foster care (in the period before we were collected by our adopters).
- Adult children of adopted people are especially welcome and we are the only group in WA which intentionally includes the next generation of family members who are also impacted by adoption, via intergenerational trauma and their estrangement from biological family networks.

GSASG meets on the first Wednesday of every month. Attendees are primarily adopted people who live in the Great Southern region. We have a regular member who drives in from Denmark every month and others from the upper great southern region of Woodanilling and Katanning.

We recently supported a person who believed they were adopted and had consequently been refused support by the Department of Communities. One of our members obtained a DNA test for this person so they could ascertain if they were or were not adopted. This is a service that would normally be delivered by the now disbanded Jigsaw.

As previously stated; the adult children of adoptees are also welcomed to the support group and have attended frequently (usually with their adopted parent) since the support group's inception.

Unfortunately, we have yet to host male adoptees to our group. We have often discussed this important issue as a group and believe there's several issues as to why they will not attend. An evening group may be a better attended timeframe for men, or a male only group. We are highly motivated to remove the barriers to their attendance.

We are undertaking the required steps to become incorporated and plan to achieve this in the coming months, having formed a committee and opened a bank account.

Peer led adoptee support groups hold a huge unmet potential for our survivorship. They are a safe place, free from microaggressions, where participants can speak openly and candidly about their lived experience. Friendships are formed and a sense of community is built, knowing that you are not alone is a huge relief for many of us, especially after a lifetime of being isolated inside our adoption grief, loss and trauma.

Each month, our GSASG secretary, Jane Dent brings her book trolley filled with a library of modern adoption related books, where our group membership can loan for free.





Advocacy

One of our core precepts is to advocate for the human rights of adopted people, to secure and establish full access to ALL our records, obtain redress for adopted people and their mothers, guide various legislative reforms which include the end to veto's, late discovery and to lift the statute of limitations for our community.

We have met with the following parliamentarians;

HON MLC Louise Kingston – June 2024

HON MLA Sabine Winton – February 2024 (this meeting was organized directly with the Ministers Office, via our membership - without assistance from our local Labor member)

PREMIER Mark McGowan – March 2023

Host to Churchill Fellowship Jeannot Farmer

In November 2023 we were excited to welcome Scottish Churchill Fellowship recipient Jeannot Farmer to Albany. Jeannot was in Australia for several weeks interviewing mothers, adopted people, post adoption service providers and other stakeholders to build a body of recommendations to inform her country in their post apology period. Jeannot's report is publicly available here – <https://www.churchillfellowship.org/ideas-experts/ideas-library/no-more-standing-in-the-shadows-treating-the-wounds-of-historic-forced-adoption/>

GSASG Core Goals

Short term-

- Raise community awareness of the GSASG and grow adoptee attendance to our monthly group.
- Website development and membership
- To establish a separate monthly support group for mothers who lost their son or daughter to adoption practices.
- Enable group members to attend relevant training to host support groups, develop advocacy skills and mentoring.
- Hold a curatorial at the local museum and an exhibition showcasing the various personal pieces of ephemera from our experience of the forced adoption era.

Long term-

- To facilitate the creation of an independent adoptee peer led support group in every major regional town in Western Australia.
- To secure government funding to achieve this goal
- To be included in future government consultations in relation to the inquiry's recommendations into r/t legislative adoption reforms and redress
- For the Department of Communities to create a permanent pathway for our community to be involved in government advisory ASAP. This idea was requested of Minister Winton in February 2024 (see below).

Below is an example of an WA advisory group for F&DV

<https://lnkd.in/gzdKT2bC>

FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY GROUP CONSULTATIONS

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

- Have you experienced family and domestic violence?
- Or are you a carer/ family member helping someone who is experiencing it?
- Would you like to have a say on how a state-wide lived experience family and domestic violence advisory group (a group that gives advice) is set up?

Survey open NOW!
Scan the QR code or visit web link for survey
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GGMRQ8>

WHAT WILL WE ASK?
Some of the questions we will ask are:
• What is the purpose of the Lived Experience Advisory Group?
• Who should be a member of the group and how should members be chosen?
• Should we have groups should be in rural areas?
• What support and/or training should members get?

FOR INFORMATION ON HOW TO BE INVOLVED
Contact Alison or Karine
Phone: 0848 837 216
Email: livedexp-goodplace@outlook.com

ALISON SCOTT
PRELIMINARY MEMBER

KARINE WINTON
PRELIMINARY MEMBER

Promotional Advertising

As we have no funding, we initially advertised our support group via a (closed) Facebook page. GSASG is also a member of Connect Groups where our details are shared on their platform. <https://connectgroups.org.au/directory/listing/great-southern-adoptee-support-group>

We designed a A4 poster to advertise the support group and this has been positioned on community poster boards around Albany, Mount Barker and Denmark.

We have applied for funding from Connect Groups for the design of a logo and website so that we can expand our exposure within the region. We will learn of the outcome of this funding in the second half of 2024.

We believe that the Government of WA should be financially supporting peer-led initiatives like this, as we are providing an important gap in services for adopted people, who currently live outside the metro area.



FASS

We are the recent beneficiaries of a funding grant from FASS, to hold a writing weekend workshop for our support group members. We have secured the in-kind support of a Perth based author and academic who will be our creative facilitator for the weekend. We have the goal to create a work of narrative non-fiction for publication.

This project is an important exercise in truth telling for our group members, as the lived experience of adopted people continues to be either ignored or actively silenced within society. The GSASG believes that our experiences are so uncomfortable that Australian society is unable to reconcile the cruelty inflicted on our mothers and ourselves.

Evidence of this can be observed within the testimonies and interviews from the various former forced adoption institutions, government departments and submission No. 96 of the WA inquiry, where our experiences were either whitewashed, denied or wholly unacknowledged.

Othering language has been commonplace within these aforementioned inquiry transcripts, submitters seemed to not know the appropriate terms to use to discuss ourselves and our

experiences. At times government and institutional representatives appeared physically uncomfortable, hesitating in their speech when the conversation slides towards discussion around adopted adults.

Adopted people, persons, adults are the correct terms, we are not ‘the children’, ‘the babies’, ‘them’ or ‘it’. When our survivorship is spoken of in this manner, this can be an indication of an enormous gap in knowledge surrounding respectful language, yet alone comprehending the basics of how adoption policies and practices have shaped and continue to impact so many aspects of our lives.

One example I draw your attention to is from the transcript of Ngala CEO Michelle Dillon; located on page 2, paragraph 4. This is the moment in her prewritten speech where Dillon could have noted the impacts of the permanent severance from our mothers and yet she failed to even mention how an adoptee was impacted as a newborn and that we **too** lost so many years with our mothers, fathers and family.

‘I know from my research that women were made to feel powerless when they entered the doors of our facility. Many carried the stigma of unwanted pregnancies. Women were rendered as powerless and have lost so many years of their children’s lives’.

[https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(Evidence+Lookup+by+Com+ID\)/EF743FA75E64F8B448258A6F00138B59/\\$file/ev.pfa.231026.tro.001.md.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(Evidence+Lookup+by+Com+ID)/EF743FA75E64F8B448258A6F00138B59/$file/ev.pfa.231026.tro.001.md.pdf)

Hence, the importance of ongoing community awareness and education opportunities to dispel the historical malignant narratives which continue to undermine forced adoption truth telling. And the importance of former institutions to ‘hold space’ for adopted people and not disappear us from adoption dialogues, discussions and apologies.



WA Inquiry 2023-2024

As the inquiry enters the report writing phase we wish to reiterate our full support for the following investigation points detailed by the principal petitioner.

[https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/petitionsdb.nsf/\(\\$all\)/C219FBE85FB2693B482588FD001F063E/\\$file/ev.070.221111.sub.001.jm.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/petitionsdb.nsf/($all)/C219FBE85FB2693B482588FD001F063E/$file/ev.070.221111.sub.001.jm.pdf)

- Ensure adopted adults are regarded with equality alongside their mothers.
- Investigate the WA experience within its own unique circumstances, within the states cultural-social-religious mores and the potential impact of our state's significant geographical isolation.
- Understand why WA took longer to move away from adoption despite the instigation of the single parent benefit in 1973 by the Whitlam government.
- Establish how many women travelled into WA to conceal their pregnancy, give birth and return home in secrecy. How widespread was this practice and did WA's forced adoption institutions capitalise on this growing need for interstate unwed mothers to disappear?
- Explore the role of doctors as initial points of contact who procured babies for constituents of their personal religious denomination via Perth based maternity homes.
- Examine the operational role of the welfare department, maternity homes, hospitals, their matrons, boards of governance, funding mechanisms and other staff in procuring adoptions. Investigate the adequacy of care given to unwed mothers by these facilities and the interactions experienced by mothers with their care givers
- Interview forced adoption institutions, hospitals, health services and the WA medical board.
- Obtain testimonies from medical and nursing/midwifery professionals and others, who were witness to the policies, practices, and healthcare standards which survivors of FAE were subjected to.
- Reveal the extent to which the anti-lactation carcinogenic drug diethylstilboestrol (DES) was administered to mothers and consider the creation of a screening clinic in WA similar to that offered at the Royal Women's Melbourne.
- Please interview Carol Devine – Australian DES advocate and campaigner

- Review and repair the current service provision for survivors in terms of comprehensive specialised psychological, individualised mental health care requirements and other, gerontology services. Survivors are represented across the lifespan
- Address and remove the legislative and the legal constraints which prevent survivors from redress mechanisms. This MUST including lifting the statute of limitations.
- Allow adoptee's a clear and simplified pathway to revoke their adoption order fee free, have their father's name (and other details) added to their first birth certificate or to obtain an integrated birth certificate. Afford adoptees the right to have their names added to their biological parents' death certificate.
- Remove all remaining contact and information vetos held over adoptees and mothers, (lifelong restraining orders). There is no other sector in society which endures this level of control simply for being born or giving birth. It is a basic human right to know who you are and from whom you are related to.
- Inform all adopted people of their adoption status, through a supported process facilitated by trained psychologists. No-one should be discovering by accident or on their adopted parents' deathbed that they are adopted.
- Ensure that all former forced adoption facilities (where newborns were removed from their mothers), install commemorative structures within their grounds, which incorporate direct involvement with survivors. These now wealthy, influential, and powerful institutions must cease creating a fairy tale narration of their involvement in forced adoption and own the widespread trauma they have inflicted upon thousands in this state.
- Allocate appropriate funding and staffing to provide FREE and timely services which conduct reconnections between adoptees/mother to their family. Survivors should not be paying the bill to find their kin. Ensure these providers are qualified, have a code of conduct and a transparent complaints procedure.
- All WA survivors must have timely access to all their adoption records, hospital, welfare and maternity home records without redaction or censorship. In the past applications have been denied – with claims of being ‘lost’, ‘destroyed’ in a fire or ‘damaged’ in floods, despite their son or daughter being able to access their own newborn records from the same time.

- Examine and identify the financial operational processes by which government, adoptive institutions, adoptive parents, and mothers operated within.
- The issue of stolen wages from unwed mothers while incarcerated Perth's maternity mother-baby homes and forced to work as domestics.
- Who paid what to whom, for a newborn baby, the issue of commodification of newborns must be examined in detail
- AN inquiry could also ascertain why the WA government has failed to instigate 18 of the 20 recommendations from the 2012 Senate Inquiry. For more than a decade adopted people, their mothers and families have waited for these long overdue changes, yet they continue to unnecessarily suffer considerable psychological and personal harms within the confines of archaic and unnecessarily complex adoption legislation.

The GSASG membership eagerly awaits the inquiry report and its recommendations.