



15 June 2023

Submission by Isabel Andrews, Counsellor, and Manager, Adoption Jigsaw made to the:

**The West Australian Inquiry into Past Forced Adoptive Policies and Practices**

The Inquiry was announced on the 23rd of February 2023 and has the following Terms of Reference:

- 1) Understand the lived experiences of those affected by historical adoption practices
- 2) Examine the role of the State Government, health services and private institutions in these practices.
- 3) Identify what measures are currently available to assist persons experiencing distress, their effectiveness, and how those persons may be supported further.
- 4) Consider any other matter that arises during the course of the Inquiry deemed to be relevant to the Committee.

**Background to Adoption Jigsaw**

Adoption Jigsaw is a service of Jigsaw Search & Contact providing support, search, intermediary and lobbying services. It was established as a self-help group in 1978 by individuals personally involved in adoption.

Since 1988, Jigsaw has received some financial assistance from the Department of Communities and has employed a professional counsellor since the late 1990s. Jigsaw is overseen by a Board of Management, most of whom have personal experience of adoption.

I have been actively involved in adoption work since 1985, initially as a social worker in Government Adoption Services and later transitioning to Centrecare Adoption Services and the Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS). I joined Adoption Jigsaw as the Manager/Counsellor in 2001 and continue in that role today. My extensive experience in this field has provided me with valuable insights into the impact of adoption on individuals and families.

Jigsaw offers a range of services, including information dissemination, search assistance, intermediary/mediation services, support, and therapeutic counselling. We provide peer support groups for adopted people and birth mothers, publish a newsletter, maintain an active presence on Facebook, and maintain a library of articles and books for loan.

I participate in the Western Australian network meeting for providers and pre-Covid attended regular Adoption Conferences rotated between the States.

**Terms of Reference (1 & 2)**

- 1) *Understand the lived experiences of those affected by historical adoption practices*
- 2) *Examine the role of the State Government, health services, and private institutions in these practices.*

The Inquiry’s first two Terms of Reference aim to understand the lived experiences of those affected by historical adoption practices and to examine the role of relevant institutions in implementing these practices.

The Western Australian Inquiry and the Senate Inquiry into Forced Adoption Practices in Australia have already established a substantial body of evidence.

The findings from these Inquiries, which include personal and agency submissions, as well as a comprehensive literature review, highlight the coercive nature of past adoption practices that compelled single pregnant women to relinquish their children.

Many, personally involved, refer to it as ‘the white stolen generation’

To avoid redundancy, I would like to submit a summary prepared by Vanish in Victoria that outlines the impact of adoption on the parties involved. I fully support their statement that skilled counsellors are necessary to address the various presenting issues related to adoption trauma, and loss throughout their lifetime.

<b>Impact on</b>	<b>Psychological</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Biological</b>
Mothers	Post-Traumatic Stress Depression Suicidal thoughts and feelings Grief and Loss Anxiety and panic attacks Low self-worth Anger, hostility or rage	Relationship difficulties (i.e. Issues with trust, intimacy, closeness, perceived/feared rejection) Parenting difficulties Desire to marry and/or have further children Mistrust of those in authority Disruption in education and employment Issues with search & contact	Substance abuse Medical or physical complaints (e.g., headaches, digestive complaints)

Fathers	Grief and Loss Shame Guilt Regret Identity of father Low self-worth Mistrust of others Mental health disorders	Relationship difficulties with spouse/partner, subsequent children, child lost to adoption Discovery of paternity Process of sharing information with family Support of family Decision to have further children Issues with search & contact	Substance abuse Medical or physical complaints (e.g., headaches, digestive complaints)
Adopted Persons	Post-traumatic stress Depression Suicidal ideation and behaviour Grief and Loss Anxiety Low self-worth Identity issues	Relationship difficulties, attachment and abandonment issues, intimacy, closeness, perceived/feared rejection Specific issues around identity, genealogical bewilderment and genetic mirroring Relationship issues with trust, intimacy, closeness, perceived/feared rejection) Parenting difficulties Issues with search & contact	Substance abuse Medical or physical complaints (e.g., headaches, digestive complaints)

VANISH Inc. 15/06/2020.

In addition, I will submit (by mail) a book called – Moments of Memory, which was written by WA Mothers in 2018 as a result of a series of writing workshops we held. It captures the ‘lived experience’ of many mothers.

### **Terms of Reference (3)**

*Identify what measures are currently available to assist persons experiencing distress, their effectiveness, and how those persons may be supported further.*

There are three agencies providing post adoption services in Western Australia. These are Jigsaw, Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS), and Forced Adoption Services.

Both Jigsaw and ARCS receive partial funding from the Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support. Both agencies are licensed to provide mediation services as required by the Adoption Act. However, it is important to note that both agencies charge fees. To my knowledge, they are the only agencies in Australia to do so.

The third agency, Forced Adoption Services is managed by Relationships Australia and is funded by the Federal Government. It is a part-time service, they do not charge fees and are not licensed to provide mediation/intermediary services.

One of the rock beds of understanding adoption, is understanding that adoption is not an isolated event, but rather one that has lifelong consequences for all the parties involved.

Feedback from our clients indicates that our services are highly valued and individuals access our support when adoption-related issues arrive at different stages in their lives. Addressing how those affected by adoption can be further supported should be the key focus of this Inquiry.

The first crucial step in supporting individuals affected by adoption is to increase funding to the existing Western Australian agencies. This would bring them in line with fully funded agencies in other States who do not have to charge fees.

While Western Australia led the nation by being the first to deliver a formal Apology, no corresponding actions were taken to enhance services. There was no increase in funding of agencies or government services, and accessibility to records remains unchanged. An apology without tangible action, although emotionally significant, is largely an empty gesture.

It is concerning that clients in Western Australia currently face a waiting period of 5-9 months to obtain their adoption records. Given that many mothers are now in their 70s and 80s and time is limited, this delay is particularly distressing. Adoption Services, under the Dept of Communities, requires increased funding to improve response times. As a result of the prolonged wait, many individuals are turning to direct-to-consumer DNA tests, primarily with AncestryDNA, in the hopes of obtaining information about their birth families. Ancestry provides a report within approximately 2 months.

While direct-to-consumer DNA tests can be an effective tool for searches, especially in locating unknown fathers, it is better to first obtain all available legal information, which typically includes the mother's name, often the fathers, their ages at the time of adoption and the circumstances surrounding the adoption.

When relying solely on Ancestry for information individuals are more likely to reach out to anyone they match to in an attempt to piece together the identity of their birth parents. Some people disclose their adoption status to extended family members such as aunts or siblings who may not have known about the adoption. Naturally, this can be highly distressing for a mother or father who may have kept the secret for decades. In contrast, a licensed mediator would write a carefully worded letter addressed to the person sought.

To provide effective services, a 'one size fits all' approach is not suitable. Whilst specialist agencies with experienced counsellors are crucial in offering counselling and intermediary services, some individuals may need psychiatric services or therapies not able to be provided by the agencies.

A more effective approach would be to fund agencies to adopt a 'case work' or brokerage model, similar to the provision of many health services. In this model, the agency would continue to provide the majority of counselling and mediation services, but when a client requires multiple services (such as psychiatric assessment, drug and alcohol services,

or a specific type of therapy such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) the agency would take on a case work role. This would allow the agency counsellor to refer the client and engage another professional on contract. This is a more targeted approach, than attempting to train every therapist in Western Australia.

***Recommendation:** increase funding to agencies to provide free services and establish a brokerage system that allows clients to access the specific support services they need. Additionally, increase funding to State post-adoption services to reduce the extensive waitlists to obtain adoption records.*

### **Access to information and Search Tools.**

Both the Western Australian and the Federal Apologies have acknowledged the importance of allowing adopted individuals and biological parents to search for and connect with their families. However, neither apology resulted in improved access to the necessary certificates and search tools; which further compounds the trauma associated with adoption. The lack of access and the cost of obtaining certificates create significant barriers to conducting searches.

***Access to Certificates** - Searches can require the following certificates – an original and/or amended birth certificate(s), marriage searches noting that a mother may have married more than once and in any state in Australia, female adoptees may have changed their surname through marriage, a mother's birth certificate to get information about her parents (the adoptee's grandparents), death certificates for any party to the adoption and again in any state. Individuals, or us on their behalf, often need to apply for multiple certificates across various states, resulting in substantial costs amounting to hundreds of dollars.*

Currently, there are also restrictions on applications for certificates, for example, we/they cannot apply for a marriage certificate for a sibling's marriage. This limitation can make it nearly impossible for adoptees to locate their female siblings raised by the biological mother. Similarly, individuals cannot apply for a marriage certificate for their mother's sister (the adoptee's aunt).

Interestingly, the process of conducting searches in the UK is often easier, as anyone can apply for any certificate, additionally they are considerably cheaper than Australian certificates.

Another potential model worth considering is the one used in South Australia, whereby a nominated agency worker can view Birth, Death and Marriages (BDM) records on a non-disclosure basis. If the worker finds a married name for an adoptee's sibling, the worker can write to the sibling, explain the situation, and facilitate contact if both parties agree.

***Recommendation:** That adoptees and biological parents be able to apply for any relevant certificate without incurring costs. As not all certificates will be West Australian and as recommended by the Federal Inquiry, BDMs around Australia should establish cooperative policies. Consideration of the South Australian model that nominated workers be able to access certificates on a non-disclosure basis.*

## **Electoral Roll**

Recognising the trauma of family separation is not enough; a genuine recognition and apology must be accompanied by the necessary resources to help an individual locate their biological family members.

The Electoral Roll is an effective and discrete means of finding someone by obtaining their address and initiating written contact. However, the utility of the Electoral Roll is very limited when searching for someone with a common name. Often, only a birth father's first name and surname, not a middle name and additionally there can be uncertainty about the correct spelling of the name. This makes searching for the person expensive, very time-consuming, and sometimes impossible.

For instance, in Western Australia alone, there are approximately 42 men with the name John, Jon or Jonathan Roberts. As Western Australia has approximately 10 % of the nation's population, it is likely, there will be over 400 men with that name. In addition, some people are known by their second name, e.g. a man's legal name may be *Barry John Roberts*, but everyone – including the biological mother, may only know him as *John Roberts*, thus making it virtually impossible to locate the right person on the Electoral roll.

Currently, we have no method of filtering results on the Electoral Roll, leaving searchers with an overwhelming number of potential matches. Writing to hundreds of individuals is financially and resource prohibitive. Giving agencies access to dates of birth or at least a year of birth, is necessary for targeted and effective searches. Many previous attempts to address this issue through submissions have been unsuccessful.

The Department of Communities do have access to dates of birth on a non-disclosure basis, thus unable to assist us. The current search process is inefficient, can unnecessarily distress individuals.

***Recommendation:** That the Western Australian electoral commission enable agencies to access dates of birth, or year of birth on electoral rolls. Alternatively, that the Western Australian Electoral Commission or the Dept of Communities are given permission to share dob information as appropriate.*

## **Terms of Reference Four**

*4) Consider any other matter that arises during the course of the Inquiry deemed to be relevant to the Committee.*

Redress remains an unaddressed recommendation of the Senate Inquiry Recommendations. Redress is a public acknowledgment of past wrongs and allows institutions and governments to take responsibility and make amends.

The National Redress Scheme and other such schemes establish key principles for redress including:

- 1. Access to counselling and psychological services.*
- 2. A direct personal response from the institution(s) responsible for the abuse, for example an apology from the hospitals and homes.*

### 3. *A redress payment.*

It is evident that current agencies/services need better and broader funding than is currently available.

Institutions and homes that were involved in forced adoptions should be encouraged to give a sincere apology. Some of the apologies given express 'regret if anyone felt hurt by their actions'. This type of apology can inadvertently place blame on the individual for feeling hurt, rather than acknowledging the institutions' role in inflicting harm.

To date, Victoria is the only state that has established a redress scheme, and it is limited to mothers, without addressing redress for adopted individuals or, where relevant – fathers.

A comprehensive redress scheme should be made available to all parties involved in an adoption. Multiple inquiries and the included table by Vanish have clearly established that adopted individuals have been significantly affected, with some experiencing severe impacts. It is essential to recognise that the severity of the traumatic event does not solely determine the extent of the separation's impact.

An individual's temperament, upbringing, support system and access to resources all contribute to the overall impact on a person affected by forced adoption practices.

The process of applying for redress should not further traumatise individuals. A redress scheme should have a base rate for anyone involved in adoption, as the fact that a mother had to relinquish a child, or an individual was separated from their biological family has been recognised as a traumatic experience and should not require further proof. However, it is important to acknowledge that some individuals experienced additional layers of trauma, such as adoptees who were abused by their adoptive parents. These individuals should have the option to apply for additional recognition and payment, with appropriate support.

Applications for redress should be straightforward, with counselling support provided if needed. In addition to consulting stakeholders in Western Australia, it may be valuable to see input from Vanish in Victoria, as they have extensive experience with redress.

#### ***Recommendation:***

- 1) *Funding to services to enhance support and counselling for those impacted by adoption.*
- 2) *Encourage institutions encouraged to provide meaningful and sincere apologies that acknowledge the harm caused.*
- 3) *Establish a comprehensive redress scheme that encompasses all parties involved in adoption, considering base payments for affected and additional recognition for those who have experienced additional trauma.*

In summary, we make the following recommendations:

1. Increase funding to agencies to provide free services and establish a brokerage system that allows clients to access the specific support services they need. Additionally, increase funding to State post-adoption services to reduce the extensive

waitlists to obtain adoption records.

2. That adoptees and biological parents be able to apply for any relevant certificate without incurring costs. As not all certificates will be West Australian and as recommended by the Federal Inquiry, BDMs around Australia should establish cooperative policies. Consideration of the South Australian model that nominated workers be able to access certificates on a non-disclosure basis.
3. Increasing funding to established services to enhance support and counselling for those impacted by adoption.
4. Encourage institutions encouraged to provide meaningful and sincere apologies that acknowledge the harm caused.
5. Establish a comprehensive redress scheme that encompasses all parties involved in adoption, considering base payments for affected and additional recognition for those who have experienced additional trauma.

Please contact me if any clarification or further information is required.

Yours sincerely



Ms. Isabel Andrews  
Manager/Counsellor