

## Recordkeeping under child abuse Royal Commission spotlight

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2016/s4547671.htm>

Sarah Shands reported on this story on Friday, 30 September, 2016

### TRANSCRIPT

Recordkeeping practices are under the spotlight of the child abuse Royal Commission, with a new line of inquiry into the serious failings by institutions right across Australia to create and keep accurate and transparent records.

The investigation was sparked by countless stories from care leavers, who suffered abuse when in the care of the state, churches or charities as children.

The royal commission has found that poor records date back to the early 1900s, to as recently as the past five years and in sectors ranging from out-of-home care to youth sporting clubs.

Reporter Sarah Shands has been speaking to some abuse survivors about the difficulties they've encountered when trying to access their own personal records, including documents relating to their experiences of child sexual abuse.

Victorian woman Sandra Chapman has been searching for her personal history since 1956. She managed to track down her birth certificate, but that's the only record she has from her childhood.

'Sometimes it gets you down ... because you'd just like to be somebody ... and that's why that bit of paper is precious to me ... because I'll never have the memories of my family ...'

It's a familiar story right across the country. This woman, we'll call her Sissy, was 2 years old when she entered the foster care system in NSW.

'Well, the longest I stayed, in 6 years, anywhere was 9 months. The second longest stay was 7 months. And all the other stays were, you know, 2, 3, maybe 4 months ...'

Sissy's search for details about her childhood has taken her to the Department of Family and Community Services. She recently asked for access to her file. More than 6 weeks passed before the Department told her that it had her file but it had to redact them, to remove any information that wasn't directly related to her.

'What could possibly be in my files if it's not relevant to me? And they said, names of people who I stayed with, names of other children who are in the welfare system and details of my siblings. What else is there to know? [laughs] It seems to me that that would be part of my story.'

She made an appointment to read the redacted files, only to be disappointed.

'It finally rolled around for this appointment, and I'd psyched myself to read all this stuff that I don't remember, and wanna know but don't wanna know, and I was very nervous, but I got to the office there, and they said "Oh, I'm sorry but we haven't had time to redact the things in it that aren't relevant to you".'

Sissy was turned away on 2 separate occasions. And it wasn't until her husband made contact with the NSW Ombudsman that she was eventually able to see her foster care records for the first time.

'I have 2 photos. One where I was about three and a half/four, and one where I'm dressed in my school uniform for my first day of school, standing in the driveway of a place at Blacktown. So I wouldn't have had those 2 photos if I wasn't able to access my file'.

Juliet Munro is in charge of providing care leavers with access to the files held by the Department of Family and Community Services in NSW. She says that under current state law, the redaction of files is required by legislation, meaning important family history is being lost.

'The files from the 50s and 60s are really files on the *administration* of the care of the child, so it's true those older files don't contain the sort of childhood information that many of our mature age care leavers are looking for.'

Leonie Sheedy is the CEO and co-founder of CLAN, the support network for Care Leavers in Australia, and says many CLAN members are further traumatised by the process that they have to go through to access to files.

'They were our legal parents, the government. And they have a obligation to provide us with an identity. We can cope with the nasty, horrible things that went on. We need to know everything about our family. Nobody else in Australia goes back to a government department to find out about their family, except care leavers. Why can't we have the good the bad and the ugly information?'

The Royal Commission is taking written submissions on the matter, until Monday.