

# **Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Nauru Detention Centre**

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### **Contact details:**

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Address .

### **Acronyms used:**

SCA is used in place of (Save the Children Australia)  
VMM: Vulnerable Minors Meeting  
OPC: Offshore processing centre (now changed to regional processing centre)

### **Role:**

I worked in the position of a Recreation worker from 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2014 to February 2015. In this position it was my reasonability to provide recreational activities and personal development programs to children aged 2- 18 as part of the recreation team. (Later in my employment the early childhood program was set up, however we still had infants regularly attending sessions).

### **General Concerns as a worker with policies:**

I was surprised that as a worker going into a culturally complex environment that I was given no formal or informal training around culture behaviours and sensitivities by SCA or Transfield. Although it can be said that the majority of SCA workers had experience with working with different cultures, very few would have knowledge or experience in such a multicultural complex environment. The Human Resource team of SCA gave a sheet with recommended dress code for inside the centre before your first employment deployment. The main point in this was to wear clothing that covered your knees. However once on island this was not followed or encouraged.

I was concerned as a worker by the lack of policies regarding how we should act and respond as a team and coordinate with other departments within Save the children if any major event occurred. The term “respond” is used as actions that were within our duty of care. In all other jobs I have held there has been clear framework to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. The only concrete thing we had was to ring our manager when high-level incidences occurred. This was problematic later in my employment as work phones were banned from the centre.

When I arrived, the centre had been open for 5-6 months, however there was no child behaviour management policy in place for recreation. This would be considered bad practice in Australia, even more so when working with children with high behavioural needs. These policies keep children and staff safe. The

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recreation staff had to continually raising this with SCA management to get one in place, it was close to a year by the time the policy was active. I found this oversight troubling as clear structures for young people with trauma and behaviour needs is important to reduce anxiety and create consistency.

There was no child protection training for staff (this is now in place for SCA workers 1.5 years after opening). This is a concern even though most SCA workers would be competent in this area. Policies are put in place so everyone is using the same system so nothing is lost or underreported. This is against common practice. Wilsons and Transfield staff most of which would not have any experience working with children only have to sign a piece of paper on code and conduct around children. For someone who has no experience in child protection this is putting children and staff in danger. These staff had the longest contact hours with children, when positioned in OPC3. SCA's contact hours were very limited to school, recreation and caseworker visits.

Before entering any OPC site you are given a safety brief, this included the policy that covered shoes must be worn. This is because the ground is covered in large chunks of loose gravel, so was needed as it presented a real WHS risk. However it is very ironic that this was a high concern and enforced, when children were running around in thongs, often broken. The environment that these children were in would not reach the basic standards of an Australian Prison. The Family camp was a small high crowed area of reclaimed land, surrounding it was uninhabitable land. The ground was covered in white chunks of rocks, which was extremely glary in the sun. All vegetation was fenced off so children had no stimuli except this gravel and severely restricted shaded areas. The only recreation space for 700 people was one volleyball court on the gravel and the recreation tent. This was later expanded to include a basic gym and a small soccer pitch, however the hours were restricted. This only occurred over a year after opening.

### **Sexualised behaviour:**

Throughout my time working in Nauru, I witnessed inappropriate sexualised behaviour of children. This ranged from children touching peers inappropriately acting out sexual intercourse with peers or using sexual language beyond their age. This behaviour was displayed from children as young as 5. Meeting notes from the recreation team meetings will support this. If you wish to find more information on this, look into caseworker notes and VMM meeting minutes were this was brought up as a concern across recreation and education. I was also shocked to see that male guards were stationed at the female shower blocks, with no criminal checks this posed a threat to the safety of young girls and women, which has now been shown in the Moss report. This also happened around the camp with guards making sexual advances on under aged girls and subjecting them to verbal sexualised abuse. If you want supported documented information regarding this look request VMM meeting notes and/or incident reports of this nature.

### **Inadequate supervision:**

When Save the Children signed their current contract (ending in October 2015) they agreed to 1-30 expat ratio to children in Youth and Child recreation. This caused staff huge concern, as we knew that we would not be able to provide safe supervision at these ratios. We knew this due to intermediate understaffing up to this point, which had forced us at times to work to and above that ratio. To put this in context we work with children with high behavioural needs, some of which would require one on one-support workers in Australia. The amount of fights that staff had to deal with between children clearly points to understaffing, as much of these could have been intervened and stopped if there was appropriate supervision. Roles taken will show this understaffing, along with recreation session reviews. It was commonplace for bullying to occur in sessions, physical abuse of peers and climbing at dangerous heights, this was not because of lack of experience or care by staff it was simply a numbers issue, what was sometimes referred to as fire fighting as staff could only hope to deal with the worst cases. However, I also wish to note although this was present, it was not of totality, high quality and safe sessions were delivered.

### **Program age groups:**

We ran two age groups infant-11 child recreation and 11-18 youth recreation. This in itself was not appropriate, as it did not provide age specific activities for young people. This meant programming did not support all age groups' developmental needs. The recreation tent consisted on five rooms, of which, only one had a door. This meant children could roam unsupervised while programs were running and also when no staff were present. Numerous requests were made to get doors on the grounds of child protection issues this caused. This was simply to ensure children were in supervised areas. In my professional view, which can be supported by session reviews completed by staff, (which SCA have on file of all sessions run) the inadequate suppression created child protection issues. To support this an example is an incident of two children holding down a third child who was aged 6 and peeing on him. This would not have happened if we had the right staffing ratios and appropriate space for recreation.

### **Unsafe levels of Heat:**

The heat inside the recreation tent was of an unsafe level, this was brought to the attention of managers who then, according to Senior SCA management in Melbourne took the issue to Canberra, however it was rejected. This is very significant as the department were knowingly putting children at extreme risk of heat related illness (IR's completed on heat related illness and also in session reviews can support this). It is also important to note that no follow up to further investigate of the primary evidence the recreation team put forward was ever requested. It is also important to note that these same temperatures would be recorded where families lived. It would also be possible that it would be hotter in accommodation tents as the ceilings are about a fifth of the height. Please note these are the **drafts** that the recreation team put together and signed as a team

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as it was of great concern to us. You can request the final copies from Save the Children as the final copies are on the email system. The related documents are as follows and have been uploaded. To whom this will concern (letter outlining the evidence and concern) Reading's in recreation tent (temperatures recorded), Hot weather guidelines (supporting evidence of safe and unsafe temperatures for activities).

### **Lack of Toys for children:**

Throughout my employment on Nauru I was very aware of the lack of toys available to children of all ages. There were very limited supplies of toys in the canteen limited to UNO, MP3 players and hacky sacks, which were constantly running out as children told me. The only toys that the children received were from a donation by Sarah Johansson Young. Most of these were perishable toys eg pencils and colouring in books so did not last long. I am presuming these were not intended to be the only personal toys the children were given. Some of the children had been in detention for up to 18 months; to not have toys for this amount of time has an impact on the development of a child. Children in desperation to play with toys often broke into the recreation storage room. This also links into an important indirect impact of this. This meant that we as SCA staff members were the only ones who had toys, this resulted in children devoting their time to us as we could give them toys to play with. Throughout my time in the centre you could see the breakdown of family units as parents had very limited contact with their own children. The parents in the camp had very little control or input into their children's lives. A child's day would be off to school at 9.30 (note parents could not freely visit the school and it was located in another camp OPC1), return to OPC3 at 3.30pm, at 4pm-5.30pm recreation, 5.30-7pm dinner in the mess, 7-9pm recreation, 9pm onwards to bed. This created an unhealthy disconnect between children and parents.

### **Extreme Under Resourcing:**

Attached is a document titled to "To whom concern resources" this is a letter from the recreation team it was a last ditched effort to get this issue heard. We had not received any resources to run programs for 8 months this extended to 11 months after the letter this was due to the department of immigration rejecting every procurement request we placed. Staff out of their own pockets were resourcing the program, this was not a replacement to the need for resources, the program suffered drastically, limiting what we could offer. It was my belief along with co-workers that we were providing substandard quality. Please read the letter for a full understanding.

In the recent Moss report it mentions an incident of an assault of 4-year-old girl by a guard, which occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2014. It concluded that due to the father not being able to recall the event along with no medical history from IHMS that this allegation could not be substantiated. I witnessed this assault along with another staff member. My witness statement will be

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attached (4 year old girl hit by guard). Now this conclusion holds major concerns to me. This is because critical incidents such as this have a very strict reporting schedule and follow up (you can request this from Wilsons of how they classify incidents and reporting time frames). Now this includes Wilson welfare following up with the family and investigating (important to note there is no trained child interviewers on island). SCA caseworkers would have also had to follow up and support the family if needed. Both above responses are required to maintain paper work records on the follow up of the incident. This leaves me to see two options that may have occurred, one; that no follow up was done which would be a failure in duty of care. Two; the paper work was not provided to the Moss report. I also find it interesting that my colleague and myself were not questioned by the Moss report, as we were eyewitnesses to this event. In regards to IHMS having to record maybe due to a first aid trained security guard dealing with her. It is important to note that recreation staff have only 3 and half hours of contact with the children a day. We only witnessed this as we had come in early, the amount of unreported events, I suspect, would be huge. Children often complained about guards physically handling them against their will, so much so you start seeing children finding it hard to recall details as it had become normalised to them you often got statements "but it happens all the time nothing happens when I report it". Children often waited to tell SCA staff members of concerns about physical or verbal altercations with security because they did not feel safe, or felt that nothing would get done if they reported it through security. This caused huge loss of information, as you could not follow up on the identity of guards accused, as they were off duty by the time the issue was raised. It is also important to understand that guards do not have any child protection training even so they have long hours of contact with them. No background checks are required.

### **Self-harm by minors:**

Please look into the self-harm by minor there will be a lot of notes in the VMM meeting notes which SCA have. My time on island I witnessed with other staff, minors acting out in play and speaking about committing suicide. The amount of young people actively self-harming was extremely distressing. I have worked with youth at risk where self-harm has been present, however, I have never seen it so prevalent and common, with young people in vicious cycles of mental health issues. This was from pre-teen to teenagers. There was an incident where a young 15-year old boy had climbed a toilet block and was threatening to jump from the roof. I had a good working rapport with this young boy and family, so I went to offer support to the negotiators (at this point he had been up there for over an hour). I was shocked to see that security had not closed off the area and children were walking past, some sitting down to watch. I had a young girl under ten come up to me and ask if this boy 'would be coming to recreation tomorrow? Or do you think he will jump?' I asked older youth who were there who were visibly upset to help me get the younger children away. I want to note that it was also not appropriate for teenagers to be watching and the choice to ask them to help me was choosing the better of two evils. I was also shocked that below the

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young boy four mattresses had been laid out, one of which had blood from some one else's previous attempt.

### **Bus incident:**

A group of young people on their way home from school, that were subject to an attempted assault or extreme intimidation. The children were singing on the way home from school. I was catching a lift down to the recreation office at OPC3 so I jumped on a school bus; I had cricket gear with me. This was placed next to the driver, as there was a gap between his seat and the passenger's seat (where I was sitting). The young people were singing loudly, and on one occasion I asked them to quieten down, which they did. They continued to singing and it would to be fair to say it was loud but in good nature. Without warning the bus driver slammed on the breaks and jumped out of the bus grabbing a wooden cricket bat. He ran around to the side door and entered the isle. The security guard had stood up and was in a position to stop him but did not. The driver, with the cricket bat raised, walked up the isle, shouting get off the bus. He then raised the cricket bat in a threatening way as if he was about to hit a particular child, at this point the security guard restrained him and I was able to get the bat out of his hand. We removed him from the bus. Out of pure luck a security van was following us so they were able to take him and replace the driver. At no point did the driver ask myself, or the security officer to get the children to quieten down. On arrival I asked for the young people to stay in the fenced off area, which was the bus stop as we needed to talk about what had occurred. Young people were either shocked, in tears, scared or angry. At this stage I reported to the guard on duty what had occurred so Wilsons could start their response. I then had to run up to the office tents to alert an SCA senior what had occurred, a response followed. Till this day I have not been given a record of my statement, even though I have requested it a number of times. I am concerned that it not longer exists.

### **Reporting concerns:**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January I witnessed an incident of child abuse while working; this involved an infant. I have attached the document name: Statement Tobias Gunn. Now this incident using Wilson's incident determination document (at that point in time it may have changed since) rated the incident as a critical. I responded along with other SCA staff members appropriately to the time contrasts and actions required to help safe guard this infant. Now Wilsons, contrary to their own policy, did not honour the "critical" rating. Note that at this stage they were outside of the time frames so would have incurred a fine by the Department of Immigration, same applies to SCA if procedures are not meet. I continued to do the reporting required of me, as I had and was still within the time frame. However I was interrupted twice first by the lady that was in charge of taking statements and then by ROMO 1 (on duty manager for Wilsons at OPC3) asking me to down grade it to a Major. The first time was done in a friendly manner, however the second time was with intimidation, trying to get me to change it. I

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stated that it was not within my role to change the rating and I was following their policy and procedures in categorising it. They then demanded to talk to the on site senior who was . was brought up to speed on events and read the Incident report for the details. He found no error in how the event was rated as critical. The discussion was heated; Wilsons were angry that we would not change the rating even though it was correct using their determination tool. They then rang the on island Wilson security manager and told us that he supports their view and we needed to change it. spoke to the on island manager and stated that we would not be changing it. This then escalated to a meeting up at OPC1 with SCA operations manager ( current operations manager) and Heads of Wilsons security the report was sent to the meeting. The end result was they downgraded it against the existing policy. This is concerning as although there could be a case for reviewing the policy in rating an incident it would be done after the event not while the response is happening. I cannot be sure whether the penalty for being out of the time frame motivated Wilson's actions or not. It is also common for staff members to be alone with out managers on site as they worked in OPC1 so it is possible that this sort of bullying occurred with success. Other staff in the recreation team complained of similar occurrences of this nature.

Please feel free to contact me in regards to the above if you have any questions.

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