

Hall for Children

1979 – 1999

Details

The Hall for Children was established in 1979 at Hazelbrook, between Queens Road and Hall Parade, in a building called “Oaklands”. It was a non-government home for children and adults with disabilities described as having “high support needs” (*Suffer the Children*, p.1). From the time of its opening until 1994, it was funded by the Commonwealth government as a Special Purpose Nursing Home. It was run by a private company called Kanowa Pty Ltd. From December 1994, funding was provided by the New South Wales Disability Services Program. A board of family members of residents at the Hall was established as a charitable company, Oberlin Ltd, and Kanowa was contracted to administer the Hall.

While the funding and organisational arrangements changed in 1994, the same individuals were involved in the management and administration of the Hall for Children for the whole time it operated.

While little is known about the administration of the Hall for Children before 1994, there were around 60 beds and residents were aged from 4-30 years of age. The Community Services Commission estimated that around two thirds of the residents were children. Some of the people at the Hall for Children were wards of the state or under guardianship orders, while others were placed there privately by their parents.

Survivors who were at the Hall for Children in the 1980s have reported being forced to undertake hard labour, that food and education was severely inadequate, that there were not enough staff, and that there were frequent injuries and some deaths of residents as a result (Submission 93 to the Senate Inquiry into Violence, Abuse and Neglect Against People with Disability in Institutional and Residential Settings).

The site of the Hall for Children also had a separate school which was attended by residents aged 4-21, and there was also a program for post-school training. The school was established in 1989. However, the Community Services Commission found that the education provided was inadequate for the residents’ needs.

In 1996, a public scandal occurred following newspaper reports of multiple deaths of residents at the Hall for Children, and terrible conditions for the people there (*Disabled Home A ‘Hall Of Hell’ For Children*, Sydney Morning Herald, 1996). The Community Services Commission was appointed to conduct an Inquiry, which involved contact with current and former staff members, visits to the Hall, and discussions with relevant government departments and administrators of the Hall.

The Community Services Commission found that the Hall for Children was unsuitable to provide residential disability services in multiple ways. First, it found that “the provision of services by the Hall for Children is not in keeping with NSW Disability Services Standards, the Principles of the NSW Disability Services Act 1993 and international human rights instruments” (*Suffer the Children*, p.10). It also found that the Hall “presents serious risks to, and cannot ensure the safety of, residents”. The Inquiry also noted multiple incidences of physical and sexual abuse, some occurring between residents and others perpetrated by staff.

The Inquiry found that the staff to resident ratios were extremely low, and noted that working conditions were also unsafe for staff, leading to a very high staff turnover and a lack of trained or experienced staff. The Inquiry found that police checks were not undertaken on staff. Staff who did try to raise issues were issued with letters

questioning their performance, and there was a culture of fear and intimidation if staff tried to speak up.

The Inquiry found that, partly because of the low staff to resident ratios, residents were frequently medicated so they could be better controlled. Residents were also locked in their rooms for extended periods of time, or were locked outside for many hours.

Medicating the residents included the practice of placing girls on the contraceptive pill once they began menstruating as a matter of course, and while parental consent was obtained, the Inquiry noted that this was clearly the preferred practice. It was also noted that medication controls often failed, leading residents to be given medications meant for others.

The physical conditions of the Hall for Children were also extremely inadequate, including some areas which were inaccessible due being unsafe. The Inquiry also found that the supply of hot water was intermittent, meaning that residents were sometimes given cold showers or were forced to wash from a bucket of warmed water. Bedding and heating were also deemed inadequate, and parts of the building leaked when it rained.

The Inquiry also noted that the governance arrangements for the Hall for Children were extremely complex and potentially constituted a conflict of interest, as Kanowa, the company who ran the Hall was also the landlord of the building. In addition, the relationship between Kanowa and the Oberlin Board was unclear.

The primary recommendation from the Inquiry was that the Hall for Children be closed, with other recommendations to facilitate this. It was confirmed in 1997 that the Hall would be closed, with the transition for residents occurring over the next 2 years (*Where the Heart Is*, Sydney Morning Herald, 2000). Residents were placed in group homes or other institutions once the Hall for Children closed. Since 2009, the site of the Hall for Children has been owned by Korowal, an independent school.

Records

The location of any records created by the Hall for Children is unknown. As some residents at the Hall for Children were under ward of the state or guardianship orders, the New South Wales government may hold records relating to these people. Both ward of the state and disability records are held by the Department of Communities and Justice.

More info

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