

The Continuum of Care Operating Model in Child and Family Welfare: An Australian Case Study

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Introduction

Australian child protective services have increased over the past 10 years. In Victoria, 31.9 in every 1,000 children received child protection services in 2020 (AIHW, 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in all areas of the Australian child protection system (AIHW, 2020).

Numerous studies in Australia, and internationally, suggest that children in OOHC are particularly vulnerable to negative psychological and behavioural outcomes compared to children in the general population (Lee & Holmes, 2021; Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021; Courtney et al., 2007; Mendez et al., 2021).

The above are key drivers behind the Victorian Government's child and family system transformation agenda – *Roadmap for Reform* (DHHS, 2016). Through the Roadmap for Reform, the government set a clear agenda for outcomes-focused, integrated, person-centred and connected services across the children and families service system.

In Victoria, this vision has been brought to life with a pathway service delivery model offered by Key Assets and Allambi Care. The *Key Assets and Allambi Care Early Intervention, Prevention, Home Based Care and Residential Care Services Model* is described as the Continuum of Care Operational Model (COCO). The Model delivers a suite of services from early help, targeted and specialist support, through to foster care and residential care. This model aims to deliver better outcomes by offering a variety of services, which are tailored to the needs of children and families in and on the edge of Out of Home Care (OOHC)

The COCO model is being applied to Key Assets and Allambi Care's work with around 51 families requiring support to look after children safely at home, 35 foster care target placements and 19 children and young people across eleven residential units.

Key Assets and Allambi Care Early Intervention, Prevention, Home Based Care and Residential Care Services Model, known as COCO (Continuum of Care Operational Model).

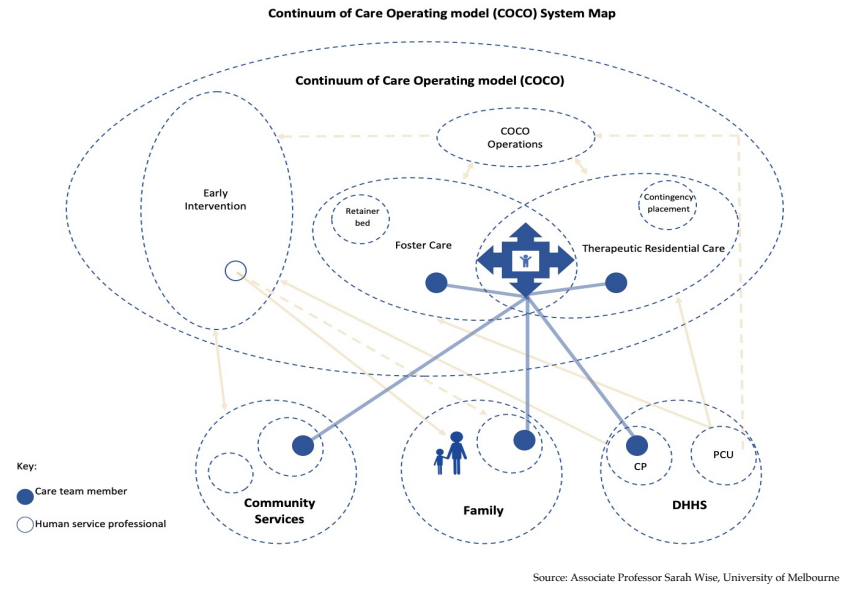
The COCO service delivery model in Victoria, Australia depicts an integrated service system across child and family services, universal services, community and other specialist services.

COCO intends to deliver better outcomes through three pathways:

- 1) early help (for people early in need and early in life)
- 2) targeted and specialist support (for children and families with a range of needs) and continuing care (for children and young people who cannot live at home).
- 3)

The COCO model aims to develop effective pathways of support and share accountability for outcomes across systems (Allambi Care NBRE, 2020; DHHS, 2019; KA Practice Framework, 2018) and use effective relationships to build family capability and promote child development.

A core objective of the model is to wrap a seamless fabric of flexible, inclusive and culturally competent services around vulnerable children and their families.



Literature Review: Continuum of Care Models

- Since the 1980s, holistic models have increasingly gained traction as the preferred approach for delivering evidence-based services to vulnerable children and their families in need of welfare support and protection (Burchard, Bruns & Burchard, 2002; Coldiron, Burns & Quick, 2017; Kaye, De Panfilis, Bright & Fisher, 2012).
- Child and family welfare 'continuum of care' approaches often comprise a range of collaborating or integrated services such as welfare and protection, education, health, mental health, disability, housing and allied services (Coldiron, Burns and Quick, 2017; Lushey et al., 2017).
- Continuum models addressing the needs of vulnerable children and families in the early twenty-first century, within Australia and internationally, privilege engagement, collaboration, agency and empowerment, strengths-based practice, responsive access, cultural competence, a theory of change and clear outcome focus (Finan et al., 2018; Gillingham, 2017). Almost all evidence in the holistic/integrated practice domain attributes good outcomes in large measure to the power of effective relationships at all levels from micro to macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
- Continuum models in Australia are often local adaptations of international approaches such as Solution Based Casework, SBC (Antle et al., 2012) and Strengthening Families, Protecting Children (Harper Brown, 2016).
- Criticisms of Australian child welfare and protection service frameworks highlight an absence of convincing research evidence on the effectiveness of continuum models (Finan et al., 2018; Gillingham, 2017).
- Further evaluation is needed to address this gap in the evaluations of continuum of care approaches, and improve practice to meet the complex needs of some of society's most vulnerable children and their families (Albers et al., 2017).

Case Study

By the time he was 15 years old, Ben had experienced many years of abuse and neglect and failed placements in Out-of-Home Care. His first experience of a Therapeutic Residential Program (TRC) was with Allambi Care. This placement proved to be a major turning point for Ben. He was assisted to overcome substance use issues, become more behaviourally settled, and re-engage with education. Allambi Care's TRC program is a core element of the Continuum of Care Operational (COCO) Model. Through COCO, Ben became linked to the services of Allambi's partner organisation, Key Assets. Key Assets' suite of COCO services includes Home-Based Care and Family Support.

Allambi Care's Family Engagement and Support Team soon formed a trusted relationship with Ben's father, Jeff and his and stepmother, Mary Anne. Jeff was keen to bond again with his son after many years' separation. The Team educated Ben's parents on his mental health and cognitive issues and helped them understand implications of his trauma history. Allambi Care's family support services facilitated Ben's reunification with his father and stepmother. Key Assets then took over case management.

The family reunification process proved successful. However, Ben later decided to transition to an independent living situation. A dangerous level of conflict with his housemate soon developed. This put Ben at risk of returning to residential care which would have been detrimental to his self-esteem and progress toward independence.

A joint support program was therefore developed within COCO to facilitate Ben's transition to living alone with individualised support. This approach has been successful; Ben currently resides in his own apartment and has gained employment. He receives a State-funded Targeted Support Package (TSP) managed by Key Assets; he also accesses disability services from the Australian Government which he will manage indefinitely with Allambi Care. COCO's flexibility and responsiveness has enabled Ben and his family to seamlessly engage with a diverse range of services tailored to their changing needs. In a siloed service system, the positive outcomes achieved and Ben's far brighter future, would, almost certainly, have been more difficult to achieve.

Next Steps

A rigorous independent action research evaluation of COCO's service delivery model, implementation and outcomes is currently underway. The evaluation is being undertaken by a team from Melbourne University led by Associate Professor Sarah Wise; it has an expected completion date of December 2021. The evaluation is utilizing an action research methodology and will involve a process/implementation evaluation, and an outcomes evaluation across a 9 – 12 month period. The evaluation will consider how the service sits in the wider out-of-home care (OOHC) service system and make recommendations for further innovation.

This study of the Continuum of Care Model is one of the first formal outcome evaluations of a continuum of care service model in Australia (Albers et al., 2017; Finan et al., 2017). It will also address an international deficit in this area of research, with very few studies having been conducted regarding the effectiveness of flexible, holistic, continuum of care service delivery approaches in meeting the complex needs of some of society's most vulnerable children and their families (Albers et al., 2017; Lushey et al., 2017; Finan et al., 2017).

Should positive outcomes for vulnerable children and families emerge as evidence from this evaluation, the newly implemented COCO Model may have potential for broader implementation in Australia and internationally.

Acknowledgements

A partnership between Key Assets and Allambi Care and the University of Melbourne.

Key Assets Management; Lisa Ranahan and Simone Carr.
Allambi Care Management; Brett Smith and Mark Harrison.

The University of Melbourne Research Team:
A/Prof Sarah Wise, Dr Tatiana Corrales, Dr Gemma McKibbin and Dr Patricia McNamara.

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Further Information

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