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## 'Optimism culture' worsens child neglect

**Ewin Hannan**  
**Milanda Rout**

AN entrenched and misplaced "culture of optimism" among child welfare agencies has exacerbated the failure of state governments to tackle child neglect, with thousands of non-indigenous children living in squalor throughout suburban Australia.

The criticism came as the Brumby Government was under renewed scrutiny last night after former neighbours of Karen Louise Cunningham said they had repeatedly called state authorities this year to report the squalid state of her Geelong house.

Despite the Victorian Department of Human Services saying they had closed the file on Ms Cunningham and her children 12 months ago, residents who lived next door to the mother of seven told *The Australian* they had repeatedly called the department this year to report the appalling state of the house and the children.

Child welfare experts said revelations about children living in squalor in Ms Cunningham's Adelaide house highlighted the need for a national reporting system, and how state authorities prematurely closed neglect cases in the mistaken belief chronic offenders could be reformed.

As the Rudd Government works on a national child protection framework, experts renewed calls for a national database that used agencies such as Centrelink to track the movement of at-risk children from state to state.

Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci said

the Adelaide scandal showed governments needed to put more emphasis on treating child neglect as a crime and less on giving support to families.

"There are thousands of children across Australia, not just remote Australia, but in suburban and metropolitan areas, who are living in squalor. We have seen them, we work with them," Dr Tucci said. "I think the mindset is that neglect isn't as bad as physical or sexual abuse, that it's best treated by supporting and educating parents. It's like there is a hierarchy, and it's seen as really low on that hierarchy.

"There is this culture of an optimism. When neglecting families make a little bit of change, they are seen as making huge changes. Cases are closed and there is an optimistic view developed that things will get better from then on, when the reality is that where neglect is chronic, it doesn't get better, it gets worse,"

Dr Tucci said authorities should be more prepared to treat chronic neglect of children as a criminal offence. "What we have tended to do is only ever see child neglect through the welfare lens, and we need to start to see it through a crime lens because it is a crime," he said.

"We have positioned child neglect as the outcome of disadvantage and poverty, and sometimes it is, be it financial stress or a crisis where real support is needed. But equally, there are lot of poor families who look after their children beautifully.

"This not just an issue of poverty. This is an issue about children's rights and whether, as a

community, we accept and tolerate this standard of neglect. It's just unacceptable."

Federal Families, Housing and Communities Services Minister Jenny Macklin said yesterday there was "clear evidence of the need to better share child protection information both within and between jurisdictions".

"We need to improve the way agencies, payments and programs interact with each other to help prevent abuse and better protect children identified at risk," Ms Macklin said. "This is where agencies like Centrelink can play a valuable role."

A former Geelong neighbour of Ms Cunningham said her husband rang the department twice at Christmas about the disgusting mess — including reporting there were smashed windows and dirty nappies smeared along the walls.

"We have a baby, so we worried about the health aspects," she said.

Another Corio resident had to call the council, who then alerted the department, eight months ago after rats began streaming in under his fence from Ms Cunningham's property.

"The house was just disgusting," he said.

Neighbours reported that it took the department almost two months to make the house liveable after Ms Cunningham left in January. This followed Ms Cunningham's eviction from a separate DHS house in Geelong five years earlier.

"It took them two months to clean it up. They had to renovate the whole house — both the inside and the outside," the resident said.