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Waitakere Anti-Violence Essential Services

WAVES Trust

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**Office of the Children's Commissioner**  
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## **Submission on the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty**

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12 October 2012

WAVES Trust is an interagency family violence network organisation. The membership is primarily government agencies and non-government service providers who work in the area of family violence. There are also members who are not specifically family violence agencies but their work complements or supports efforts to reduce violence in Waitakere.

We are committed to strengthening the work of those who support and inform victims of family violence and those who hold offenders accountable and support them to make positive changes to their behaviour. WAVES acts to support and resource all member agencies to practice to the highest standards of integrity and professional ethics.

WAVES Trust provides:

- A networking forum to encourage and support statutory and community services to provide integrated and collaborative services to reduce family violence
- Links to other organisations through the interagency network
- Community advocacy and representation on initiatives that target family violence
- Information about best practice in family violence intervention and support for the implementation of best practice

- Primary prevention, capacity building and education opportunities for those working to reduce family violence
- Contract management of interagency projects and contracts
- Access to current, relevant research Monitoring of community initiatives such as the Waitakere Family Violence Court
- An overview of information deficits and initiation of local research

WAVES Trust is a charitable trust. Governance is vested in the Board chaired by trustee Waitakere Family Court Judge David Mather. There are 5 trustees including David Mather, Penny Hulse (Auckland Council Deputy Mayor), Howard Dawson (Man Alive), Steve Kehoe (NZ Police) and Tiaria Fletcher (Lifewise Family Services).

There are currently four staff members – a Manager, two part-time Coordinators, and an Administrator, as well as one contracted part-time Project Leader.

## Background

The Trust's role in the community is to provide services and information to the network of family violence service providers and related agencies in Waitakere. For the past three years WAVES Trust has been actively addressing gaps in service provision to children living with family violence and child maltreatment in Waitakere. These activities have contributed valuable experience and knowledge to our submission.

The family violence sector engages with individuals and families affected by family violence, which includes perpetrators and victims of, and witnesses to, violence directed at intimate partners, at children, or towards other members of the family/household such as elders and extended family.

In preparation for this submission we attended the consultation event hosted by the University of Auckland. We have also drawn on information received during earlier consultations with the WAVES Network and Waitakere community groups which supported the Network's submission on the Minister of Social Development's *Green Paper for Vulnerable Children*. That submission included the following recommendations:

- That a **Children's Act** be developed appointing Government and Community Boards and ensuring political independence of the Office of the Children's Commissioner. These Boards and the Commissioner would oversee the development, implementation, and reporting on an Action Plan for All New Zealand Children and a national strategy on child maltreatment.
- That government should not limit its discussion to targeting vulnerable children in the forthcoming White Paper and should produce an **Action Plan for All Children**.
- That government make reducing child poverty a key priority for this term and ensure that progress is assessed and evaluated.
- That government investigate and implement solutions to promote children's interests across ministerial portfolios and seek cross-party support for these measures.

- That all New Zealand government policies and legislation affecting to children be brought into line with UNCROC and Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi as soon as opportunities arise.
- That existing and future government reviews with potential impacts for children immediately be revised ensuring that impacts on children are assessed as part of the review process and solutions implemented to mitigate any adverse consequences.
- Government investigate ways to promote and support inter-agency collaboration for children and fund these accordingly.

## Summary

We thank the Children's Commissioner and his Experts Advisory Group (EAG) for giving us the opportunity to make this submission. Our submission below discusses how family/whanau violence (FV) intersects with child poverty and makes recommendations on aspects of the *Solutions to Child Poverty* document that relate specifically to FV.

Earlier this year we undertook a consultation process services in our network and wider community organisations on the *Green Paper*. During these meetings stakeholders identified the need for a coherent and agreed vision of what children need to promote their wellbeing and a corresponding commitment on the part of present and future Governments to uphold that vision across sectors and within government across ministerial portfolios. The WAVES Network recommended that a Children's Act be enshrined in legislation with a specific action plan developed for reducing child poverty. We believe that a Children's Act is a necessary precursor to any activities aimed at reducing child poverty because this is the best way to ensure that priorities set by one government are maintained during subsequent terms and across changes of government.

In our submission below we draw the EAG members' attention to the inter-relationship between poverty and FV. We recommend that FV be included in any State strategy around child poverty and that mechanisms be created to produce robust relationships between services addressing poverty and those responding to FV. The EAG might wish to consider *Te Rito: The New Zealand Family Violence Prevention Strategy* as a model for the development of strategies and networks to address child poverty.

We recommend that the EAG acknowledge the inter-relationship between FV and poverty and suggest this relationship be incorporated in any State strategy to address child poverty.

We support the EAG's recommendation to embed a Child Poverty Action Plan within a legislative framework provided by a Children's Act.

## FV AND CHILD POVERTY

We know that child poverty is often enmeshed with FV to the extent that for some families poverty and FV can have a complex and mutually reinforcing relationship. The detrimental impacts of on-going poverty on family resources, parental competence and warmth, child health and development, and family functioning are well known, as is the fact that children growing up in poverty are more likely than well-resourced children to experience childhood abuse and neglect. Children who witness FV at home often have similar life experiences to those associated with child poverty, including inadequate family resources, inconsistent/inadequate or chaotic parenting, low social support, high levels of transience, and increased risk of living in sole parent families. The sheer volume of children exposed to violence at home is large: longitudinal studies suggest that during childhood between 20% and 40% of NZ children will witness one or more incidents of physical or psychological abuse at home, and up to half of these children will live with on-going FV for long periods during childhood.<sup>1</sup> Between 30% and 70% of children living in homes affected by FV will themselves be victims of abuse or neglect.<sup>2</sup>

FV happens in families across the social spectrum, but the most visible child victims — children seriously harmed, killed, or taken into care — are often also living in poverty. This is the unfortunate reality that services in the FV sector regularly work within; as stakeholders at *Green Paper* consultation meetings we attended argued that services must first find ways to address the most basic of human survival needs for their clients, such as income and housing, before beginning to address issues of FV. Much of this work is done through interagency collaboration and multiagency referral pathways. But in the absence of a concerted State strategy to address child and/or family poverty community services find themselves constantly ‘remaking the wheel’ insofar as they must continually be cognisant of the landscape of poverty-related support services, whilst also bearing in mind that they can do little to ease the impact of systemic inadequacies such as low benefit rates and lack of emergency housing, for example.

We recommend that the EAG acknowledge the inter-relationship between FV and poverty and suggest this relationship be incorporated in any State strategy to address child poverty.

We support the EAG’s recommendation to embed a Child Poverty Action Plan within a legislative framework provided by a Children’s Act.

We would prefer to see integration of child poverty and FV within a wider strategy to improve the wellbeing of all NZ children with a strong emphasis on collaboration between

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<sup>1</sup> Fergusson, David and Horwood, L. John, ‘Exposure to Interparental Violence in Childhood and Psychosocial Adjustment in Young Adulthood’, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 5, 1998, 339–57; Martin, Judy, Langley, John, and Millichamp, Jane, ‘Domestic Violence as Witnessed by New Zealand Children’, *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 119, 1228, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Hamby, Sherry, Finkelhor, David, Turner, Heather, and Ormrod, Richard, ‘The Overlap of Witnessing Partner Violence with Child Maltreatment and Other Victimizations in a Nationally Representative Survey of Youth’, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34, 2010, 734–41; Holt, Stephanie, Buckley, Helen, and Whelan, Sadhbh, ‘The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Young People: A Review of Literature’, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 32, 2008, 797–810.

local and national government, and between local and national government and local community sectors, including family and sexual violence networks. Our network has identified lack of durability across political regimes as a key impediment to producing long term, meaningful change for children.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission.