

Indigenous community calls for greater say in ACT foster care system

By Jake Evans

Posted Tue 18 Jul 2017, 3:08pm



PHOTO: Foster mother Selina Walker believes there is a fear of Aboriginal people. (ABC News: Jake Evans)

Selina Walker was named Barnardos ACT Mother of the Year in April, in part because of her efforts fostering three Indigenous boys.

She has been introducing them to Ngunnawal culture - and the eldest has even given his own welcome to country.

"It just makes him feel so proud. It's that ownership and that 'this is my country'," Ms Walker said.

But the path to fostering the boys has been difficult.

Before Ms Walker fostered boys herself, she was a support worker with Gugan Gulwan, an Aboriginal youth centre in Canberra.

She said professionally and personally, interacting with the child protection system was a challenge.

"There was so many barriers. [There's] just not a real understanding of Aboriginal people," Ms Walker said.

"Some of the workers, their hearts [are] in the right place, but there's just this fear."

'Don't be afraid of us'

Ms Walker said government services often lacked cultural training.

"One of my clients actually phoned me - Care and Protection [Services] were there ready to remove the child," she said.

"They had the police there because there was a didgeridoo in the house, and they classed it as a weapon. So they called the police."

The ACT Government recently announced a review into the Territory's foster care system, to address the fact it has the highest rate of Indigenous kids in care in the country.

Ms Walker said the Government needed to work with the community before families were separated.

"Don't be afraid of us, we are people. Give us the credit that we deserve, and the respect," she said.

'It's only us who can protect our kids'

Community leader Bill Bashford runs a school program for Indigenous youth that has seen attendance and school completion rates for the young people who participate improve to nearly 100 per cent.

But he said despite that success, he found it hard to attract Government buy-in.

"What are they frightened of? What scares them about investing in our solutions?" Mr Bashford asked.

"We need to start taking some responsibility, and government need to release some of that and give us some powers back."

Mr Bashford said in situations where children did have to be removed from their family, more work needed to be done to support them culturally.

"[We need] our own ACT Aboriginal Human Rights Commissioner, because it's only us who can protect our kids," he said.

"If government had all the answers ... we wouldn't have the highest rates of care and protection orders," he said.

Ms Walker said finding a way to keep families together was pivotal.

"It's the underpinning of how that child's going to end up, to be honest."

Topics: states-and-territories, community-and-society, family-and-children, indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, canberra-2600, australia, act

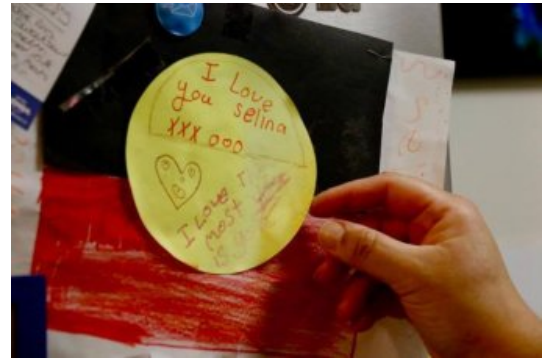


PHOTO: Selina Walker wants more cultural understanding from government bodies. (ABC News: Jake Evans)



PHOTO: Community leader Bill Bashford is calling for an ACT Aboriginal Human Rights Commissioner. (ABC News: Jake Evans)