



WITNESS STATEMENT OF WHITNEY DWYER

I, Whitney Dwyer, say as follows:

Background

My childhood

- 1 I became a ward of the state at the age of 12, but had been in the system on and off since I was 18 months old. From the age of 18 months to about 7 or 8 years, I lived with my family. I went between my grandmother, my stepdad's mum and my mum, but even when I was in my mum's care, my stepdad would palm me off to his mum. I then went from foster family to foster family until I eventually was placed in residential care.
- 2 Entering into residential care at that age I thought "that's just life, I can still have fun". Now I think it screwed up my whole life. There were no rules, we were living out on the streets and drug use was common. If I sit and think about it now, the system failed - there's a one in a million chance to come out the good end.
- 3 I don't blame my mother for what happened to me as child, she was young when she had me. She tried her best, I know she did love me but she was just messed up herself and my stepdad was controlling. The system pulled me out of some bad situations, like when Mum tried to run me over with the car. However, I was then put with a foster family who didn't give a shit about me. The system really failed me.
- 4 I've told my story 1001 times. At first it was distressing to retell it, but I had to learn to accept all the stuff I went through. At first I blocked it out with substance abuse, but after seeing a psychologist for two years, I have learnt to open up and respect everything. It's been a long journey, but if I didn't go through all that I wouldn't be who I am today. I am streetwise and now coming out from under my rock and learning about reality.

Relationship with my ex-partners

- 5 My relationship with my ex-partner, my older children's father, was very controlling and violent.
- 6 I was with him for six years, and in those six years I went to hell and back. The system knew I was getting abused, but didn't do much. I lost my mother during that relationship. I just had nowhere else to go to. Towards the end, he started taking it out on the kids instead of me because I would just sit there and cop it. I finally found the strength to leave

after he kicked my eldest child into a baby gate. I ended up telling everything to a health professional who reported the situation.

- 7 He borrowed a large sum of money from me but never paid me back. I ended up giving him a second chance three weeks later. He told me that we were not trying again unless his name was on the lease for our house, so I agreed to add his name to it. We kept clashing, and he kept threatening to leave, and I said "OK, go to your Mums". Towards the end, I was \$2,000 behind in rent and I had to leave my house. I had nowhere to put my stuff and he said he would look after it until I could find another place. That was just another one of his scams - afterwards, he said "what stuff did I have? Where's proof? What money?".
- 8 There was originally a DHHS order in place, where the kids had to spend two nights with him and two nights with me. They closed the case without notifying me. My children were the very last thing I had, but he used them to get what he wanted from me. He dangled my kids in front of me. That's what pushed me to the point where I started falling down.
- 9 When I met the father of my youngest, I had been homeless for three months and didn't have anywhere to go, so I started living in his car. He was involved in fraud with credit cards and phones. He would do all the work, but I would go into shops or other places and pick up parcels to help him. He was manipulative and very emotionally abusive.

Contact with the mental health system

- 10 I have had contact with many different aspects of the mental health system. My first contact with the mental health system was as a child. I think I've had counselling almost my entire life - I recall doing counselling when I lived in residential care from when I was about 12.
- 11 When I was younger, I was hospitalised a fair bit, I think for overdosing. I have also been hospitalised for a suicide attempt. The ambulance took me to hospital with a police escort for the night and then to secure welfare afterwards.
- 12 As a young adult I would see my counsellor whenever I got the opportunity, but my ex-partner would often not let me see them because he was scared I was speaking about the abuse. Once my counsellor did not hear from me for ages and he actually wrote me a letter. I can't quite remember what happened, but my ex-partner got to it first and found out I was talking about him in the sessions. As a result, he completely stopped me from seeing anyone and totally isolated me from my family, friends, DHHS, my counsellor - basically everyone.

Experience with the criminal justice system

- 13 I first had contact with the criminal justice system when I was a child, I remember getting in trouble with the police from when I was around 12 or 13. A couple of times when I was a child I got a good behaviour bond. I started to get serious charges toward the end of 2010 when I was 21. These were mostly driving offences and I lost my licence. I've also been done for stolen vehicles.
- 14 I have been in custody in Dame Phyllis before. Last time I was in Dame Phyllis it was about seven to eight weeks just on remand. I have also spent a lot of time in the custody cells at the Magistrates' Court.
- 15 When I was released on bail at one stage, I was linked with the Court Integrated Services Program (CISP). I was linked up with a social worker as part of the program. I can't remember exactly what I had to do, but I remember that I would see her a fair bit. I failed the program at least five times before they included me on corrections and I think I also breached the community corrections order. They just kept giving me a chance.
- 16 I don't think there was any mental health support whilst I was in custody. Obviously you do courses and stuff but there is no mental health support. I also don't recall the support for my physical health in custody being very good.
- 17 I can't remember if there were mental health supports whilst I was on bail, but if there were, I probably did not take them up.

Assessment and Referral Court (ARC)

- 18 I first became involved with the ARC program around 2017 and was on the ARC list for two to three years. I recall someone telling me about the program and telling me to bring it up with my lawyer. When I discussed it with my lawyer, they thought I would be suitable for the program. From memory, my lawyer got me to see a professional psychologist to see if I was suitable. That psychologist diagnosed me with borderline personality disorder and severe depression among other things, which got me into the program.
- 19 I have had a number of cases in the Magistrate's Court not in the ARC program. However, my lawyer asked if we could join those cases with ARC and they luckily agreed because I had an ongoing case with them.
- 20 For ARC, I obviously had to go to court every month to have a review and look at the progress I'd made. They did give me a lot of leniency and I was skating on thin ice. They also gave me a worker to work with. My first worker and I didn't get along and she tried to get me kicked off the ARC list. I wasn't happy, but then the judge gave me another chance and a different worker. When they gave me another worker, towards the end, I

ended up chasing him down instead of him chasing me down. They were amazed – I was one step ahead of everyone else. I started working well with that worker and getting my life together. I kept in touch with him and let him know what was going on with me.

- 21 When my ARC worker was doing outreach with me, they would help me with setting goals and see if I needed any support in certain areas. I remember they spoke with me about linking me up with supports to help me find housing when I was released. I didn't get any success through them, though. I had more success through other networks and services I was involved with, including St Vincent's, Haven Home Safe, Salvation Army Social Housing Service (**SASHS**) and Launch Housing. I currently have secure housing.

Positive experiences of ARC

- 22 The reason ARC was such a positive experience was because everyone in the program gave me a chance. When I was in the program, I just kept crossing the line, because I had given up. My first judge, however, saw a lot of potential in me and believed there was so much more to me. Because of that, she was very lenient with me and never gave up on me. I really appreciated that. Even when she moved to a different area because they opened up ARC there, she was still keeping an eye on me and checking on the case.
- 23 I think if I had gone through the normal court system, I would not be where I am today and would not have had a chance at life.
- 24 One time I tried to contest one of my charges outside of the ARC court, but it backfired on me and I faced jail immediately. This really made me realise how much ARC had helped me: there is no doubt I would probably have been in prison for a few years with the majority of my charges. I wouldn't be able to see my kids or have a good chance in life. If I had convictions for all the charges that were in ARC, my future career and life would be stuffed up just because of my previous bad choices, circumstances and lifestyle.
- 25 I can't think of many improvements for ARC, I think they are doing an excellent job. I don't think anything needs to be changed with the program itself. It might be good if they could give the program more workers because I think last time I was there, they only had two main support workers. They could also try to promote more caring work and how to help people with mental health issues so it carries less stigma.

Experiences with support services

- 26 When working with people, it is the positive relationships that you really remember, because if you don't engage people, they just fall down the same path.
- 27 It is very hard to choose the right service, but some of them are just shocking. I don't know if the workers are well paid or not, but some of them don't really seem to give a shit about

their job. Sometimes they say they're going to do their job, but a month later you're homeless, in the same situation and you have to chase them up. If you know that the people you are working with don't care about you, you don't want to work with them. You need someone who is not going to give up on you. You need someone who will sit there and they say, "No, I do care. You can try to push me away but I am here. I want to show that I care and I'm here." That healthy kind of relationship has made a massive difference to me. I don't think I would be where I am today if I didn't have positive relationships like that.

- 28 For example, when I got out of prison, even though I went straight back down the same old road, my housing worker really cared about me. She was from SASHS (Salvation Army Social Housing and Support), where I went for help after I was released from prison. Usually if you don't engage with workers, they close your case, but she didn't close my case even though she didn't hear from me for ages. The next minute she was rocking up at my shared accommodation door with a bag and she was like "I just wanted to check how you are". I honestly started crying and I gave her a hug and I felt like "wow, she actually cares". It made me want to work with her because she still believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. Most other support services just want to wipe their hands of me, but she always tried to put the effort into keeping contact with me and trying to work with me.

North West Mental Health

- 29 Finding the right person and support for my mental health has been really important for me. I've been through so many different networks and support services in the mental health system. It took me until two years ago to find the right person for me: a person who was down to earth, willing to help and knew what they were doing.
- 30 I had a really positive experience through North West Mental Health in 2018. I went to a youth refuge when I was halfway through my pregnancy for my youngest. They had a counsellor there that you could speak to if you wanted, but they didn't force you to. For the first two months I was like "no, I don't want to speak to anyone". However, after a period of time, I was like "okay, I want to be happy, I don't want to keep living with my past and everything that I've gone through, I don't want that haunting me".
- 31 I started working with the counsellor and she mentioned a psych nurse and said that he would be able to help me with my diagnosis and other things. I agreed and from that point on he would always come to the refuge with her. I started working side by side with the counsellor and him as a team. Unfortunately, my counsellor left her job and went somewhere else, so I started just to speak to my psych nurse and didn't try to meet a new counsellor. They were patient with me and did not try to force me to find a new counsellor,

they just kept reminding me that the option was there to talk to someone like that if I wanted.

32 It's taken me years to find the right people, but when I met them both you could see that they truly did care. I stuck with the psych nurse and he has been a miracle through tough times. He is very understanding and calm.

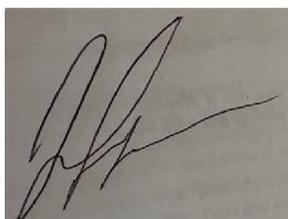
33 North West responded really well to my needs. I'm not so sure about other services, however. Sometimes you just feel like you are going back and forth in the system. You keep repeating the process but you are still standing in the same spot. The majority of people just keep palming you off to other people saying "oh yes, this will be the right person for you". You start to wonder what the point is after a while.

Improving the workforce

34 I think the most important thing is that the workforce is caring and also has a passion for the work that they are doing. They need to employ the right people and ensure they are there for the right reasons, know what they're doing and are passionate about what they're doing. I understand it's hard to run a business, and everyone has their own jobs to do, but they need to be checking up on workers to make sure that they are doing their jobs and not slacking off. We need to be giving them greater access and more resources to work with. The majority of people are restricted and there is only so much they can give.

35 Further, there needs to be less restrictions on accessing treatment. At the moment, the majority of people only have ten visits, or they only get a worker for a couple of months. That was the good thing about North West Mental Health: there was no time limit. I could have the psych nurse and counsellor for as long as I wanted, I didn't need to get a new referral and the workers weren't leaving after two weeks.

sign here ►



print name Whitney Dwyer

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