



MEDIA ALERT

Who will provide early childhood speech and behavior therapies in Northern Tasmania when Commonwealth funding of a StGiles program finishes in June?

We learned on December 22, that we had failed in our speech and behaviour funding application to the Commonwealth.

Funded by the Commonwealth for a decade, the StGiles program was viewed as a Tasmanian leader in early childhood therapies for at-risk children and their families.

We remain confused about why such a crucial program in the development of our children can be no more?

But it is not StGiles' loss.

The 300 children and families who used the services each year were sent by doctors, child health nurses, early childhood centres, dentists, audiologists and child protection teams.

We started 2015 with 127 pre-school children on our waiting list for these services

Bass has Australia's highest rate – 42.2 per cent – of children starting school with speech impairments, which reflect in our poor school results and our crime rate.

The program would never have started without the help and guidance of former Bass Federal MP Michael Ferguson through the Howard Government's Invest to Grow fund.

Mr Ferguson's involvement came from inconsistencies in the funding of community Speech Pathology. Positions in Southern Tasmania and the State's North-West were funded by the State Government.

A single, Northern, paediatric, speech pathology position was funded by the State at the Launceston General Hospital. The situation has not changed.

By mid-2005, with Mr Ferguson's help, StGiles secured four years of Invest to Grow funding at \$341,932pa for speech pathology and behaviour support.

During the first six months, until December 2005, StGiles speech pathologists saw 340 clients and by December 2006, the number had grown to 413.

At the request of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, StGiles and the UTas Faculty of Health Science undertook a 18-month evaluation of the program and produced a 169-page report which found, in summary:

“The St Giles Speech Pathology and Behaviour Support Program can be considered as a demonstration model for early intervention extension services which include a rural outreach component. The project team have capitalised on the established infrastructure available at St Giles using existing physical infrastructure, management and governance structures, clinical resources and client management systems as the foundations to build speech pathology and psychology outreach services upon. Integration of the new services with existing networks has been helpful in establishing them relatively quickly however both arms of the program have developed important networks of their own.”



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StGiles speech pathology and behaviour teams were Northern Tasmania's front line of defence against the creeping and insidious impact of poor educational outcomes.

We are concerned that there is no Commonwealth or State Government plan to fill the gap that has been created by the funding cut to our program.

For a decade, StGiles teams worked to break down systemic and family barriers to accessing highly qualified professionals. It also collected valuable data for the Commonwealth on early childhood intervention.

This work is not likely to fit within the framework of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Nor should it.

The State Government has already made significant cuts to its allied health workforce, State-wide.

It is our hope that the Commonwealth or State has a plan to provide Northern Tasmanian children with timely, focused early intervention speech or behaviour therapy services as prudently and effectively as those provided by StGiles.