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| 2025 Victorian Protecting Children Awards Winners and finalists |

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# Robin Clark Leadership Award

#### Winner – Robin Clark Leadership Award

**Dr Trish McCluskey, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing**

Trish demonstrates an unwavering dedication in advocating for children of diverse cultures and faiths and those who have experienced trauma and upholding their foundational rights.

Trish leads a team that undertakes the complex work of progressing visa and immigration matters for refugee children and supporting their settlement from conflict zones around the world.

Trish has created programs such as the Cultural Engagement Program, aimed at preventing multicultural children from entering statutory care. The Stronger Futures for Refugee Youth program supports young people to transition from care and succeed as young adults.

Trish encourages young people to not be defined by trauma, rather to see and expect a strong future. This model and the empowerment of what young people are capable of has enabled unparalleled results.

To secure student placements and internships for young people, Trish has supported partnerships with Universities and TAFES and enterprises such as NASA and the Australian Broadcasting Cooperation.

Trish’s advocacy and interventions have influenced policy and practice in Victoria and beyond.

#### Finalists – Robin Clark Leadership Award

* Anne Henderson, MacKillop Family Services
* Dallas Widdicombe, Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative
* Elvis Martin, Kids Under Cover

# Robin Clark Making a Difference Award

#### Winner – Robin Clark Making a Difference Award

**Aboriginal Children’s Healing Team – Yinga Healing Group, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency**

The Aboriginal Children’s Healing Team developed the statewide Yinga Healing Group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The group promotes social, emotional and spiritual healing to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in at-risk families or in care services.

To strengthen community connections, the group involves yarning and learning through storytelling and cultural activities. It also incorporates evidence-based models and trauma informed therapeutic approaches to healing.

Aboriginal leaders and clinicians collaborate to determine effective approaches for integrating culture into clinical responses.

Every child and young person has the benefit of a culturally appropriate multi-disciplinary team. This includes allied health professionals, social workers, counsellors, psychiatrists, practitioners and leaders with lived experience and cultural expertise.

The team also involve the support systems surrounding the child or young person, such as parents, families, carers, community, caseworkers, teachers and health professionals.

The team seek feedback from young people on what their experience in the group to ensures their voices empowered.

#### Finalists – Robin Clark Making a Difference Award

* Function Family Therapy – Child Welfare, OzChild
* The Family Violence Advisor Team, Berry Street Yooralla

# Minister's Award for Excellence in Protecting Children

#### Winner – Minister’s Award for Excellence in Protecting Children

**Corey Harrison, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency**

Corey’s drive is to ensure Aboriginal children, young people and families are protected and remain culturally supported, connected and self-determined.

Corey has close connections to the Aboriginal community and various groups to empower local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

During the pandemic, Corey created a video with senior Aboriginal staff on mental health messaging. This video remains one of VACCA’s most viewed with over 15,000 likes and 203 shares.

Corey was instrumental in implementing VACCA’s Nugel program in Inner Gippsland and Western Metropolitan regions.

The program offers a model of Aboriginal-led child protection practice as part of the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program. VACCA works in partnership with Aboriginal families to keep children and young people safe and connected. Under Corey’s leadership, those in the program take an active role in decision making.

Corey advises on VACCA’s Gamidji Balit residential care program. Corey also established the West Metro Aboriginal Governance Group, which supports local ACCOs to build knowledge and further understanding of government strategies.

#### Finalists – Minister’s Award for Excellence in Protecting Children

* Cleona Feuerring, Westjustice, Western Community Legal Centre
* Cultural Mentoring Program, MacKillop Family Services
* The Out of Home Care Team, Community Living & Respite Services

# Foster Carer Award

#### Winner – Foster Carer Award

**Lesley Brechin, Anglicare Victoria**

Lesley has been a foster carer for 21 years and has cared for over 40 children and young people, ranging from overnight to long term placements. Lesley has provided these children and young people with a nurturing family environment and exceptional care.

Lesley’s first foster care placement was with a young sibling group. These children reached adulthood in Lesley’s care and remain connected to this day.

Lesley provides care to children with complex medical and physical needs including, a child who - without Lesley’s care - would have remained living in the hospital.

Skilled in using non-verbal cues, changes in appetite and other behaviours, Lesley can detect pain or symptoms that require immediate attention.

Lesley has been a driving force to explore, with allied health teams, the available options to enable a-typical communication platforms to give children the ability to connect.

Feedback from medical staff affirms Lesley’s ability to tune into the needs of the child to achieve improved outcomes.

#### Finalists – Foster Carer Award

* Mathew and Cristy Oxley, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency
* Rose and David Foulkes, Anglicare Victoria
* Sue and Lee Wakeman, MacKillop Family Services

# Kinship Carer Award

#### Winner – Kinship Carer Award

**Patricia Barton**

Patrica’s life has been dedicated to helping others and empowering children and young people to have a voice.

Patricia was described by a care leaver as “not the woman who gave birth to me, but the person who helped heal my heart and find hope in the midst of the most traumatic years of my life”.

Patrcia connects children and young people with complex needs to the right supports to learn who they are and to flourish.

One of the children dreamed of being an Olympian, Patricia supported the child's goals by travelling across Victoria for them participate in sport.

To give a child the best start in life, Patricia funded a semi-private education out of a pension fund.

Through support, encouraging interests and unpacking stressors, Patricia helps children and young people to know they are capable and empowered to break intergenerational trauma.

Patricia shows that family is not always related by blood and remains a parental and grandparental figure in the lives of care leavers.

#### Finalists – Kinship Carer Award

* Allyson Walker, Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency
* Lose Samasoni, Baptcare Family and Community Services
* Sasha Naboulsi, Anglicare Victoria

# Engaging Kids in School Award

#### Winner – Engaging Kids in School Award

**Project REAL – Banksia Gardens Community Services**

Project REAL is a re-engagement program supporting students aged 9 – 12 years who are disengaged with education.

The program is a flexible learning option which is now regarded as a benchmark of effective practice for flexible learning.

The team works with students, their families and carers, and partner schools to ensure every child's right to education is a reality and not just an ideal.

The team provides practical support to break down barriers to school engagement, with family support plans, and at times including school pick-ups and drop-offs or organising lunches.

Since 2017, Project REAL has supported close to 60 children to re-engage in learning, as well as participate in activities like sports, music and school camps.

Prior to Project REAL, some students had not attended school for extended periods of time. Others were presenting with low impulse control and limited capacity to regulate their emotions.

Most children in the program have shown improvements in attendance, social and emotional skills and responsible decision making.

#### Finalists – Engaging Kids in School Award

* MacKillop Education Senior Leadership Team Geelong, MacKillop Family Services
* The Paw Pals Program, MacKillop Family Services
* Travis Tuck, Berwick Secondary College

# Keeping at Risk Young People Safe Award

#### Winner – Keeping at Risk Young People Safe Award

**Lisa Cappola, Anglicare Victoria**

Lisa has over 25 years’ experience in residential care and demonstrates exceptional leadership and dedication to at-risk youth.

Lisa’s knowledge, trauma-informed methodologies and ability to forge meaningful connections have been pivotal in safeguarding and transforming countless lives.

Lisa played a key role in the North with the transition to the KEYS program which provides an individualised trauma-informed approach.

Lisa creates an environment where children, young people, and their families and carers are active participants in shaping their futures with long-term stability and growth opportunities.

A notable example is Lisa’s role in facilitating the smooth transition and successful reunification of a young person with their family.

To deliver holistic care, Lisa’s leadership style is collaborative with a multidisciplinary team. Lisa has established partnerships with services such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency and Youth Support and Advocacy Service.

Lisa ensures Aboriginal children and young people remain connected to their culture and appropriate services, recognising the importance of cultural identity in overall wellbeing.

#### Finalists – Keeping at Risk Young People Safe Award

* Sergeant Tem Hawkes and the Youth Tasking Team, Victoria Police
* Two Bed Emergency Response Program, MacKillop Family Services
* Youth Services Team, Les Twentyman Foundation

# CREATE Positive Impacts Award

#### Winner – CREATE Positive Impacts Award

**Zoe Stamatopoulos, MacKillop Family Services**

Zoe has shown a thorough understanding of trauma informed practice throughout interactions with young people in care.

By listening to the voices of the young people, Zoe develops strong rapport while providing support. Zoe drives the importance of self-care and promotes that all children deserve the chance to be themselves and to have fun.

Under Zoe’s guidance, a young person embarked on their first ever interstate trip to Queensland where they got to experience theme parks and fun activities. This was possible as the young person advocated for themself with confidence to be able to go on the school camp.

Zoe also empowered the young person to be involved and play an important role at their school concert.

Zoe provided transport for family members so that they could watch and share the special moment with the young person.

Zoe has advocated for young people and provided hope when some had lost sight of it.

#### Finalists – CREATE Positive Impacts Award

* Gabby Knight, Pyjama Foundation
* Narelle Rosbergen, Anglicare Victoria

# Child and Youth Empowerment Award – Commission for Children and Young People

#### Winner - Child and Youth Empowerment Award – Commission for Children and Young People

**Chadstone Child Safety Committee – Salesian College**

The Chadstone Child Safety Committee is made up of students and college staff to implement projects that support a child safe culture for all students.

The committee developed a child safety framework, child safety standards action plan, student concerns process, and a diversity and inclusion policy.

A key committee initiative was the student concerns process. Developed and implemented by students, the purpose is to empower students to report issues for the school to promptly action.

The co-design between staff and students has fostered respectful relationships and ensured diverse ideas.

Students are empowered to present ideas, seek feedback from peers and design initiatives. Items are discussed at committee meetings, with student voices informing decisions for how to deliver solutions and offer support.

Students have presented in school assemblies and widely communicate their initiatives and documents to students, parents and staff.

The Chadstone Child Safety Committee is a great example of student agency and empowerment.

#### Finalists - Child and Youth Empowerment Award – Commission for Children and Young People

* Chelsea Russell, Uniting Vic.Tas
* Kelly Danaher, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

# Leaving a Legacy Award

#### Winner – Leaving a Legacy Award

**Bronwyn Pike AM**

Bronwyn has an unwavering dedication to child, youth, and family services.

Bronwyn has shaped the future of generations of Australians. Initially as a teacher and then through serving as the Director of Justice and Social Responsibility with the Uniting Church.

In 1999, Bronwyn entered Victorian Parliament, representing Melbourne for more than 12 years.

During this time, Bronwyn held key ministerial roles, including housing, health, aged care, community services and education.

Post-politics, Bronwyn continued advocacy work as Chief Executive Officer of Uniting Vic.Tas, leading the unification of the organisation’s founding agencies.

Bronwyn has also chaired numerous boards, including the Victorian Council of Social Services and Western Health.

Bronwyn was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia in 2022 for lifelong commitment to social welfare.

Seeing the next generation grow and embody the passion for working in child and family support services gives Bronwyn satisfaction in the work and optimism for the future.

# The Walda Blow Aboriginal Children and Young People Award

#### Winner – The Walda Blow Aboriginal Children and Young People Award

**Zee Pepper – Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA)**

As a proud transgender Gunai Kurnai man, Zee has worked tirelessly to ensure inclusivity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTIQA+SB (rainbow mob) children, young people and their families and carers.

Zee has worked through VACCA's accreditation with the National Rainbow Tick Standards.

Zee has co-delivered VACCA's inclusivity training. This has resulted in increased confidence and understanding for staff on the importance of LGBTIQA+SB inclusivity and creating a safe space.

To help ensure children and young people understand their rights, Zee led the development of VACCA's easy to read information packs. Topics include privacy, inclusivity and connection to culture, self-determination and their voice being heard.

Zee’s visibility in the Aboriginal community, including events and social media campaigns demonstrates a commitment to empowering the LGBTIQA+ SB community and for people to feel safe expressing their identities.

Zee was the recipient of the 2024 Inaugural Victorian NAIDOC Pride Award. Zee advocates and campaigns for Rainbow mob to be seen and understood, and to feel safe expressing themselves.

#### Finalists – The Walda Blow Aboriginal Children and Young People Award

* Goolum Goolum’s Njerna Gap Gap Dyir Program, Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
* Secure Care Services Senior Aboriginal Liaison Officers, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

# Chief Practitioner’s Award

#### Winner – Chief Practitioner’s Award

**Carley White, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing**

Carley is a well-regarded leader in child protection, who's leadership impact has extended far beyond their local area.

In one leadership position, Carley led the implementation of the SAFER Children Framework across the East Division.

Carley understood the importance of the framework being adopted in practice. Carely tailored implementation and embedded support to meet the needs of practitioners across the division.

Carley led over 140 SAFER focussed sessions and developed a leaders pack of 7 mini sessions for coaching new practitioners in using the framework. Carley also worked with the Orange Door to assist their understanding of how child protection undertake risk assessment and make decisions.

Carley’s efforts across the investigation phase and championing of SAFER has had a profound impact on what outcomes have been achieved across the area.

Good early risk assessment and decision-making provides the foundation for child protection to do the best work at any phase that comes thereafter.

#### Finalists – Chief Practitioner’s Award

* Charlotte Nicholls, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
* Emma Pallister, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
* Nicole Sobey, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
* Rae Matejka, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

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| To receive this document in another format, phone (03) 9067 0498, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email the Victorian Protecting Children Awards on <protectingchildren.awards@dffh.vic.gov.au>.Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.© State of Victoria, Australia, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, August 2025.In this document, ‘Aboriginal’ refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Koori/Koorie’ is retained when part of the title of a report, program or quotation.Available at <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/victorian-protecting-children-awards> |