



# State failing to help struggling parents

**Ruth Pollard**

NSW has yet to carry out all the recommendations from its 2002 parliamentary inquiry into child protection services, even as the new special commission of inquiry prepares for its first public forum this week.

The most significant failure has been the Department of Community Service's inability to develop early intervention services that allow families to get help without being caught up in the child protection system, experts say.

Judy Cashmore, an associate professor in the University of Sydney's law faculty, said there must be other ways to support struggling parents, such as ensuring that the health and education departments played a greater role caring for children.

"You need to try to get to these kids before they need statutory services ... and that means you are looking to other departments and services that deal with adults," Dr Cashmore said.

"Drug, alcohol and mental health services need to be really aware that there is often a child

standing behind that adult and that child needs some help."

Forcing families into the child protection system was often the least effective way of providing support, said Alison Peters, the executive director of the NSW Council of Social Service.

"Families who are putting their hands up and saying 'we are struggling, we need a bit of help' essentially have to report themselves to DOCS to access care, and that is both a disincentive and a problem," Ms Peters said.

The Opposition spokeswoman on community services, Katrina Hodgkinson, said revelations from DOCS whistleblowers published in the *Herald* yesterday also highlighted the failure of the State Government to fulfil its own recommendations on early intervention for families under stress.

A \$1.2 billion injection of funds over five years had gone some way to rebuild the department, the Premier, Morris Iemma, said, but he acknowledged there was a need for more reform, much of it driven by the commission of inquiry to be headed by the retired judge James Wood.