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Recession tearing families apart, child agency says

By CAROLINE MILBURN,
community affairs reporter

The rate of family breakdown has reached its highest point in 18 years, says the director of Melbourne's largest child welfare agency.

Canon Ian Ellis, director of St John's Homes for Boys and Girls, blamed the recession for tearing families apart. He said the number of children being placed in the Anglican agency's care had doubled in the past three years to more than 3000.

Last year, the agency had to find full-time foster care placement for 400 children, but only half could be catered for. This year, 800 children are in need of placement.

Canon Ellis said many families were disintegrating under economic pressures. Unemployment aggravated internal conflicts within families and led to evictions and homelessness. "It's the worst that I've seen, and I've been here for 18 years. Once a family breaks down and separation occurs, the damaging consequences are quite enormous in a child's life.

"Their sense of identity is shattered. Children feel abandoned or resentful towards parents, and parents feel overwhelmed with guilt and failure. Once families drift apart, it's difficult to reverse."

Demand for care has rocketed in St John's other services for children. This year, the agency received 745 requests to house homeless young people, compared with 520 last year. Only 16 per cent of those who applied were housed because of a lack of accommodation and resources.

In the emergency housing program, 504 families were catered for this year compared with 436 last year. Requests for financial counselling and the number of children placed in St John's family group homes also increased.

Despite rising numbers of families wanting to be helped under the agen-

cy's family support program, the number of children seen by workers had fallen, Canon Ellis said. This year, workers helped 2031 children in their own homes, compared with 2299 last year.

He said he had been forced to curb the preventive service to families because of a five per cent budget cut and declining Government subsidies.

St John's has headquarters in Canterbury and services in the outer-east, inner-urban and north-west regions of Melbourne. About \$1.4 million of its annual budget of \$7.2 million is spent on the family support program.

Canon Ellis called on the Government to increase funds for preventive programs. Most of the state's child welfare agencies have threatened to surrender their services to the Government if extra funds are not provided by 1 March.

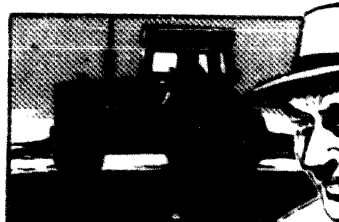
The Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, which represents non-government child welfare agencies, has been negotiating with the Minister for Community Services, Ms Setches, and the Department of Finance to cover a statewide funding gap of \$11.2 million from general revenue. It is believed that Ms Setches will put a submission to Cabinet on the funding crisis in late January.

The executive director of the association, Mrs Margaret Roberts, said it had spoken five times with Ms Setches and was concerned that the department had come up with a last-minute funding change that could wipe out services.

"We're very worried about this 11th-hour change and we're terrified that it could mean that current services will be wiped out as well as not getting the increased funds.

"Our agencies are on standby to hand over their services. Money seems to be pouring in for hams and chickens for emergency relief, but money for services is very deficient."

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