

Witness Name: GRO-A-Mr AI

Statement No.: WITN0705001

Exhibits: [WITN0705002 - WITN0705009]

Dated: 2021

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF GRO-A-Mr AI IN RESPECT OF THE MĀORI INVESTIGATION

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I, GRO-A Mr AI state: -

#### INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is GRO-A-Mr AI I was born on GRO-C 1990 in Pukekohe.
2. My whānau are Māori and affiliate with Tainui Waikato.
3. My parents' names are GRO-B and GRO-B I grew up with my parents and five sisters: GRO-A Ms AK, GRO-A Ms AH, GRO-A Ms AG, GRO-A Ms AJ and

GRO-B-1 I am the third eldest of the group. I also have two much younger half-brothers.

4. Me and my five sisters all went through the care system. We remained in CYFS placements for most of our childhoods.
5. I know that my dad went through the care system himself. He was in and out of the Boys' Homes as a child. He suffered at the hands of the State too, and he has his own trauma.
6. I don't think dad ever learned to speak te reo Māori. I know that some of my grandfather's sisters speak te reo fluently, and so it is likely that my grandfather could speak as well, but I never got the opportunity to know him due to being in care. He died while I was in care, and I never got to go to the tangi. I have since learned that the tangi was at our urupā, which was 30 minutes away from where me and my siblings were placed by CYFS at the time, but we did not get to attend.
7. My memories of childhood of living with mum and dad and by siblings, before going into care, were good. We were poor, but we were happy and there was love in the home.
8. I don't remember much violence at home from my parents, or between my parents.
9. Dad was often away, because he was involved in gangs, and as a result, spent time in prison. When he was not in jail, he would be at home with us.
10. I do not think I had realised that when I was about 6 years old, mum and dad had separated, but I do remember going to live with dad and GRO-A Ms AK in Pukekohe, while my other siblings stayed with mum in Hamilton.  
**[WITN0705002]**
11. Shortly after I started living with dad, he took us down to see mum and my siblings. The first night we were there, four social workers and three police officers came to our mum's house and quietly removed us one

by one, while dad was sleeping inside. They told mum that she could come with us and offered to take us all to a Women's Refuge, which mum agreed to. **[WITN0705003]**

12. This uplift was in response to allegations by neighbours that mum had been abusive and neglectful to my siblings who were in her care, and because of anxiety the social workers had in response to my dad coming back on the scene with mum, as the records show that mum and dad had a history of domestic violence. **[WITN0705003]**
13. The social workers had to drive around to find **GRO-A Ms AK** and when they found her, they had to wrestle her into the car. When we arrived at the Women's Refuge, the social workers had to wrestle **GRO-A Ms AK** out of the car again. Eventually, the social workers decided that they should let **GRO-A Ms AK** go because they were causing distress and they would have to use too much force to keep her there.
14. During the same drive, **GRO-A Ms AH** had to be restrained by a social worker, to stop her from following **GRO-A Ms AK**.
15. Our dad, on waking up to find us all gone, called the police to report us missing. He also contacted CYFS. He was angry, particularly as both **GRO-A Ms AK** and me had been taken into care too, when we had been living with him until the night before the uplift and were not the subject of the notification that had triggered the uplift. **[WITN0705004]**
16. Two days later, on 12 February 1996, CYFS used the same place of safety warrant to remove us from mum's care at the Refuge, after the Refuge workers complained that mum couldn't control us. There were also reports that mum had told dad where we were and had told him to come pick us up. **[WITN0705005]**
17. From that point on, I remained in CYFS custody and care until I reached 17 years of age.

18. I remember that for the next two years, I moved between about four different foster homes. CYFS split most of us into twos and placed us with various strangers. I remember that I was most often with GRO-A Ms AH or GRO-A Ms AK.
19. Over those years, I remember wondering why I was being made to live with these strangers and kept trying to work out what I had done wrong to end up there.
20. I remember this sense of loneliness, and never knowing what was happening. I would just start to get to know a home, and then it felt like I was being shipped off again. I kept being moved to different homes and to different schools. No one ever told me what was happening.

### ***Foster placements***

21. My records show that after we were removed from the Women's Refuge, me and GRO-A Ms AH were placed with a woman named GRO-B in Huntly for a few weeks. We were then placed with a woman named GRO-B and then in June 1996, GRO-A Ms AH must have been placed elsewhere, and I spent a few months with my baby sister GRO-B-1 in the care of a woman named GRO-B who CYFS recorded was whānau to us.
22. A few months later, me and GRO-A Ms AG were placed in a Huakina Trust-run Family home in Pukekohe with a caregiver called GRO-B. My other sisters were also placed in Huakina Trust, but in a Family Home in Mangere.
23. In September 1996, my baby sisters, GRO-A Ms AJ and GRO-B-1 were allowed to go back to live with mum. When that happened, me and GRO-A Ms AG were transferred up to from the Pukekohe Family Home, to be with GRO-A Ms AK and GRO-A Ms AH at the Mangere Family Home. The four of us older siblings remained in the Mangere Family Home for over a year together, while mum was at home with the little ones.

24. In February 1998, CYFS decided mum was ready to have more kids home living with her. Between mum and CYFS, it was decided that GRO-A Ms AH and GRO-A Ms AG would be chosen to go home to live with mum and the younger girls. Me and GRO-A Ms AK were to remain in the Family Home. Our records noted that me and GRO-A Ms AK were the two siblings who were closer with dad, and it appears this was basis of the decision-making.
25. Me and GRO-A Ms AK remained in the Family Home in Mangere for another year, just the two of us.
26. I am not sure why CYFS did not also return us home or put us into whānau placements, instead of allowing us to remain for over the two years in the Mangere Family Home. There had been several plans, and willing whānau members to care for us, but these options were never followed through. Instead we stayed for over two years in a home that was unfamiliar and unwelcoming.
27. My memories of the Mangere Family Home were that there was quite a bit of fighting with the other kids who came through there. Those kids were often older than me and would pick on me. I do not think the caregivers saw them doing this, however I do remember that the caregivers had definite favourites amongst the foster kids, and this made me feel like an outcast. I remember that they would give certain kids lollies and stuff right in front of me and spoil them. It's hard as a young kid to try and make sense of why you are being treated worse than others.

GRO-B-2 and GRO-B-3

28. My worst memories in the care system were at a placement in GRO-A with GRO-B<sub>3</sub> and GRO-B-2. I was about eight when I first arrived. Me and GRO-A Ms AK were placed with the GRO-B-2 GRO-B-3 directly from the Mangere Family Home. When we arrived, all our siblings had already been living with the GRO-B-2 GRO-B-3 for a few months, after they had been uplifted again from mum.
29. I remember that for the first month or so it was good, and I was happy to be back together with my siblings. However, after that first bit of

happiness, the placement turned ugly, and we began to be treated like slaves.

30. Living at the placement were the caregivers [GRO-B-2] and [GRO-B-3] as well as several of their family members, including an adult daughter, two adult sons called [GRO-B] and [GRO-B] and several grandchildren.
31. When we moved into the [GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3] townhouse in [GRO-A] it was extremely overcrowded, and all six of us siblings shared one room. Eventually we moved with the [GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3] out to their farmhouse. Again we still were made to share one room.

### *Physical abuse*

32. The physical abuse from the [GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3] was constant. It felt like you could get a hiding from any of the adults who lived there at any time.
33. [GRO-B-2] was violent toward me every day. I felt like I spent my time walking on eggshells, expecting the next hiding. I was in a constant state of anxiety.
34. [GRO-B-2] would hit me with anything she had to hand like the jug cord, vacuum pipe, wooden spoon, or with her open hand or fist.
35. In addition to [GRO-B-2] I remember that some of the worst beatings I got were from her son [GRO-B] I remember one morning he punched me in the face and head several times, and then I still had to go to school with bruises all over my face, a fat lip, and bloody teeth. The teachers asked what had happened, but I just told them that it was nothing.
36. [GRO-B] abuse happened regularly, and I remember that it just about always involved punches to the face.
37. [GRO-B] would also psychologically abuse me. I remember one time, as punishment for getting my maths homework wrong, [GRO-B] told me I had to do 60 press-ups. I was not fit and could not do the press-ups, but he made me keep trying. This went on from about 8pm until midnight. I was made

to be on the floor trying to do the press-ups as everyone else ate dinner and watched me. The same thing happened every night for the rest of the week. The whole time he sat on the couch holding a stick and threatening me. I remember feeling so humiliated by it all.

38. The other son [GRO-B] was also violent. He beat me multiple times. He would also force me to watch when he beat up my sisters, as he knew how much that hurt me.
39. [GRO-B-3] would also physically abuse me. I remember his violence occurred less often than [GRO-B-2] maybe twice a month. He would hit me with an open hand or closed fist, usually to my body, legs, or chest. I was usually able to hide the bruises from him under my clothes.
40. I remember that a lot of the early hidings that we received were in response to not knowing how to do chores properly.
41. The [GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3] expected us to be working for them, day and night, and we had never done a lot of the things they wanted us to do. They did not teach us how to do the jobs, they just expected that we would know.
42. I remember that any adult around who saw us not cleaning properly would physically discipline and beat us.

*Inappropriate work*

43. We would be made to work every day of the four years we lived there. I remember mowing lawns, cleaning the house, washing the windows, working in the fields and other manual labour. Once we had moved to their farmhouse, we also did a lot of work on their marae, which was just down the road cleaning toilets, cooking and doing dishes, and any other jobs that needed doing there.
44. We would work from when school finished until dinner time, and often afterwards as well. I remember finishing work at midnight sometimes. Sometimes, they would get us up really early to do more cleaning before school.

45. I remember that on weekends, we would work all day. The work got so much worse when we moved from the townhouse to the farm, as we had to do farm work all day, and the marae was only a few doors down.
46. One of the worst days of work I remember was when we found a dead possum in the animals' water tank. The GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3 were worried about the water being contaminated, and so me and GRO-A  
Ms AG were made to empty the tank, by hand, using buckets. It took us the entire day in the sun, with me scooping out water, and passing the buckets down to GRO-A  
Ms AG to empty. I felt so sorry for her because she was even younger than me.
47. For all the work we did on the farm, we never got paid, and never got pocket money. One time a friend's mum, who lived down the road gave me \$5 as a gift. I felt so rich to have that much money to myself.
48. I remember being made to feel worthless while I was there, like I was nothing. I was constantly belittled.
49. I remember that GRO-B-2 always called me by my first and last name. I have hated my name ever since because of how she would say it, and of how scared hearing my name being said by her would make me. It was always said with so much anger. My name always came before some demand to do this or do that.
50. The amount of work we had to do left me exhausted and I remember going to school tired. Despite my exhaustion, I was still always excited to get to school as it meant being away from the GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3

### *Neglect*

51. There was never a lot of food. I remember that when we did have food for lunch, it was only ever ham sandwiches, and nothing else.
52. I remember that on multiple occasions, GRO-B would take my blanket off me as punishment, and so I would have to try and sleep in the cold. It felt like he had something against me.



*Psychological abuse*

53. [GRO-B-2] would play mind games with us. She would tell us that mum was coming to see us, but then, on the day [GRO-B-2] had said mum was coming, [GRO-B-2] would tell us that mum wasn't coming anymore, and that mum didn't want us. [GRO-B-2] would tell us no one in our family wanted us. Being told that repeatedly left me emotionally damaged for years.
54. One time dad came to visit us on the farm once. [GRO-B-2] and [GRO-B-3] did not bother to tell me he was coming, and so I remember being surprised when he drove past me as I worked outside and he said, "hey son". It was the coolest feeling ever seeing him again. As soon as he left, [GRO-B-2] started speaking negatively about him, saying he did not want us, and he was only coming to see us so that he could use us. I remember feeling so angry with her, but not knowing how to voice my emotions.
55. I hated it there. It felt like no one was there for me or my sisters, and that no one cared about us.
56. School was the only time I was happy. At school, I could still play, and be a child. I was scared every afternoon when I had to go back home to the [GRO-B-2]  
[GRO-B-3]
57. I remember the relief I felt when CYFS eventually came and uplifted us. It felt like finally someone was coming to rescue us. I remember the social workers turning up at school, and us all being bundled into a car, before going and picking [GRO-A Ms AH] up from the farm. We left so suddenly, we were not even able to grab our clothes or things.
58. I don't really remember, but I have since learned that a year before we were uplifted from [GRO-B-2] and [GRO-B-3] home, one of my sisters made allegations to CYFS that we were being physically abused by the [GRO-B-2]  
[GRO-B-3]

*Records*

59. On 18 September 2000, a CYFS social worker responded to a query from our Lawyer for Child, Grant Litchfield, about the allegations of abuse at

the GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3 noting that CYFS' stance was that they would look at the option of "working with GRO-B-2 as opposed to seeking a new placement for six children".

60. On 13 November 2000, Ms GRO-B said CYFS had investigated the concerns about us being hit, and had offered support to GRO-B-2 but that she thought this was not necessary. **[WITN0705006]**
61. CYFS do not seem to have checked in on us from that time until eight months later, when in June 2001, a social worker visited the farm to check on us, and asked GRO-B-2 about the previous allegations. GRO-B-2 told the social worker that us kids were "well aware of her authority over us" and she told the social worker that "it's necessary to growl them, whack them, boot them and shove them." **[WITN0705007]**
62. GRO-B-2 also informed the social workers during that visit that we were a source of income to her. During the visit GRO-B-2 told the social worker that we had had no contact with mum or dad for 5 months.
63. Despite GRO-B-2 comments, CYFS left us living with her.
64. In October 2001 CYFS visited our school, where teaching staff stated that we were continuing to be physically abused at the GRO-B-2  
GRO-B-3. The teacher told CYFS that we had no faith or trust in anyone, and that this was directly related to CYFS' lack of response to GRO-B-2 admissions to assaulting us. The teacher informed CYFS that after the social workers had left in June 2001, GRO-B-2 had told us kids that "she told the social workers she hits us, and that she was going to carry on hitting us". **[WITN0705008]**
65. CYFS again spoke with GRO-B-2 who again told CYFS that sometimes she would kick and hit us, and that she would yell at us. She said she whacked us with a stick, but that she did not give us hidings. She also said that we all had our chores to do. GRO-B-2 then asked CYFS for a loan and financial assistance to start renovations on the home, and informed CYFS that she and GRO-B-3 were saving the Department a lot of money. **[WITN0705009]**

66. After this second disclosure, social workers looked at uplifting us to another placement. It took them about 4 months to find a placement that would take all of us. For those 4 months we remained with GRO-B-2 and GRO-B-3
67. The social workers who uplifted us took us all to a new placement with a woman named GRO-B-4. GRO-B-4 was yet another stranger to us.

GRO-B-4

68. At the start, all six of us were placed together with GRO-B-4. However, after a few days GRO-A Ms AK ran off, and then GRO-A Ms AH left soon after that.
69. To me, GRO-B-4 was alright. She did not deprive us of anything.
70. I remember that we went to school there, and it was a good change to have a little more freedom than we were used to at the GRO-B-2 GRO-B-3
71. Despite this, I remember that at some point me and GRO-B-4 started arguing, and I decided I wanted to leave and live with family.

### ***Whānau placement***

72. I remember being taken by social workers to go and stay with an aunty or nanny in Pukekohe for a few weeks, and that every day social workers would come and drive me back to school in GRO-A
73. I think my time there was fine, although I know I was still emotionally very upset about our treatment with the GRO-B-2 GRO-B-3 and I still remember that feeling of having no idea of what was going on and what would happen next.

GRO-B

### ***– Mt Wellington***

74. After a month or so with my aunty or nanny, I was placed in a CYFS home with a woman called GRO-B in Mt Wellington, Auckland. I am not sure what prompted this move. I think I lived with GRO-B for about a year.

75. There were always a few other foster kids in this home with me. They were all in the same boat as me, all with no proper home, and a bit messed up and needing help.
76. I remember that [GRO-B] was a pretty good caregiver. If any of us ever wanted anything, we could ask her, and she would actually take the time to talk to us about it, would consider the request, and would come up with a plan with us on how we could get what we wanted.
77. While I was with [GRO-B], I don't think CYFS made any effort to maintain contact between me and my siblings, or my parents. I remember that other kids would get to see their families, but for me, every time holidays came around, I would be shipped off by social workers to another camp.
78. I hated the camps. I must have been to all the camps on offer in Auckland. It felt like the social workers just wanted me out of sight, out of mind. I felt like I was being forgotten about.
79. By this stage I was beginning to fall into a fairly serious depression.
80. As well as being depressed, I became angry. I would argue with [GRO-B]. I didn't understand my emotions, or how to regulate them. I just remember feeling sad and angry all the time. Eventually I asked to leave.

### ***Kokiri***

81. CYFS agreed and placed me at Kokiri in Otara. This was a Christian Group Home, run by a woman named [GRO-B] and her family, plus some staff.
82. When I arrived there, I went backwards. I stopped speaking to people and my depression got a lot worse. Staff who worked with me there later said I was completely shut off, and that I didn't know how to be around people. I would wander around by myself, and often turn my back toward the staff or other kids and isolate myself.

83. My memory of [GRO-B] and the staff is that they were pretty good. I know they were trying to help me, although I don't think I knew how to be helped at that stage. I didn't know how to heal, or how to express myself. I had become stuck in the belief that no one cared about me.
84. There were about twenty of us CYFS kids at the placement. We did not have our own rooms. We all slept 'marae style' with girls at one end and boys at the other.
85. If you were naughty at Kokiri, you were put on 'loss of privileges'. This meant you didn't get your allowance for the week and usually you wouldn't be allowed to make phone calls.
86. There were also rules that stipulated that you were not allowed to leave the property. It was considered an absconding if you went outside the front gate. If you ever wanted to go anywhere, or buy anything, you had to wait until a staff member was willing to take you.
87. At Kokiri I remember doing Correspondence for a bit, and then going to a Māori language school that was directly opposite Kokiri. I could not speak te reo and so found it challenging to keep up with the schoolwork.
88. I remember that school would be from about 8.00am until 12.00pm and that after that we would do sports.
89. Every day we had chores. These were usually cleaning duties or food preparation duties.
90. Once a week, instead of school we would have a day of "work based" activities. This was really just a day where me and all the other CYFS kids would be made to work on [GRO-B] property and house at Kokiri. I remember that anytime there was work to be done, anywhere on the property, the adults would always say "don't worry the teenagers can do it".

91. I remember thinking 'why are we doing all the cleaning and work on their house, when they had heaps of family living onsite, who never did anything'.
92. At some point I changed schools and started going to Tangaroa College full time.
93. I know that [GRO-B] eventually tried to adopt me. In July 2006 [GRO-B] was awarded parenting and additional guardianship orders for me.
94. At some point after this, when I about 14 years old, an uncle called [GRO-B] who was in a relationship with [GRO-B] sister, decided that he wanted to care for me. He and [GRO-B] sister were moving with their family to Australia and asked if I wanted to come with them. I agreed and mum, [GRO-B] and CYFS all signed off on the move.
95. I lived with [GRO-B] and his family in Brisbane for about 6 months. I remember that at that time I was still extremely depressed, and I struggled over there. After 6 months, I asked my uncle if I could come back to New Zealand. He agreed and I was sent back to New Zealand and went back to living at Kokiri.
96. Around this time at Kokiri, some of my sisters started being placed there too. I really liked having my sisters at Kokiri with me.
97. Despite my sisters being there, after Australia my depression got even worse. I think I barely spoke to anyone for a year.
98. I felt angry and lost, and I started to not care about anything.
99. I felt that no one knew or understood what we had been through.
100. I remember that some counselling was arranged. The counsellor who would pick me up from Kokiri would always take me to McDonalds, then take me to her office afterwards. Because of being treated to a feed beforehand, I was usually in a better mood by the time we got to her office, and we never talked about any of my underlying problems. The counsellor

would just provide questionnaires throughout the course of counselling which went on for a few weeks. I think she was just trying to kill time and was not interested in listening to my problems. A few weeks later she told CYFS I was fine and did not need further help.

101. Eventually I moved out of Kokiri and into GRO-B house. I stayed there for a while and became a mentor myself at Kokiri and worked there for a year or so after college. During this time, I was discharged from CYFS care.
102. Eventually I left Kokiri and moved in with GRO-A Ms AG and later with my mum.

### ***Impacts***

103. I am now 31 years old now, and I find myself surprised at how much my time in care still impacts me. A lot of those emotions and hurt sit deep inside me and those experiences will never really go.
104. I think my time in care dislocated me from my culture and wider whānau connections. We were taken away from Pukekohe where most of our whānau have lived for generations and taken away from the contact we had, and might have continued to have, with our grandparents and aunts and uncles. I feel like I do not quite know where I belong because of this.
105. Throughout my time in care, we were never offered whānau placements. Instead we were made to feel that our whānau did not want us. I have later learned from some of my wider whānau that many of them were never asked, and that most of them had no idea where we were.
106. I have been reconnecting with many of my whānau as an adult and have chosen to move back to Pukekohe with my family and young son, so that he can get to know where we are from and get to experience those connections.
107. Because of my time in care, and the ways that I learned to react to stress, I have had some struggles with employment. I have walked out of jobs when it feels like the pressure is getting too much, and I respond by reverting to my feelings of not caring about anything anymore.

108. I have managed to stay out of the criminal justice system, and I think that that is probably something of a statistical anomaly for a Māori man who has been through the care system and who has come from a gang-related whānau. Many of my wider whānau have been to prison. I think this fuelled me to get somewhere else in life.
109. I remember that when I finally made it out of several years of my depression, I made my mind up that I wanted my life to be better than what it had been during my time in care.
110. Despite missing quite a bit of schooling, I still managed to get myself through higher education and got a degree in business.
111. Even though my father, and all us kids went through the care system, none of our next generation are in care. Me and many of my siblings have had our children, and they are at home with us.

### ***Recommendations***

112. The whole system needs to change. There needs to be much better, in-depth assessments of caregivers, and the system needs to be set up so that both the caregivers and the State are responsible and accountable when things go wrong.
113. I think in our case we were better off with mum and dad, despite some of their issues. I remember that at least we were happy and loved there. We were taken away and put in a place that was so much worse for us, and all of us were damaged.
114. I am only just starting on the journey to seek redress for my treatment in care, but my understanding is that it is a very long process and that it is a process that is not very good for survivors. I think it is important that any monetary compensation that is provided, is adequate to compensate us for the harm that was done, particularly as it has had such a long-term impact in many people's lives, including mine and my siblings'. I also want an apology from the State, for allowing me to be treated the way I was.



**Statement of Truth**

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.



GRO-C

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