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Gippsland children's advocate and educator honoured

Trish McCluskey, the Gippsland Regional Director of child and family welfare organisation, Berry Street, has been recognised for her work improving services for vulnerable children, young people, women and families.

Ms McCluskey was singled out as an innovator and leader who prioritised education for her own staff, clients and others in the children's services sector. And, she is an inaugural member and chair of the Victorian Therapeutic Treatment Board for young people with sexually concerning behaviours.

Ms McCluskey is among five finalists in the Unsung Hero category of the 2015 HESTA Community Sector Awards. The Awards recognise those in the community sector who've made an exceptional contribution to social justice in Australia, by enhancing the wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals and communities.

"Underlying everything we do is a conviction that all children have the right to a good childhood and we support those children, young people and families with the most complex issues arising from abuse, neglect or violence," Ms McCluskey said.

"My commitment to children is matched by a drive to improve systems of care and I have been involved in various initiatives to improve outcomes for children in the state's child protection system. Currently, I am part of an initiative to find ways to ensure that siblings in out-of-home care are able to remain connected."

As well as her operational leadership role and policy input, Ms McCluskey also started an annual debutante ball for young people in care and on case management programs in Gippsland.

"These young people may have had chaotic, traumatic childhoods but this is one event they look forward to," she said.

"I go to the dance lessons, find the girls' dresses, the boys suits and ensure all of the young people have someone who is important to them there on the night. Sometimes we have 300 families and friends turn up and the debutantes experience a great sense of pride."

Ms McCluskey has also developed the Gippsland Wilderness Program, an outdoor education program for young people whose experiences of abuse have left them grappling with self-esteem and other issues.

The program involves animal assisted therapy and includes a very special member of the Berry Street team – Koda the kelpie dog.

"Koda has proven very popular with vulnerable children, has provided many positive, life changing experiences and is certainly among the most popular members of our Gippsland team," she said.

The Unsung Hero Award winner will receive \$5,000 in a **ME EveryDay** Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant. There are two other categories — Social Impact and Organisation. The Social Impact winner will also receive \$5,000 in a **ME EveryDay** Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant. The Organisation winner will receive a \$10,000 development grant, also courtesy of proud awards sponsor **ME**.

Finalists will be flown to Sydney for the awards dinner on 25 June 2015, where the winners will be revealed.

The HESTA Community Sector Awards are presented in partnership with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) as part of the ACOSS National Conference 2015 and have been sponsored by ME since they started in 2012.

Learn more about the awards at hestaawards.com.au

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