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# Mothers, lawyer raise concerns about Tasmanian government's handling of forced adoption redress scheme



By Loretta Lohberger

Adoption

Thu 8 Jan 2026 at 5:12am



In 1969 Robyn Cohen was subjected to the forcible removal of her baby. (ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke)

## In short:

The Tasmanian government has announced it is consulting on a redress scheme for mothers who were subject to historical forced adoption practices.

In the consultation documentation, the government says it has "decided" on the monetary value of the redress payments, leaving some questioning how genuine the consultation process will be.

## What's next?

The government says it is "acting with urgency" to establish the scheme, which comes more than 13 years after the Tasmanian parliament apologised for the pain and suffering caused by past forced adoption practices.

Robyn Cohen says she felt "unworthy" when her newborn daughter was taken from her after she gave birth at the Royal Hobart Hospital in 1969.

Now, she says she feels "worthless again" after the Tasmanian government released more details about a redress scheme for mothers who were subject to forced adoptions in the state from the 1950s until the 1980s.

"It's totally inadequate for the trauma I've lived with for the past 56 years," Ms Cohen, 75, said.

"This is not just about me, this is about all mothers, and mothers deserve better than the token offer that's been put on the table ... we're all damaged."

The Tasmanian redress scheme for mothers — often young and unmarried when they gave birth — who had their babies taken from them, or who were left feeling like they had no choice but for their baby to be adopted, comes more than 13 years after the state parliament apologised for the pain and suffering of past forced adoption practices.

[Consultation on the redress scheme is now open](#), but the government has already put a dollar figure on the compensation amount.

In a preamble to a survey that is part of the consultation process, it says:

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- Relationships Australia Tasmania's Forced Adoption Support Service **1300 364 277**
  - DECYP Adoptions Service **(03) 6166 0422**
  - Lifeline **13 11 14**
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"The Government has decided that the financial redress amount will be \$75,000, including a \$65,000 monetary payment and a provision for counselling, well-being, and psychological support services up to \$10,000."

The survey, however, asks:

"What do you think of the proposed amount?"

Lawyer Angela Sdrinis, whose firm represents 17 mothers who were forced to give up their babies, said she and her clients were "flabbergasted to see that in fact the government already seems to have made a decision about the monetary payment".

**"It's very triggering, and one of the things that you become instantly aware of when dealing with mothers who've been subjected to the forced adoption practices is that they've been living with extraordinary pain for decades," she said.**



Angela Sdrinis says the monetary payment is "very, very important" and has to reflect the level of wrongdoing. (ABC News: Owain Stia-James)

Ms Cohen said: "How can it be genuine [consultation] if you've announced how much it's going to be?"

### **Scheme 'appreciated' but sensitivity called for**

Ms Sdrinis said the government's moves towards the redress scheme were appreciated.

"But it needs to be done sensitively," she said.

A Tasmanian government spokesperson said the government was "acting with urgency" by releasing the details of the scheme "to ensure the interim scheme can be operational as soon as possible".

**"The government is proposing a nation-leading, non-adversarial redress scheme for mothers affected by**

**historic forced adoption practices," they said.**

"The redress payment will be more than double that provided in the Victorian scheme."

The spokesperson did not answer the ABC's question about whether there was potential for the monetary amount to change based on feedback during the consultation period.

Ms Cohen said the \$65,000 monetary payment was not enough.

"I just think they've plucked out a figure that they think, 'Oh well, they'll cop that and it's more than the \$30,000 that Victoria is giving and that'll do,'" she said.

"I don't think the amount reflects the gravity of the crime ... the damage done to me 56 years ago is irreparable and I would have spent the better part of what they're offering on counselling.

**"Redress needs to reflect the gravity of the crime, which is taking my baby off me the second she was born and not letting me see her."**





Robyn Cohen says the amount of redress should be the same across the board. (ABC News: *Ebony ten Broeke*)

Ms Sdrinis said the monetary payment was "very, very important".

"Not just because many of our clients have actually suffered significant financial hardship because of their experiences through forced adoption, they've suffered psychological injury, they've been unable to work, they've needed medical treatment," she said.

"But the other reason why the monetary payment is important is because it has to reflect the level of wrongdoing ... for it to make a difference to these women, I think they have to feel that it's fair."

Ms Sdrinis said looking at redress payments in other schemes for "comparable sort of harm, the 65,000 is low".

"Having said that, we need to acknowledge that in Victoria the payment is \$30,000, but in comparison to what these claims would be worth ... if they

were civil [court] claims for damages, all of those figures are manifestly inadequate," she said.

**"So it's a question of trying to balance what potentially is available with what can practically be done, and I think the government has fallen short."**



Angela Sdrinis likens her clients to child abuse survivors, as many were minors or in their late teens at the time of the events. *(ABC News: Owain Stia James)*

The compensation amount would be a fixed amount, something Ms Cohen agrees with.

"I don't think mothers need to go through the trauma of proving this or proving that ... to determine how much you get; I think the amount of redress should be the same across the board."

In 2012, the same year as the Tasmanian parliament's apology, a Senate inquiry into forced adoption practices recommended "that formal apologies should always be accompanied by undertakings to take concrete actions that offer appropriate redress for past mistakes".

Consultation on the redress scheme is open until February 14, and the government hopes to implement the scheme by July.

Posted Thu 8 Jan 2026 at 5:12am, updated Thu 8 Jan 2026 at 7:41am