

# Executive summary

The aim of the Family Support Services Scoping study was to assess the scope of 'family support services' funded by State, Territory and Commonwealth community service departments and to provide an overview of the current data collection efforts in relation to these services. The study arose in the context of the *National Community Services Information Development Plan* adopted by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC). Family support services are identified within the plan as one core component of the community services sector and an area in which further data development was required. Community Link Australia was contracted to undertake this study and worked to a Steering Group chaired by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

'Community services departments' were defined as those departments or components of departments that fund or deliver community services for children and families. The various departments that contributed to the study were as follows: New South Wales Department of Community Services; the Victorian Department of Human Services; Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland; Western Australian Department of Family and Children's Services; South Australian Department of Human Services; Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services; Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Community Services; Territory Health Services, Northern Territory; and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. As of March 2001, the Queensland Department is now called the Department of Families Queensland.

An agreed definition of 'family support services' was developed for the purposes of this study:

*Services that seek to benefit families by improving their capacity to care for children and/or strengthening family relationships.*

This report describes, at a high level, the programs which each jurisdiction funds or delivers; broadly outlines the philosophies and approaches taken by each jurisdiction in relation to family support; and gives a broad description of the data collection systems in place or planned. It is one step in a long and ongoing process to provide meaningful, useful and beneficial information about an important area of community services.

The complexity of services and service activities was evident in defining 'in scope' family support services for this study. Family support services provided in Australia cover a wide range of service delivery types, ranging from large-scale media campaigns for the general public, to volunteer help for families in their own homes. The major categories of family support services identified were:

- information and referral
- education/skills development
- counselling, mediation or therapy
- residential and in-home support
- advocacy
- other family support services

More detail about the service activities in each of these categories is provided in the report.

Many similarities in approach to family support services were noted, with a number of issues being evident in most jurisdictions.

- Family support services are becoming more publicly visible and politically (and financially) recognised. Child protection and family violence services are still extremely important, and receive considerable funding from government, but are now increasingly complemented by services which build on the strengths which exist in families, rather than focussing on the dysfunctional aspects of family life.
- Building and strengthening the capacity of families and communities to manage their own needs is critical in developing strong, responsible families and communities.
- Local perspectives are becoming more important, with generic, whole of jurisdiction service delivery models being complemented by innovative, locally designed and delivered services to meet the needs of the families and communities for whom the services are provided.
- Integration or ‘seamlessness’ of service delivery is a key aim, with jurisdictions actively involved in fostering partnerships between the varied departments, local government and non-government agencies and in assisting with coordination of services and sharing of resources.
- Professionalism in providing family support services is increasing, with resourcing, training and support for both professional staff and volunteers receiving greater attention and funding.
- Clients are seen in the context of their family, and the family in the context of their community. Strengthening families and communities is a prime driver for many of the services.
- Early childhood services are crucial—support for families with children in the youngest age groups is essential if stronger, self-reliant families and communities are to thrive. Early support and intervention are clearly seen as highly effective in preventing or reducing the level of more intrusive interventions at later stages.
- Services are designed to meet the specific needs of the people they are seeking to assist—whether these are recent migrants, families with young children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or isolated families.
- Understanding and measuring outcomes are essential factors in delivering effective services, with a sustained move towards identifying outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Knowing and understanding ‘what works’ is a major issue for all jurisdictions.
- Clearer objectives in funding services in the local government and non-government sector are evident—funding arrangements are formalised, and specify the outcome and performance measures expected.
- Commitment to good, consistent information about services being delivered is evident, with enhancements to existing data collections or plans for new data collections on the agenda for many jurisdictions.

Data collections relating to family support services are in place, at least in part, in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth in relation to services provided or funded. Plans exist to commence collections in other jurisdictions, and to extend or review existing collections in most States, Territories and the Commonwealth. Data systems vary from detailed unit record collections

about activities, to 6-monthly aggregates of information on key outputs and performance measures. Many activity collections are supplemented by consumer feedback or client satisfaction surveys. Longitudinal studies are becoming more common with several under way or planned. Information collected in the various systems is not identical, but there are several core pieces of information collected, such as client numbers, instances of service, hours of effort and the like.