

Appendix 9: Commonwealth Government—Department of Family and Community Services

The information provided during the discussions is outlined below, under the following topic areas:

- approach to family support services
- services provided or funded
- service delivery mechanisms
- data currently being collected or planned to be collected
- developments or initiatives which are planned in relation to family support

Approach to family support services

Approach to planning

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) reports on indicators for their three outcomes areas—stronger families, stronger communities, and economic and social participation. For the purposes of the Family Support Services Scoping study, the policies and programs within the stronger families outcome area are the most important, as they cover family assistance, youth and student support, child support and child care support. Elements of the stronger communities outcome are relevant also, particularly in the area of community support.

The department has a key focus on families and lifecycle, and seeks to fund services to meet the needs of families in a range of areas. There are a number of key policy documents, including the various guidelines which have been developed for funding programs. The Commonwealth uses a three-part means of describing services:

- universal—primary services which are directed to all families
- selected—secondary services which are directed to families in particular groups or at particular stages of the lifecycle
- targeted—tertiary services which are directed to families with specific needs

A key new initiative of the government is the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. This strategy is strongly grounded in national and international research into family and community functioning, and together with the experiences of existing communities has led to the development of key focus areas for both families and communities. The strategy recognises that families and communities know their own needs best, and that a 'ground up' approach to service development and delivery will best meet needs at a local level, and stand the best chance of ensuring that real change occurs for both families and the communities in which they live. For families, the Strategy has three focus areas:

- early childhood and the needs of families with young children
- strengthening marriage and relationships
- balancing work and family

This initiative is heavily committed to a partnership approach, with government working with business, communities and individuals to develop strong families and communities. The strategy recognises that strong communities have:

- strong leadership
- skills and knowledge
- expanding partnerships between public and private sectors
- a solid core of committed volunteers

In delivering on the strategy, the government has outlined eight key principles which will guide the 'social coalition'—the partnerships between government, business, community agencies, families and individuals—and give clear direction to the programs being funded under the strategy. The principles are:

- working together in partnerships—involving all partners who can make a real difference to the experience of families and the strength of communities
- prevention and early intervention—investment in supporting families and communities early on, before problems occur
- life transitions—helping families and communities get help as it is needed, to provide extra support at key transition times in their lives
- more integrated and coordinated services—improving the access to services through better integration and linking of services and information at the local level
- local solutions to local problems—understanding that local communities are often the best at identifying and responding to local problems, and working in partnership with local communities in ways which are appropriate to them will develop real solutions
- capacity building—increasing personal and collective resources of individuals and communities to develop skills and capacities needed to respond to local issues
- using the evidence and looking to the future—using evidence and research to determine future policy and directions, and building on this evidence to develop good social policy
- making the investment count—encouraging families and communities to provide feedback on the effectiveness of particular initiatives, and using frameworks and data to ensure that the money goes to projects which are successful in strengthening and supporting communities

Nine new initiatives have been announced, many of which are completely or partially in scope of the study. These are discussed below.

As well as this strategy, the department continues to fund a range of services in the family support area, which have been in place for many years, and which are currently being reviewed in the light of the social policy inherent in the new Strategy. In addition, direct income support in the areas of pensions, benefits and allowances remain a key government approach to supporting families. New initiatives have been implemented from 1 July 2000 in relation to family assistance and child support. These initiatives include simplification of 12 family assistance benefits payments into three new payments. New child support initiatives include an emphasis on non-financial aspects of child support by non-custodial parents.

Approach to funding

The department generally contracts agencies for 3 years, with 12-monthly schedules for payments. Most funding is recurrent, but some newer programs are established under 'one-off' 12- or 18-month agreements. The Good Beginnings program is moving to 2-yearly contracts following a successful pilot phase.

A number of programs, including those funded by the former Department of Health and Family Services are being reviewed, with an expectation of either transfer to States and Territories, transfer to child care programs or integration into other program structures within the department. Funding arrangements for these programs will form part of this review.

Competitive tendering under the purchaser provider model is implemented, or being implemented in the department's family support programs.

Services provided or funded

Services provided

Income support is the main direct 'service' provision for families. The Family Assistance Office is responsible for delivering the three new family payments on behalf of the department:

- Family Tax Benefit Part A, which replaces the minimum family allowance, family allowance, Family Tax Payment Part A and Family Tax Assistance Part A and is directed to assisting families with the cost of raising children
- Family Tax Benefit Part B, which replaces the basic parenting payment, guardian allowance, Family Tax Payment Part B, Family Tax Assistance Part B, the Sole Parent Rebate, and the with-child Dependent Spouse Rebate and is directed to providing extra help to single income families including sole parents
- Child Care Benefit, which replaces child care assistance and the child care rebate, and is directed to helping families with the child costs of child care.

These payments are not true services in the same sense as other family support services delivered by government departments, although it could be argued that the payments are directed to assisting families to care for children, and so are within the scope of the study.

Services funded

The Commonwealth funds a range of services, including family relationships services, parenting programs, Aboriginal and Islander Child Care agencies and a mix of programs which were funded under the former Department of Health and Family Services.

Family relationships

The Family Relationships Services Program provides funds of over \$34 million to over 100 agencies to provide family relationships counselling, family mediation services, children's contact services, adolescent mediation and family therapy, family relationships education

and family skills training. Specific services are directed to men, young women and Indigenous Australians.

These services use a range of strategies to meet the needs of clients. These may involve one-to-one counselling and therapy services, family counselling, intensive counselling and support work with young people and their families, mediation, personal or group education, facilitation of child–parent contact hand–over, supervision of child–parent visits, and community education and development activities.

The services provided are directed to families at all stages of the service delivery continuum—from universal services involving community education, through selected services, which are directed to assisting couples to prepare for or enrich existing relationships, through to targeted services for families with relationship problems for which they need specific, direct assistance. Services provided may focus on any stage of the relationship or family cycle, from formation, through maintenance to dissolution. Families are assisted with all aspects of family lifecycle changes, including pre-marriage education, parenting skills from the birth of a child, through to adolescence and ‘empty nest’, relationship enrichment, remarriage or re-partnering, separation and divorce, and retirement and its effect on relationships.

Many agencies funded under this program offer other services to support families, including services for problem gamblers, information lines for men, and budget counselling and support.

Parenting Program

The Parenting Program funded by the department is Good Beginnings, a family centred-program based on volunteer home visiting of families with new babies. Four pilot sites were established in 1997, with each project managed by a professional who is responsible for recruitment, screening and training of ‘community parents’. These parents are matched with families who have been referred by local services or who have asked for home visiting. The program is voluntary, and is designed to provide practical assistance to families with babies and young children, particularly those who do not have other support systems.

The program is managed by Good Beginnings Australia Ltd, and includes on its Board of Directors representatives of National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) and the Lions Club of Sydney who have been key players in the establishment of the program.

The program was developed by researching, developing and testing a number of family-centred programs and initiatives. The project aims to develop strong family and community links necessary to strengthen families and neighbourhoods. This has been achieved partly by consultation with families in their home or local neighbourhood, and by identifying needs and building on existing strengths.

In addition to family-focussed activities, the program is engaged in providing training and support for volunteer and professional staff; development of best practice guidelines; community information packages; and sharing of resources with local health, welfare and community agencies.

The program was evaluated after 18 months, with positive results indicated for the 117 families who participated in the program, the community parents and the communities in which the four pilot projects were established (inner-south west Sydney, Katherine in the Northern Territory, Moe in Victoria, and Hobart). Following the success of the pilot, new

services have been implemented in other areas in conjunction with State and Territory departments and local agencies. These include services focussed on men's parenting, Aboriginal communities, a Prison Parenting Program in Hobart, and services for specific ethnic communities. Outreach services have been developed for isolated communities and parent group support services for high-dependency families have been established. The program is building social capital or capacity in the families involved in the program, as well as strengthening the support networks for their community.

Agencies funded by the former Department of Health and Family Services

These services have been funded recurrently and are currently the subject of a review. The services cover a range of models, some of which are within the scope of the study, and others which are more clearly identified with child care. Services include community education programs, child abuse prevention services and some school-based behaviour modification programs. The services which remain within the scope of family and community support programs will be integrated with new service programs under the government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Services 'on the borderline'

Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies

These services are generally jointly funded by the Commonwealth and States, and are focussed on child protection and family welfare and support. Much of their work is involved in the tertiary sector, with particular focus on children and families in contact with the child protection system. While these activities are out of scope of the Family Support Services Scoping Study, the agencies also provide a range of support activities for families, and seek to work in ways to prevent families from entering the statutory child protection system.

Reconnect

Family support is also provided under a number of targeted services, such as the Reconnect program, an early intervention program for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and for their families. Services assist young people and their families through counselling, family mediation and practical support. The primary objective is to improve the level of engagement of homeless young people, or those at risk of homelessness, in family, work, education, training and the community. Although much of the work undertaken within this program is out of scope of the Family Support Services Scoping Study, some activities, particularly with young people and their families prior to the young person becoming homeless, could be considered within the broad framework of family support for the study.

Domestic violence and child abuse prevention

A number of agencies funded under by the department are involved in development and delivery of services relating to people experiencing domestic violence and child abuse. These services are often undertaken by agencies funded under the family relationships services program, and seek to support families experiencing violence or abuse.

Service delivery mechanisms

The services provided cover a wide range of activities for individuals and families, including:

- counselling and therapy
- mediation
- skills development and training
- supervision of child handover
- supervision of child–parent contact visits
- relationship education courses
- home visiting of families with young children
- behaviour management
- behaviour modelling
- advocacy
- referrals
- information provision

Community–focussed services include:

- media and community education
- community development

Data collection

Family Relationships

There is a data collection system, FAMnet, in place. The system has been operational since early 1999, and collects information from services funded under the program on an ongoing basis. The data collection covers information about clients and activities engaged in by the clients of the service provider, as well as information about community education, training and other support activities. Service activities are categorised as ‘Cases’, ‘Courses’ or ‘Support Activities’. Definitions of these are included in the data dictionary for the system.

The system contains a program management component which enables the department and agencies to manage contract arrangements, through online access to contract details, financial schedules, and electronic submission of financial data and accountability information. The system is Internet-based, with all information stored centrally. Service providers access the system through a secure browser-based interface.

Reports on service activities, client characteristics and performance measures can be obtained from the system, and further reports are constructed by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) using a Crystal Reports tool.

The system has recently been transferred from the software developer to in-house management. Work continues on fine-tuning of the system, including the transfer of some data items from ‘mandatory’ to ‘optional’ status.

A comprehensive data dictionary forms part of the FAMnet system. The data dictionary is in two parts:

- Service Activity, covering information on the services provided to clients by service providers
- Supply Side, covering items concerned with the relationship between service providers and the department, such as contract and budget information etc.

The data dictionary is updated as new items are added or items are amended. It is accessible directly from within the system via a 'Help' button, and can also be downloaded by individual system users.

Parenting Program

Some data is collected about the Good Beginnings program, particularly in relation to costings and outcomes, as input to evaluations. Good Beginnings Australia is developing a new database to enable it to report more accurately on the program's outcomes. The 2-year evaluation of Good Beginnings revealed inadequacies in its existing database. The department has not developed particular data collection forms, but relies on the funding agreement as the means by which program information is obtained.

Other funded services

No data collections exist for other in-scope services. However, as part of the review of agencies funded by the former Department of Health and Family Services, a new data collection system is planned, along with new agreements. It is anticipated that this may take a few years for full implementation.

Evaluations

The department conducts regular evaluation studies of particular programs or elements of programs, each of which gather specific data sets. Recent examples of evaluations include the Good Beginnings project; and projects in the Family Relationships Services Program which focussed on family violence research and intervention; the Community Development Officer (diversity) project relating to service provision to clients from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; children's contact services; and adolescent mediation and family therapy services. A preliminary survey of affected customers of the new Family Tax Benefit has been undertaken to identify service delivery issues, and provide baseline data for a more comprehensive survey after 12 months operation of the new payment.

Customer surveys and longitudinal studies

The department has a comprehensive and detailed program of customer surveys and longitudinal studies to provide information on a range of departmental programs. Key among these studies are the Customer Participation Survey, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (see below); and the General Customer Survey.

The Customer Participation Survey involved a telephone survey of 2,027 recipients of social security payments for people of workforce age and covered areas which are related to family

support, including participation in voluntary or community activities. Analysis of the data from this survey is continuing.

The General Customer Survey involves a sample of FaCS customers (pension, benefit and allowance recipients, people receiving family payments and holders of Health Care Cards), who are followed up each year to provide information on the impact of income support payments. Analysis of the data from the survey is ongoing.

Developments and initiatives

Stronger Families and Communities

A significant development in coming months will be the finalisation of guidelines for new services funded under the Stronger Families and Communities initiative. Specific services types which are expected to be within the scope of the Family Support Services Scoping study are:

- the Stronger Families Fund—this fund will establish a number of projects to support parents and families in their role of caring for young children. Projects will be developed locally and the fund will assist projects which help families with their parenting; provide young children with development opportunities; help balance the needs of work and family; and provide resources to deal with relationship difficulties. Communities will be encouraged to combine Stronger Families funds with existing community resources and infrastructure. The fund will also establish a national clearing house for local communities to access information and research on successful projects. \$40 million has been committed to this fund over 4 years.
- early intervention, parenting and family relationship support—to provide services and activities with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention through practical skills and support for families facing difficulties and whose needs are not currently met by existing approaches. Expanded family skills training will be a focus, as will playgroups in rural and regional areas, relationship education in new and responsive ways, family counselling services through the Department of Transport and Regional Services' Regional Communities Program; and developing and providing training resources for professionals to assist and refer individuals and families to support. \$47.3 million has been committed over 4 years.
- longitudinal study of Australian children—information from this study will address a major gap in knowledge and information about early childhood experiences and their impact on education, health, employment, crime and social problems. The study will complement the HILDA Survey and other studies being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Australian National University (see below). \$6.1 million has been committed over 4 years to the study.
- communication strategy—this strategy will, amongst other initiatives, promote and reinforce the significance of good parenting and strong family relationships to children, communities and Australia's future. A range of media will be used to promote the Families and Communities Strategies, with \$8 million committed over 4 years.

Other initiatives in the strategy will be partly in scope of the Family Support Services Scoping study, including the Leadership in Local Communities projects; National Skills

Development for Volunteers; Local Solutions to Local Problems; and the Can Do Community Initiative.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey

The HILDA Survey is a long-term panel survey focussing on the links between labour market, income dynamics and family structures, as well as retirement issues. Although primarily related to economic determinants of behaviour, there is an inter-related objective relating to family dynamics, focussing on separation/divorce, and social/economic status and on links between income support and family formation and breakdown. The survey is currently in the late stages of survey instrument design. AC Nielsen has been subcontracted to carry out the fieldwork by the survey contractor, a research consortium led by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research from the University of Melbourne. Wave 1 will start in September 2001 and be completed in December 2001.