

# Appendix 2: Victoria—Department of Human 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

Family support services in Victoria are largely provided and funded through the Community Care Division of the department.

Family support services provide assistance, counselling and support to families exhibiting risk indicators, to promote, maintain and strengthen their independence and wellbeing.

The services target families with children. These families have significant needs and require support to strengthen their capacity to adequately function and care for their children. The importance of prioritising service delivery to those families with greatest needs is integral to the strategic directions for family support services.

The objective of family support services is to strengthen the capacity of families with significant needs to adequately function and provide safe and nurturing environments for their children. Services aim to work with families to enhance the family's capacity to provide a nurturing relationship, safe environment and access to opportunities.

The department funds agencies to deliver family support services within defined geographic areas. Ensuring services are accessible by all Victorians is a key element in service delivery, as is providing services which are accessible to all groups within the community, including Koori families and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are recent arrivals and/or have significant parenting and/or relationship issues relating to their cultural background.

The department does not directly deliver family support services but funds a large number of agencies to provide family support services throughout the State. Cooperative partnerships between the department, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, local agencies and local government are important to the success of the family support programs.

A major initiative in the area of family support is the Strengthening Families program, which aims to link families with welfare concerns to social supports and services which

enhance their functioning and wellbeing, thus reducing the need for more intrusive intervention such as child protection.

This initiative is consistent with both international research, and work undertaken by the department, which has identified that profiles of families where child abuse is not substantiated are similar to families where the abuse of children is substantiated. Early intervention and preventive services are thus an important part of the approach to providing support to families to meet their needs—when they need the support, before child abuse or family violence becomes entrenched.

In common with other jurisdictions, Victoria uses a participative approach, with families encouraged to participate in the decision making process, with a focus on building on strengths.

Integration of service delivery is important, to provide a mix of services which will meet the varying needs of families throughout their lifecycle.

## **Approach to funding**

The department funds most family support services on an ongoing basis. Some programs are funded for limited periods of 1–2 years, depending on the program. Each funded agency has a single service agreement with the department, with a separate service plan for each distinct funding program. The service plans cover service aims, objectives, service standards and guidelines and performance measures for each funding program. Most service funding is recurrent.

New services are subject to open tender processes. Tenders may be called for specific service delivery models or for specific geographic areas of the State, although this may change for future funding processes.

## **Services provided or funded**

### **Services provided**

Parentline is a statewide telephone information, advice and referral service for parents of children aged from birth to 18 years. It is staffed by professionals from a range of backgrounds including psychology, social work and nursing. Advisers have online access to a wide range of information to meet parenting needs. A resource database allows telephone advisers to provide parents with information about services in their local area.

### **Services funded**

#### **Victorian parenting services**

These services were reviewed at the end of 2000. The final report is not yet released.

Services include the Victorian Parenting Centre (VPC); Regional Parenting Resource Services; the Positive Parenting Program; Family Intervention Services; and Parentline.

The Victorian Parenting Centre is a statewide service established in 1997. It is engaged in research and evaluation of parenting education strategies and resource materials, and produces a range of multimedia culturally sensitive resource materials and proactive strategies relating to parenting and family development for providers of local multi-disciplinary family services and for families. It delivers training to parenting professionals, provides statewide coordination of parenting skills development services and supports, and develops and promotes empirically validated models of parenting education. It has a best practice focus, and ensures that professionals working with children and families have access to high quality resources and training in the delivery of parenting education.

The statewide service is complemented by a number of Regional Parenting Resource Services—one per departmental region. These regional services provide information, resources and education to parents and professionals. They are engaged in networking, coordination and linkages of universal and specialist services to strengthen the supportive service networks available to families. In terms of information provision, the services disseminate parenting information and resources to enhance family functioning to both parents and professionals. An advice service puts parents in touch with the range of services available in the community to meet their needs, and refers families to relevant and appropriate services. The regional services take part in an interactive partnership with the Victorian Parenting Centre and provide a means for dissemination of research findings, resource materials and training programs produced by the centre. Regional services also identify, promote and consult on training options for professionals involved in parenting education in their regional area.

A major focus of the Victorian Parenting Centre, and the regional services, is the development and dissemination of the Positive Parenting Program (PPP)—a multilevel model of prevention and treatment of behaviour problems in children. A range of parent information products, professional resources and training programs are designed to address family issues from those requiring provision of brief information through to intensive family intervention for high needs families.

The more intense intervention services of the PPP are the Family Intervention Services. Three services have been established to target families where the need for parent support coexists with other issues such as relationship difficulties and stress. Services are located in Barwon South Western region, Hume region and Northern Metropolitan region. Services provided include group and individual intervention for parents of children aged from birth to 10 years. The isolated project in the Hume region is a telephone intervention service.

### **Occasional care**

The Children's Services Program funds occasional care (as well as other child care programs) to enable parents to participate in short-term education and other activities.

### **Family support services**

The family counselling program is run by professional staff who offer structured guidance and support to individual family members or groups of families. Family counsellors encourage and support families with difficulties such as partner relationships and parent-child relationships. Some family counselling agencies offer in-home support in addition to centre-based or telephone counselling. Some agencies will provide services to any person or family referred to them, while others are more targeted, particularly in relation to families

with child protection concerns, with these referrals varying from 30% to 70% of all referrals. Demand on these services is increasing, as other access points for services are reduced because of Citizen's Advice Bureaux closures and reduction in local government services following competitive compulsory tendering (CCT). Many agencies also receive funding from other sources, including local government. In some instances, services are 100% funded by the department.

The in-home support program focuses on providing practical 'hands on' advice to families, often in their own homes. Workers also assist families in learning about and accessing relevant community services. The program, in common with family counselling, is broadly targeted to families with 'needs'. It works primarily at the preventative end of the continuum of care. Formal training for workers has been developed with a Certificate in Family Support Work offered to provide a professional training opportunity in this field.

Family support services undertake a range of local activities, including running parenting groups in local schools.

### **Strengthening Families**

Strengthening Families is an initiative which has been in place for about 2.5 years. The aim of the program is to divert families from the child protection system—to link families with welfare concerns to social supports and services which enhance their functioning and wellbeing, thus reducing the need for more intrusive intervention such as child protection. Children are not considered to be at risk of serious harm, but the family may be struggling with psychiatric illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, disability or chronic illness.

It works at the interface with the child protection system—both pre- and post- intervention. Agencies do not provide services to families where children are considered to be at risk of serious harm as these children are notified to Child Protection for assessment and appropriate action agencies may also receive referrals from the department following child protection intervention.

The service provides case management, including assessment, planning and monitoring to ensure families engage with other services; assertive outreach services to actively engage families in their own environment; in-home support comprising both practical, hands-on assistance and more structured support in areas such as parenting skills development; and purchase of services through a flexi-fund, which provides material aid for families. Services cover approximately 60% of the State, and are concentrated in high need areas.

Strengthening Families and family support services work in conjunction to provide a single service system for families in Victoria.

### **Early parenting centres**

Early parenting centres are located in three areas, and cover the State. These centres are primarily for mothers with new babies or children aged up to 3 years. Referrals are primarily from Maternal and Child Health nurses. The centres provide residential services up to 5 days, day stays, and some outreach services. In-home support is also provided.

## **Services ‘on the borderline’**

### **Maternal and Child Health services**

These services provide primarily health-related services, but also include maternal wellbeing, home visiting services targeting families with high needs, and a statewide telephone advisory service. These services are moving into generalist areas of family support, while still providing a health service.

### **Neighbourhood houses**

In Victoria, neighbourhood houses provide elements of family support. Funding is provided for coordinators and services include linking families with family support services in their area. Skills development is also provided.

### **Other services**

Families First services operate towards the tertiary end of care, at points just prior to the removal of children or at reunification of children in care with their families. Family Preservation services are child protection funded, and provide intensive support for families where child protection concerns exist. These services are more likely to be out of scope, as child protection is the main criterion for service access.

## **Service delivery mechanisms**

Department services and funded agencies provide a range of services, using a variety of strategies:

- research and development of parenting resources, education and training
- individual and family counselling
- home visiting
- centre-based support programs and activities for families
- information and referral
- self-help groups
- outreach services
- advocacy
- linking family members

In addition, peak agencies such as Victorian Council of Social Service (VIC COSS), and volunteer centres receive funding, some of which is directed to providing support, resources and training for family support workers.

## **Data collection**

The department initially contracted an external data collection which has now ended. The department has spent considerable resources in consultation with the non-government

sector in relation to a new data collection for the Family Support Program. The new collection is being implemented from 2000–2001, and will collect information on clients in accordance with new service plans. Information is collected quarterly. The collection is part of a wide-ranging Information Management Strategy being implemented throughout the Community Care Division of the department.

The data collection is currently paper forms based, with the intention to move to an electronic collection in the near future. The information is collected in relation to both casework, and short service activities.

Casework items include:

Agency details

- agency number
- suburb/town of the outlet

Client details

- client code
- suburb/town of the client's usual residence
- country of birth
- Indigenous status
- language spoken at home
- proficiency in English
- interpreter required for effective service delivery
- housing status
- income sources
- household members and family members living elsewhere involved in the case—sex, age, relationship to client and whether living with client

Case details

- date of referral
- referral source
- intake outcome
- date of intake outcome
- date of first attempt to contact family post intake outcome
- date of first meeting with family
- client issues identified—covering a wide range such as access to child care, behaviour, disability, family violence, isolation
- service activities—date, type, duration, travel time, participants, interpreter usage
- reason for case closure
- whether family had telephone or face to face contact with departmental protective services team in the past 2 years
- date of closure

Short service activities cover work where an activity does not proceed beyond intake; no formal assessment is done; telephone contact with no further appointment; crisis

intervention; activities of 1–2 hours where few details are gained about the presenting person or family; one-off service activities where no further service is expected; referrals which are deemed ineligible. Data items collected are:

- date of activity
- sex of person
- type of service (in person, telephone)
- duration of service
- service outcome
- use of professional interpreter

This data collection covers agencies funded under the Family Support Program. Strengthening Families currently has a separate data collection system as part of its evaluation. It is anticipated that the Strengthening Families program will move to the Family Support Data Collection in 2001.

The department also collects financial information from funded agencies through the service agreement management system (SAMS).

Statistical information is collected from Parentline, including number of calls; location of caller; sex of caller; age of child/ren; and issues raised.

## **Developments and initiatives**

The new data collection system is a major development in the Family Support Program. It will provide information for monitoring of the effectiveness and efficiency of funding programs; provide planners with information on the effectiveness of allocating funds for specific issues and assist in evaluating the extent and nature of any changes which need to be implemented; provide client service and business managers and agency managers with information about their individual agency performance against their peers; and provide valuable input to research into what works and what does not in the delivery of family support services.