



Family Relationship Services  
A U S T R A L I A

# Submission to the Federal Budget 2008

18 January 2008

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## Sustainable Services for Australian Families

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## About Us

Family Relationships Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for the family relationships services sector. Our mission is to provide national leadership and representation for the development and delivery of quality services and public policy relevant to individual and family relationships. To achieve this mission, FRSA receives Federal Government funding and financial contributions from member organisations.

Established in July 2007, through the collaborative efforts of three national networks – Family Services Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia and Relationships Australia - FRSA has a broad and inclusive membership. Member organisations range in size from small local community organisations to large service providers operating across State and Territory jurisdictions. They include both secular and faith based organisations, operating high quality professional services. We also have a number of Associate member organisations that support our work, including leading national non-profit organisations and research institutes.

The FRSA website [www.frsa.org.au](http://www.frsa.org.au) is currently under construction. In the meantime more information on FRSA can be obtained by sending an email request to [admin@frsa.org.au](mailto:admin@frsa.org.au).

### Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP)

To be eligible for full membership of FRSA an organisation must be receiving Federal Government funding through the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). This program is administered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and jointly funded by FaHCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD). The program currently funds 105 organisations to deliver services in more than 400 locations across Australia, including:

- **Family Relationship Centres (FRCs)**
- **Post Separation Services:**
  - Family Dispute Resolution
  - Family Relationship Counselling (also referred to as Family Counselling)
  - Children's Contact Services
  - Parenting Orders Program
  - Post Separation Cooperative Parenting
- **Early Intervention Programs:**
  - Family Relationship Counselling
  - Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy
  - Family Relationship Services for Families in Special Circumstances
  - Family Relationships Education and Skills Training
  - Family Relationship Services for Carers
  - Family Relationship Services for Humanitarian Entrants
  - Men and Family Relationship Services
  - Mensline Australia
  - Specialised Family Violence Services

More information on the Family Relationship Services Program and the services provided is available from [www.fahcsia.gov.au/frsp](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/frsp) and [www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au).



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## Executive Summary

Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for family relationship services. FRSA and its member organisations seek to work in partnership with the Federal Government to strengthen and support Australian families. Our vision is for an Australian society that is enriched through respectful relationships in all their diversity.

Strong, healthy families build a protective barrier around individuals. When these family relationships breakdown both adults and children are left vulnerable. Family relationship dysfunction is the largest contributing factor to homelessness in Australia<sup>1</sup>. It is also a significant factor in poverty and unemployment. As so many Australians know, the trauma of separation or divorce can lead to emotional distress, social isolation, disconnection from the workforce, mental health issues, severe financial stress and significant disruption in the lives of adults, children and young people.

Effective relationship services can help to build family resilience and strengthen relationships, preventing family breakdown but also reducing the harm that can occur when relationships come to an end. For example, timely support during separation can substantially reduce conflict and increase parental cooperation focused on the needs of children – a range of services can be provided to assist each family member through the transition.

Investing in family relationship services makes social and economic sense. Family counselling, dispute resolution and post-separation parenting supports are substantially more cost effective than adversarial legal processes and deliver significantly better outcomes for children. Investment in early intervention services including relationship education and targeted programs yields long-term benefits – increasing the capacity of parents to care for children and reducing the incidence of problems, such as family violence and youth homelessness.

Family relationship services have been providing quality support to Australian families since the 1960's with substantial expansion in service delivery over the past two years. The greatest challenge now is to ensure that these services are sustainable over the long term. FRSA has identified investment in strategies to enhance sustainability as our first priority for Federal Budget expenditure.

### Priority 1: A Sustainable Service Sector

Strategies:

- 1.1 Equity in salary levels across community and public service sectors.
- 1.2 Investment in workforce development, including training.
- 1.3 Adequate levels of indexation to ensure funding keeps pace with cost increases.
- 1.4 Funding equity for regional, rural and remote services.

The second priority that we have identified is further investment in support for family and individual relationships. The family relationship services sector has proven its capacity to maximise the efficient and effective use of public resources to enrich family relationships and promote social inclusion. Areas of high need and potential benefit have been identified, in consultation with service providers.

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<sup>1</sup> AIHW (2007) pg 263; SAAP IV Evaluation Report (2004) pg 45: overviews gender and age groups of individuals and reasons for seeking support from SAAP services: 11% of individuals across all clients groups reported relationships or family breakdown; 23% of women reported family or domestic violence; 22% of women under 25 reported relationship or family breakdown and 17% of men under 25 reported relationship or family breakdown.



## Priority 2: Expanding Service Delivery

Strategies:

- 2.1 Enhance services to children and young people.
- 2.2 Enhance the capacity of services to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- 2.3 Enhance the capacity of services to respond to the needs Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families.
- 2.4 Invest in primary prevention strategies to strengthen family relationships.

This submission contains 10 recommendations for investing in sustainable services for families, developed in consultation with member organisations. Due to time and resource limitations, we are unable to provide detailed cost estimates at this time. We are, however, well placed to work collaboratively with relevant government agencies and service providers, to develop more detailed cost estimates if required.

## Summary of Recommendations

1. Increase funding provided to community organisations through the Family Relationship Services Program to enable organisations to offer salaries commensurate with the public and private sector.
2. Support the development of a workforce strategy for the family relationship services sector.
3. Invest in tertiary scholarships and vocational training to increase the supply of qualified practitioners able to work in the family relationship services sector.
4. Adjust the formula for annual indexation of Family Relationship Services Program funding to align with the real cost increases in service delivery.
5. Adjust the FRSP funding model to recognise the higher costs associated with the delivery of services in regional, rural and remote areas with capacity for services to receive funding adjustments in response to local cost pressures, when appropriate.
6. Strengthen the focus on children and young people as a priority within the Family Relationship Services Program, encompassing adequate funding for child inclusive practice, increased funding for Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy, as well as the development of new approaches to providing direct and effective support.
7. Work with the family relationship services sector to enhance service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and their communities, through training and sector development initiatives.
8. Continue and expand the Humanitarian Entrants Program currently provided through the Family Relationship Services Program by the family relationship services sector.
9. Create a special purpose fund that makes resources available at a regional level to fund capacity building and additional service costs resulting from improved Family Relationship Services Program service delivery to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.
10. Increase investment in primary prevention strategies to strengthen family relationship and support working families as a core function within the Family Relationship Services Program.



## The Case for Investment

### Family Breakdown

Though the most common family household structure in Australia continues to be a couple family with children, there are more than a million children who have one parent living elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The negative impact of separation and family breakdown on children is largely due to “inter – parent conflict both before and after separation”<sup>3</sup>. There is substantial evidence linking the degree of conflict in the co-parental relationship to children’s adjustment post-separation and that unresolved, enduring parental conflict can violate children’s core developmental needs and threaten their psychological growth.<sup>4</sup> In addition, children’s healthy development is at risk if family break up results in poverty and homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

The links between family relationship breakdown, poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage<sup>6</sup> and homelessness are well documented.<sup>7</sup> Unemployment and low incomes can have a direct impact on family breakdown, domestic violence and child abuse,<sup>8</sup> whilst family breakdown is among the risk factors for suicidal behaviour.<sup>9</sup>

“The costs of parental divorce have implications not just for the individuals concerned but for society more broadly. i.e. current high adult depression levels were reported by 9.0% of those from divorced families compared to 6.0% of those from intact families...”<sup>10</sup>

“Disadvantages for children from divorced families range across social, psychological outcomes and poor outcomes are roughly 50% to 100% more likely for those from divorced families. Such differences have been reported for social and emotional behaviour in childhood; educational and adult socioeconomic attainment; aggressive and antisocial behaviour and delinquency; substance abuse; mental health in adolescence and adulthood; and family and intimate relationships.”<sup>11</sup>

#### Statistical Snapshot – Family Households in Australia, ABS Data

- There were 5.2 million family households in Australia in 2006.
- 37% or 1.9 million are couple families with children or dependent students.
- 10.7% or 559,469 are one parent families with children or dependent students.
- Of the couple families, 89% are ‘intact’ families while 11% are step or blended families.
- The probability that a marriage will end in divorce has been increasing gradually over time, it is currently around 33%.
- Around half of those who divorce remarry - the proportion of step or blended families are increasing (10.7%).

Recent reports reveal that family relationship breakup was the most common reason for individuals accessing supported accommodation housing.<sup>12</sup> In 2005-2006 families with children were the most common group to be turned away from supported accommodation services required within 24 hours.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>2</sup> AIHW (2007) pg 27

<sup>3</sup> Ellis (2000); McIntosh (2003); Booth & Amato (2001)

<sup>4</sup> see for example Kelly (1993)

<sup>5</sup> Melbourne City Mission (2007) pg 9

<sup>6</sup> Brotherhood St Laurence (2006) pg 11; ABS (2001) notes that the index used “variables that reflect disadvantage rather than measure specific aspects of disadvantage for example indigenous, separated / divorced.”

<sup>7</sup> FaSCIA Research News 29 pg 14 “Marriage including living in a de facto relationship, is an important factor associated with lower likelihood of being ‘in poverty’.

<sup>8</sup> Vinson (2007) pgs 2,18,20

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p 17.

<sup>10</sup> FaSCIA Research News 28 pg 5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid



It is also increasingly obvious that young people seemingly relegated to exclusion from education, employment and community participation are young people who experience: “disrupted households – including poverty, conflict, violence, neglect and reformed families; traumatic life event(s), such as family break-up, divorce, illness of a family member or exposure to conflict; and homelessness for many of these reasons.”<sup>14</sup>

Children and young people highly value family relationships<sup>15</sup> and often seek assistance and support where family conflict and relationship issues occur<sup>16</sup>.

Family relationship breakdown often results in lone families experiencing multiple factors of social exclusion as well as deprivation, social disadvantage and poverty, with family members often ‘losing out’ or ‘dropping off the edge’ of socioeconomic prosperity and positive health outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

These families also include resident grandparents caring for their grandchildren as a result of family breakdown and who are also increasingly at risk of poverty. 22,500 grandparent families are raising 31,100 children across Australia<sup>18</sup> and 42% of all children removed from their parents/guardians by State and Territory child protection agencies live with relatives or kin carers<sup>19</sup>. Two thirds of these grandparents rely on government aged pensions and are often unable to access family benefits.<sup>20</sup> Social exclusion and dislocation are common indicators both for grandchild or grandchildren and grandparent(s).<sup>21</sup>

In 1998 the House of Representatives Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs noted that the cost of marriage breakdown to the broader Australian community was \$2.7 billion per annum, and that this was considered a ‘conservative estimate’.<sup>22</sup> While the true economic, social, emotional, health and other costs of family breakdown are unlikely to ever be quantified, the daily effects of family breakdown on all Australians has been recognised by successive Federal Governments’ committing to funding family relationship services located in the community.

### **Benefits of Service Delivery**

Family Relationship Services are cost-effective and widely supported by the community. Program and service evaluation research over the 40 year history of the FRSP has consistently identified the benefits to individuals, families and the broader community, particularly in relation to tangible

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<sup>12</sup> AIHW (2007) pg 263; SAAP IV Evaluation Report (2004) pg 45: 11% of individuals across all clients groups reported relationships of family breakdown; 22% of women under 25 reported relationship or family breakdown and 17% of men under 25 reported relationship or family breakdown.

<sup>13</sup>AIHW (2007) pg 269

<sup>14</sup> Melbourne City Mission (2007) pg 3, the full list of factors are; cannot find full-time or meaningful work; disrupted households – including poverty, conflict, violence, neglect and reformed families; experience learning difficulties at school, cannot fit in at school, or leave school early; live in locations with high levels of disadvantage including unemployment, crime and poor housing; experience a traumatic life event(s) such as family breakup, divorce, illness of a family member or exposure to conflict; are indigenous or refugees; misuse alcohol or drugs; become socially isolated; and homelessness for many of these reasons.”

<sup>15</sup> Mission Australia (2007) pg 4

<sup>16</sup> Kids Helpline (2006) pg 19

<sup>17</sup> SPRC (2007) pg 89

<sup>18</sup> ABS (2004a)

<sup>19</sup> Mission Australia (2007) pg 2 – this figure does not include many grand / kin carers who for a range of cultural or social factors i.e. shame and/or cultural expectations of caring

<sup>20</sup> Ibid – typically grandparents/ relatives and kinship carers caring for grand / kinship children require residency orders from the Family Court of Australia to access family benefits. State and Territory child protection agencies are increasingly relying on grandparents and kinship carers due to a shortage of foster carers. These carers are typically not eligible for family benefits due to a lack of the abovementioned orders.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid pg 5

<sup>22</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 40



improvements in relationships, cooperation between parents – whether as partners or separated and parental capacity. Delivered by community organisations that are embedded in local communities, the family relationship services that we represent enjoy strong community support.

Reports commissioned by FaHCSIA highlight the cost effectiveness of the FRSP program; however it is noted that Commonwealth funds account for less than 75 percent of organisations funding.<sup>23</sup>

Low cost, non adversarial family dispute resolution processes have substantially contributed to the economic and social productivity of individuals, extended family members and developing children. The first eighteen months of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and visiting outreach services across regional and remote Australia, does appear to have supported separating parents across the range of FRSP programs.

The establishment of FRCs (FRCs) and the implementation of the Family Law Reforms were supported by the family relationships sector and the sector has worked extraordinarily hard to ensure their success.

FRCs and the implementation of the Family Law Reforms by the family relationship services sector have benefitted many Australian families in developing positive relationships before, during and after relationship formation and dissolution.

**Cost effective service provision delivered in the community:**

***“We have been trying to resolve this problem for several years, spending time and large amounts of money. Sad to say, we were unable to prove the real situation to the court. But finally with the help of the children’s contact service we were able to resolve the problem completely.” (Client feedback to FRSA member organisation providing Children’s Contact Services)***

***A separated family who had self managed contact arrangements of their daughter over a five year period spent over \$100,000 of their assets in solicitor’s fees and court appearances after a minor problem escalated. They were referred to a FRSA member organisation’s Parenting Orders Program (POP). After 30 hours of intervention the parents again were able to self manage. The cost of the intervention to the parents was approximately \$500 each. The cost to deliver the program was only \$5000 provided through FRSP funding - a significant difference. (case managed by FRSA member organisation operating FRCs and delivering FRSP services.)***

**Current Investment**

In 2006-2007, Federal Government expenditure on family relationship services reached a total of \$136.1 million. This investment is across two portfolio areas, the Attorney-General’s Department invested \$83.9 million and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) invested \$52.2 million<sup>24</sup>. This investment is set to grow in 2008-09 with the last of 3 major expansions due to be implemented.

**Future Investment Needs**

The family relationship services sector delivers a multitude of programs to diverse client groups, most of whom are experiencing heightened emotions and stress, in a timely, cost effective, accessible and appropriate manner.

<sup>23</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 116

<sup>24</sup> Federal Budget Papers 2007-2008



There is strong evidence to support the sector's claim of achieving these objectives. However the family relationship services sector has been delivering these services 'on the smell of an oily rag', often relying on the enthusiasm and passion of the dedicated professionals, who work to support and assist Australians, to have respectful family relationships.

Audited financial data made available by the Department of Family and Community Services indicated that, across the FRSP as a whole, 'real costs' were at least one third higher than the level of FaCS/AGD funding. On the basis of the agency consultations, however, it would be more accurate to say that these were not the real costs but rather the discounted costs of service delivery by agencies which are overstretched and under-funded.<sup>25</sup>

Further investment in the sector is not only warranted, but is an imperative, if all Australian children regardless of their family makeup are to have equal chance of socioeconomic prosperity and positive health outcomes. Supporting working families relies on fair working conditions, wage equity as well as a well resourced family relationships services sector to strengthen and enhance family relationships in all their diversity.

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<sup>25</sup>FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 107



## Priority 1: A Sustainable Service Sector

### Strategy 1.1 Equity in salary levels across community and public service sectors.

The family relationship services sector has undergone rapid growth over the past two years. The introduction of Family Relationship Centres (FRCs), compulsory family dispute resolution and increased investment in services across the spectrum of Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) was welcome and timely. The service sector has embraced the expansion and worked extraordinarily hard to ensure it success. It has, however, been a challenge to achieve this expansion. Service provider organisations are dealing with critical staff shortages and competition for skilled workers. FRSP funded organisations compete with a well resourced public sector and the private sector for the services of qualified and experienced practitioners, with qualifications in areas such as social work, psychology, counselling and family law. Generous remuneration packages (including substantially increased superannuation contributions) offered by the public and private sectors cannot be matched by community based providers under current FRSP funding levels.

FRSA member organisations estimate the gap in salaries for practitioners (including qualified and experienced counsellors, mediators and family dispute resolution practitioners) between the community based FRSP sector and the public sector is between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per annum for each full time equivalent position<sup>26</sup>.

For example:

- A large Sydney based provider reports that their counsellors and mediators are paid in the order of \$50,000 per annum, compared to \$80,000 per annum for comparable positions in other sectors – including the private sector, the Family Court and state government agencies.
- A regional provider in QLD compared their salary award rates to those in the public sector award for equivalent work, which revealed a gap of between \$12,000 per annum for entry level positions up to \$18,000 per annum for more experienced positions.
- A Brisbane based provider reports that superannuation rates for practitioners in the community based services is 42% less than that of their counterparts in the public sector.
- Another provider organisation gave the following summary of recent exit interviews with staff leaving the organisation:
  - Relationship educator/counsellor offered a position in government at a salary more than double the hourly rate we can afford to pay.
  - Senior counsellor left for a State Government position at \$25,000 more per annum for similar levels of responsibility.
  - Well qualified practitioner had to return to State Government employment as they were unable to manage the drop in salary at over \$25,000 per annum.

Higher remuneration rates in the public and private sector are particularly significant in the context of increasing housing costs. Several organisations have observed that while salaries in the

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<sup>26</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 26, notes that professional salary (direct service delivery i.e. counselling, mediation, education) costs represent 54.29% of organisational costs. Administrative (non direct service delivery i.e. corporate staff) salaries represent 18.17%. There is ongoing discussion regarding the role of intake staff, who have traditionally been regarded as administrative staff. However since the implementation of the New Family Law system these staff are performing more direct service delivery functions.



community sector have always been below those in other sectors, they have been able to offer other incentives to attract staff – flexible hours, training and creativity in service delivery options. However, increasingly staff can no longer afford to pass up higher income as they struggle to manage mortgage rate rises or rent increases.

As a result of the salary discrepancy, community sector providers are finding it increasingly difficult to attract experienced practitioners and have difficulty filling these and other specialist vacancies.<sup>27</sup> They are also finding that the biggest pool of employees are new graduates who use the sector to gain experience and then move on into better paying positions in the public or private sector. This makes it very difficult to sustain quality service delivery.

Management and administrative positions are also lagging behind. Comparisons by FRSA members suggest similar gaps to those identified for practitioners.

These problems are not unique to the family relationship services sector. Similar issues have been identified across the community services sector. For example, the 2007 *Australian Community Sector Survey*<sup>28</sup> conducted by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) found that respondent agencies experienced:

- average staff turnover higher than the all Australian industry average;
- difficulty in attracting appropriately qualified staff; and
- the number of clients assisted by the agencies had increased at a greater rate and the work intensity had increased.

FRSA acknowledges that the Federal Government has stated a commitment to addressing workforce issues in the community sector. We believe that there is an immediate opportunity to make this a reality in the delivery of family relationship services.

***“A well trained, skilled and resourced community sector is a critical aspect of the delivery of social services in Australia. But maintaining and growing a high skilled workforce in the community sector is not just important for the millions it services every year. It is also critical to building the social capital which will underpin Australia’s social inclusion agenda. Community and government programs which focus on investment in human capital ultimately build social capital, because by building capabilities in communities and disadvantaged communities we are building social inclusion”.* Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Leader of the Australia Labor Party.”<sup>29</sup>**

As wage costs account for 72% (at a minimum) of expenditure in family relationship services<sup>30</sup>, addressing salary discrepancy and improving pay equity for family relationship practitioners will require substantial increased investment in the program. FRSA and its member organisations call on the government to increase FRSP funding for this purpose. This needs to be a negotiated process to ensure that the additional funding has a direct impact on salaries and has the result of achieving equity for practitioners without any reduction the levels of service provided.

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<sup>27</sup> FRSA member organizations report that it is not unusual for vacancies to be unfilled for periods longer than twelve months despite repeated readvertising of the positions through a number of mediums and outlets i.e. newspapers (local, regional state and territory, and national); employment agencies and internet employment sites.

<sup>28</sup> ACOSS (2007)

<sup>29</sup> ALP (2007) pg 10

<sup>30</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 26



**Recommendation 1: Increase funding provided to community organisations through the Family Relationship Services Program to enable organisations to offer salaries commensurate with the public and private sector.**

Given the timeframe for this submission FRSA is unable to provide a detailed costing estimate. We believe that the increase in funding required is in the order of 20% of total expenditure or \$30 million. This could be phased initiative over 2-3 years with a substantial up-front component to address immediate needs.

### **Strategy 1.2 Invest in workforce development, including education and training.**

To meet the complex and challenging needs of Australian families experiencing relationship breakdown, practitioners require qualifications, specialist training and appropriate experience. A survey of FRSP provider organisations conducted in 2004 found that the majority of practitioners hold degree qualifications in social science, law and/or counselling. There is increasing competition for these skill areas and a national undersupply of graduates from key areas such as social work, psychology and counselling.

The Federal Government has invested in the development of new vocational qualifications, including:

- o Certificate IV in Children's Contact Service Work
- o Diploma of Children's Contact Service Work
- o Diploma of Family Intake and Support Work
- o Vocational Graduate Diploma of Relationship Counselling
- o Vocational Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution
- o Certificate IV in Relationship Education
- o Diploma of Relationship Education

These qualifications are yet to be implemented in any substantial way across State and Territory jurisdictions. There is concern that unless funding is made available to support the implementation of these qualifications it may take considerable time for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to scope and deliver adequate levels of training in these areas. There is also a need for funding to ensure that training is affordable and available in rural, regional and remote areas.

The current undersupply of qualified practitioners poses a significant threat to the capacity of the family relationships sector to effectively deliver the program. FRSA seeks to work with the Federal Government to increase the number of qualified practitioners through both tertiary and vocational pathways.

**Recommendation 2: Support the development of a workforce strategy for the family relationship services sector.**

**Recommendation 3: Invest in tertiary scholarships and vocational training to increase the supply of qualified practitioners able to work in the family relationship services sector.**

FRSA is well placed to assist with the establishment of scholarships and/or training funds. We are also keen to partner with the government to develop a workforce strategy and believe that this could be achieved for an investment in the order \$90,000.



### **Strategy 1.3 Adequate levels of indexation to ensure funding keeps pace with cost increases.**

FRSA urges the Federal Government to review the formula used to determine indexation rates for family relationship services. Levels of indexation over recent years have fallen well below the level of increased costs.

For example, in 2007-08 the indexation rate applied to FRSP funding was just 2.1% and in 2006-07 it was 1.7%. Service providers are reporting increases in the order of 4% (consistent with the seasonally adjusted labour price index through the year to September 2007 which was 4.2%<sup>31</sup>). This is the third year in a row that wage costs in the health and community services sector increased by around 4% while indexation rates hover around 2%. Wage costs account for approximately 72% of all funding provided to FRSP service providers<sup>32</sup>, sometimes more. For example, one member organisation reports *"over the past two years SACS workers have received a pay rise of 3.5% per year. With salary and on costs at 84% of the total organisational budget it is easy to see that indexation (1.7% and 2.1% respectively) is not keeping up."*

There have also been substantial cost increases in information technology and commercial rent, which are not recognised in standard indices, such as the CPI. The incapacity to match increasing costs has significant flow on effects to service delivery. For example, one FRSA member organisation reported the following impacts on their children's contact service:

*"As a community organisation working under the state award we were greatly affected by increases for weekend loading in 2006 (50% increase for Saturday and 100% for Sunday) - we have had to decrease the hours of opening and therefore the amount of service delivery to clients.. in addition our rent has increased by 9% which has put these premises beyond our budget, we are now looking for new premises, the second move in the life of this service, and this will be disruptive to clients (particularly children), the service and the community."*

FRSA estimates that over the past 3 years family relationship service providers have absorbed more than \$7.4 million in cost increases. This is not sustainable and will eventually force agencies to reduce service outputs. A reduction in service outputs is a negative outcome for communities, particularly at a time when services are experiencing record levels of demand.

**Recommendation 4: Adjust the formula for annual indexation of FRSP funding to align with real cost increases in service delivery.**

FRSA estimates that the level of indexation that would be appropriate for 2008-09 is in the order of 4.5%. Furthermore, we would value an opportunity to work collaboratively with the Federal Government to develop a mutually agreed approach to indexation over the longer term.

### **Strategy 1.4: Funding equity for regional, rural and remote services.**

The cost of delivering services in regional, rural and remote areas is generally higher and substantially more variable than the cost of services in metropolitan areas<sup>33</sup>. We estimate that a third of FRSA members operate services in non-metropolitan areas, providing the full range of FRSP service types

<sup>31</sup> ABS (2007) Cat. no. 6345.0.

<sup>32</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 26

<sup>33</sup> Ibid pg 52 ; CWA (2006) pg 4



(see page 2 for a description) as well as specific services such as drought counselling and other specialised assistance for rural communities.

The current FRSP funding model does not directly accommodate higher costs or readily allow for services to receive funding adjustments in response to local cost pressures<sup>34</sup>. This can leave organisations highly vulnerable to cost fluctuations. For example, organisations operating in places affected by the resources boom report a multitude of impacts including:

- o Lack of affordable commercial premises available for establishing new services and large increases in rent being charged for existing premises;
- o Rising housing costs making it prohibitive for staff to relocate or maintain housing on existing salaries;
- o Increased demand for services as result of rapid population growth; and
- o Cost increases arising from changes in the local economy and increased competition for staff.

Across the board, regional, rural and remote FRSP services have reported higher costs related to:

- Distance and transport, largely as a result of the rising cost of fuel;
- Increasing housing costs for staff and the availability of overnight accommodation for staff (in parts of WA staff have slept on the floors of community members due to the lack of accommodation);
- Costs associated with telecommunications; including the cost of satellite phones;
- Recruitment and wages ; including 'zone allowances' built into State and Territory awards, the need to build in subsidised housing and increasingly managing 'fly in, fly out' employees;
- Community needs – including the need for service models and practices that respond to the unique needs of isolated and often disadvantage communities; and
- Lower capacity to generate income through client fees compared to metropolitan services and anomalies in 'free service versus fee service' policies within FRSP<sup>35</sup>.

**Some 'real life' examples:**

- o Toowoomba, QLD - rent for commercial properties rose by 30-40% during 2007.
- o Port Hedland, WA – the average rent for a 3 bedroom house rose 31.7% from \$645 per week in December 2006 to \$850 per week in March 2007.
- o Orange, NSW – the cost of premises has risen by 71% compared to 3-5% increases in other locations.

FRSA is aware that in other human service sectors, including aged care and disability services, the increased cost of delivering services in rural and remote areas has been acknowledged and addressed through higher levels of funding.

**Recommendation 5: Adjust the FRSP funding model to recognise the higher costs associated with the delivery of services in regional, rural and remote areas with capacity for services to receive funding adjustments in response to local cost pressures when appropriate.**

<sup>34</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 58

<sup>35</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 52; FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 58



## Priority 2: Expanding Service Delivery

### Strategy 2.1: Enhance services to children and young people.

FRSA member organisations share a commitment to achieving positive outcomes for children and young people, particularly those affected by parental separation and/or family relationship difficulties. Service providers have consistently identified the need to increase the capacity of the FRSP to work directly with children and young people.

One of the ways in which providers engage children and young people in family relationship services is through the use of child inclusive practice. Child inclusive practice provides an opportunity for children of separating or separated parents to provide feedback and comments on how the situation is affecting them in a safe and appropriate way. This occurs through direct consultation with the child/children undertaken by a specialist practitioner, who then provides feedback to parents. It is a powerful tool for assisting parents move past old conflicts to focus on the best interests of their child/children<sup>36</sup>. Comprehensive research has demonstrated the benefits of child inclusive practice when properly implemented, particularly in the process of family dispute resolution<sup>37</sup>. Child inclusive practice, though strongly promoted by funding bodies and enthusiastically embraced by service providers, has not been built into the funding model for family relationship services. As a result, the cost of child inclusive practice is often dependent on a decision by individual parents to commit to and support child inclusive practice, a decision often influenced by their capacity to pay.

Another important service type within the FRSP is Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy (AMFT). This is a highly effective sub program that works with young people and their families or care givers experiencing relationship conflict or family difficulties that could lead to: family breakdown; low levels of educational attainment; or youth homelessness. This program works through a variety of channels - schools, state departments., community or self referral. Clients typically include vulnerable young people:

- at risk of school expulsion,
- identified by state government departments;
- experiencing family conflict or family difficulties which may lead to family breakdown; and
- experiencing self esteem or mental health issues amongst others

There has been an under-investment in Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy, which has not received additional investment, despite recent increases in funding for other early intervention services. As a result, these services are in limited supply. In the context of increasing homelessness amongst young people, we believe that investment in these services should be a priority.

"Special effort needs to be made to help students...to successfully negotiate the mid primary years for the educational – and therefore personal and social futures of many people depend on it."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 68 noted that "agencies consulted during the review reported that focussing on children can be a very powerful tool and that parents often become less antagonistic towards each other when they understand the impact that the conflict they are having on their children."

<sup>37</sup> McIntosh, Wells & Long (2007) pgs 8-25; McIntosh & Long (2006)

<sup>38</sup> Vinson (2007) pg 98



An FRSA member organisation providing AMFT services reported the following benefits to families and children:

- 30 conferences have been offered to children and young people since January 2007, including Family and Community Group Conferences (FCGC), Restorative Conferences and Restorative Groupwork;
- Mental health, school-based, offending, and relationship issues have been attended to through FCGC;
- Young people have been offered educational support e.g. tutoring, flexible timetables, individual learning plans to re-engage with their learning;
- Alternative educational settings have been secured for young people through community health programs;
- Service coordination in linking young people and their families to professional supports;
- Young people have had community supports e.g. cricket coaches, boxing coaches, Salvation Army and neighbours attend their meetings - people who would normally not 'have a place at the table'; and
- FCGC has been offered as a preventative approach following or prior to child protection involvement.

At a broader level, FRSA members have identified the potential to substantially improve the experiences of children and young people affected by family relationship issues through the development of more direct therapeutic approaches. This could include the development of new service models and practice approaches.

Greater investment in family relationship services for children and young people has significant potential to increase their resilience and ameliorate the negative impact of family breakdown and/or exposure to parental conflict. Experts consistently identify the long-term benefits that can result from the provision of therapeutic interventions for children who are affected by family breakdown, particularly in cases involving violence, abuse/neglect, homelessness or severe financial hardship. Service providers have also identified benefits in assisting children and young people through transitions such as when parents re-partner, forming step and blended families. Family relationship services are well placed to identify children who may be at risk and provide effective support. FRSA believes that it would be timely for this to be strengthened as a focus within the broader family relationship services program.

**Recommendation 6: Strengthen the focus on children and young people as a priority within the Family Relationship Services Program, encompassing adequate funding for child inclusive practice, increased funding for Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy as well as the development of new approaches to providing direct and effective support.**

## **Strategy 2.2: Enhance the capacity of services to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are under-represented in the client population of the FRSP at the national level<sup>39</sup>. This varies at the local level - some individual services work very effectively with Indigenous communities, achieving much higher outcomes than average. In particular, agencies with dedicated funding for Indigenous liaison workers (including Family Relationship Centres) have substantially improved access to some FRSP services.

Difficulties in enhancing access to FRSP services for Indigenous families include:

- A critical undersupply of suitably qualified Indigenous practitioners – for example FRCs report difficulty in recruiting Indigenous liaison worker with some positions vacant for extended periods of time;

<sup>39</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 15



- Traditional services models are often not the most appropriate way to deliver services but contractual requirements, performance measurement and limited resources can prohibit the development of more innovative approaches;
- Complex needs at the individual and the community level can impact on the extent to which services are able to address need – particularly in remote areas and disadvantaged communities; and
- Language barriers present significant challenges in some areas<sup>40</sup>.

FRSA is aware of a strong interest across the FRSP sector in developing new approaches to the delivery of services to Indigenous families and communities.

Family relationship services working with Indigenous communities report that service delivery needs to reflect the tendency for indigenous community members to not self present for “traditional “ services, resulting in the need for more informal service provision. Mainstream standard promotional activities are not often not appropriate or ineffective. Considerable time must be invested in community development and working with community elders in order to identify issues and solutions.

One agency has established regular “yarning” sessions for indigenous families with each session running for approximately 3 hours and held in a local park, lake or other open area.

The need to establish trust and relationships is evident in the following example:

A family relationship services organisation developed a program with staff regular making contact with community members and establishing links to encourage community members to present for services. Relationship building activities involved numerous community enhancement initiatives including the purchase of sewing machines for community use. With the relationships established, family relationship services staff visit the community once a week with individuals having “informal” discussions of issues in non-intimidating environments, such as on a bench under a tree. <sup>41</sup>

Service providers have expressed a strong interest in vocational and tertiary training to increase the number of Indigenous people qualified to work in family relationship services. In the past the Federal Government has sponsored training for a small number of Indigenous workers in this sector. There is considerable scope to build on this. There is also interest in developing culturally appropriate models of family counselling and dispute resolution in partnership with Indigenous communities, if adequate resources were to be made available or an agreement could be reached on flexible use of existing funding. <sup>42</sup>

**Recommendation 7: Work with the family relationship services sector to enhance service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and their communities, through training and sector development initiatives.**

<sup>40</sup>FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 61

<sup>41</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 50

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, the report notes “ the need for a less formal process also has the potential to result in lower client volumes (i.e. clients per day per counsellor) than traditional models and also more flexible, longer sessions...As a result there is a cost import versus delivery the delivery of services to other clients groups.”



### Strategy 2.3: Enhance the capacity of services to respond to the needs Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families.

At a national level people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are under-represented in the client population for family relationship services<sup>43</sup>. Some family relationship services deliver quality services to highly diverse communities very successfully, but there have been limited opportunities to acknowledge this and identify examples of good practice. Specialist services that work primarily with people from diverse backgrounds report mixed experiences when seeking to work with mainstream services to improve access with some strategies more successful than others.<sup>44</sup>

“We have difficulty referring clients to address specific needs such as men’s change behaviour programs, domestic violence counselling services, separation and co parenting programs, amongst others”. Specialist agency

“Interpreters for weekend work are expensive and we are unable to afford them on an ongoing basis for clients. As a result we can only offer limited usage of this service.” Mainstream provider

Families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often have unique relationship needs and issues, particularly refugee families where there is a history of dislocation and/or trauma.

The Family Relationship Services for Humanitarian Entrants sub-program currently delivered in four States offers advice, support and assistance to newly arrived immigrants. Given that 60% of marriages from these groups break down within three months of arriving in Australia this is a very important program for these new Australian families and should be available to all eligible families across Australia.<sup>45</sup>

The family relationship services sector is required to reassess existing service models as they may or may not be appropriate, “*There is a need for government and non government agencies to consider the cultural perspectives and beliefs of cultural families when engaging with those families.*”<sup>46</sup>

Often a community development approach is required, in which a service will work with community leaders to first understand the cultural needs and diversity of needs prior to developing tailored responses. This can require specific expertise and significant investment of time and resources.<sup>47</sup> It also requires some flexibility in what funding can be used for and how performance measurement is undertaken. For example, sometimes a service that is usually delivered 1-to-1 is better delivered in a group format for a particular cultural group (or vice versa) but this may be incompatible with contractual requirements.

In addition extra staff, or staff with specific cultural expertise, may be required in order to work effectively with a specific cultural group and this may substantially increase the cost of service delivery, which may jeopardise service performance against target output requirements.<sup>48</sup> It can also be difficult to recruit and maintain staff with this expertise. As a result of many different factors, some families miss out on important preventive, supportive and facilitative services despite an intention across the service sector to be inclusive and responsive to diverse community needs.

<sup>43</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 107

<sup>44</sup> Kaur (2007) pg 18

<sup>45</sup> FCoA

<sup>46</sup> Kaur (2007) pg 17 quoting Gopalkrishnan (n.d) (2007)

<sup>47</sup> FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 15

<sup>48</sup> Ernst & Young (2006) pg 49



FRSA believes that there is a need for a systemic approach to enhancing service delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse families, in which responsibility is shared across the service sector and funding bodies with a commitment to achieving outcomes collaboratively.

**Recommendation 8: Continue and expand the Humanitarian Entrants Program currently provided through the Family Relationship Services Program by the family relationship services sector.**

**Recommendation 9: Create a special purpose fund that makes resources available at a regional level to fund capacity building and additional service costs resulting from improved Family Relationship Services Program service delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse communities.**

Recommendation 9 could be modelled on the locally based resource centres that assist child care services to respond to diverse cultural and linguistic needs of families. Resource centres could provide cultural resources and training that enhance cultural inclusion as well as expert staff (often bi-lingual) to assist on a case-by-case basis, when needed. For example, they might work with a counsellor assisting a family with very little English by arranging for or acting as an interpreter and providing advice on specific cultural needs, or they might work with an agency to develop a culturally appropriate program for young people from a particular cultural background. While some investment would be required, there is the potential to build on infrastructure already in place.

## **Strategy 2.4: Invest in primary prevention strategies to strengthen family relationships.**

FRSA members have a shared commitment to the vision of an Australian society that is enriched through respectful relationships in all their diversity. To achieve this vision there is a need for greater investment in strengthening family relationships through relationship skills development, public awareness and universal supports for families. Investment in primary prevention strategies has tended to lag behind investment in interventions that respond to families experiencing difficulties and/or 'at risk'.

Too often, families only seek help with their relationships when they are experiencing significant levels of conflict or have decided to separate. Encouraging families to engage in activities that strengthen their relationships before problems arise, and to seek help earlier when they are having difficulties, means children stand to benefit from reduced levels of family conflict and separation.

FRSA believes that more public education is needed to reduce the exposure of children to parental conflict, to enhance parenting capacity and assist families to cope with contemporary pressures including balancing work and family, coping with financial stress and adjusting to complex family structures such as step and blended families. We believe that this would complement the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda and commitment to supporting to working families.

The benefits of investing in health<sup>49</sup> through social advertising/campaigns have been well recognised. For example, research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in examining the accessibility of child abuse prevention programs; found that the most significant issue is the need for adequate levels of funding for primary prevention<sup>50</sup>. "These programs are too limited in number and size to make a clear impact on preventing child abuse and neglect, and many of the programs offered are not accessible to families with children with the greatest need for a service which prevents maltreatment. The benefits of investing in prevention are well recognised in many other

<sup>49</sup> WHO (2007) social relationships are defined as one of the social determinants of health; social relationships include family relationships, social supports and have been taken to include social capital.

<sup>50</sup> Stanley & Kovacs (2003)



health and safety areas of Australia. Every \$1 spent on anti-smoking programs has been shown to save \$2 in lower health costs<sup>51</sup>. Research in the United States on the cost savings of the Perry Preschool Early Intervention program has shown far greater savings, with \$7 saved for every \$1 spent<sup>52</sup>.

**Recommendation 9: Increase investment in primary prevention strategies to strengthen family relationship and support working families as a core function within the Family Relationship Services Program.**

## Conclusion

FRSA looks forward to an opportunity to discuss the recommendations contained in this submission with the Federal Government. Resource and time constraints have limited our capacity to provide detailed cost estimates for each recommendation. We are prepared to undertake further consultation with member organisations and relevant government agencies to develop more detailed proposals as the Federal Budget process progresses.

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<sup>51</sup> Gray (2002) cited in Stanley & Kovacs (2003)

<sup>52</sup> Zigler & Styfco (1996) cited in Stanley & Kovacs (2003)



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- Central West Contact Services
- Drummond Street Relationship Centre
- Gordoncare
- Interrelate Family Centres
- Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Queensland
- Mallee Family Care
- Newcastle Family Support Services
- Pine Rivers Neighbourhood Centre
- Positive Solutions Tasmania
- Relationships Australia Western Australia
- Stepfamilies Victoria
- Sunshine Coast Family Contact Service Association
- Upper Hume Community Health Service
- UnitingCare Unifam



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