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**Family & Relationship
Services Australia**

Building Future Capacity in the Family Support Program

Submission to the 2012 Federal Budget Process

January 2012

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About Us

Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is a national peak body. Our purpose is to provide national leadership and representation for services that work to strengthen the wellbeing, safety and resilience of families, children and communities. FRSA member organisations deliver services in more than 650 locations across Australia and work with over 500,000 people each year. They consist primarily of non-profit organisations embedded in local communities.

FRSA provides support to members and draws on their expertise to understand the changing needs of families accessing services and to inform public policy. FRSA also works collaboratively with the Australian Government and its agencies. FRSA receives funding through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to provide sector representation and support to services funded under the Family Support Program which has three core streams:

1. **Community and Family Partnerships:** providing intensive and coordinated support targeted to disadvantaged communities and families, especially where children are at risk.
2. **Family and Parenting Services:** providing early intervention and prevention services to families to build and strengthen relationships, develop skills and support parents and children.
3. **Family Law Services (Attorney-General's Department responsibility):** assisting families to manage the process and impacts of separation in the best interests of children.

Many of FRSA members deliver a mix of other Australian Government and State/Territory Government funded programs, such as:

- Family violence and sexual assault services
- Child protection services
- Family support
- Community legal services
- Crisis accommodation and support
- Community/neighbourhood centres
- Disability and carer support services
- Mental health services
- Children's services

FRSA works collaboratively with related service networks, peak bodies and advocacy groups to promote effective support for families across these and many other program areas.

For more information visit www.frsa.org.au.



Executive Summary

Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is the national peak body for family and relationship services. Together with our member organisations, FRSA seeks to work in partnership with the Federal Government to strengthen and support Australian families.

In the context of a tight fiscal environment and the Government's commitment to return to the Federal Budget to surplus, this pre-budget submission is focused on maintaining current levels of support to families and building future capacity across the sector. Three priorities have been identified, as summarised below.

Priority 1: Equal Remuneration for Community Sector Workers

Recommendation 1: In light of the decision by Fair Work Australia (1/2/2012) supporting increased wage rates for community sector workers; FRSA believes that full supplementation to meet increased wage costs in Federal Government funded programs including, but not limited to, the Family Support Program is an appropriate priority for the 2012 Federal Budget. We recognise that this will have significant cost implications but it is important to maintain support to Australian families at or above current levels while addressing historical wage inequity. This is a significant investment in the future capacity of the community services sector.

Priority 2: Scholarships to Support Workforce Diversity

Recommendation 2: FRSA seeks additional funding to expand the training scholarships pilot beyond the Family Dispute Resolution qualification. An additional \$150,000 would allow scholarships to be offered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as people from culturally and linguistically diverse background to undertake vocational training in other qualifications relevant to family and relationship services.

Priority 3: Facilitate integration of financial counselling and microfinance initiatives in the Family Support Program.

Recommendation 3: FRSA and Financial Counselling Australia (FCA) propose a collaborative project to enhance connections between family and relationship services and financial counselling. This project could be delivered for a modest investment of \$200,000 with the bulk of the funding to be distributed to service providers to directly support service integration initiatives. The more funding provided the higher the number of initiatives that could be supported.

FRSA would be happy to provide additional information or detail that may be useful to decision-makers.



Budget Context

FRSA recognises that the Federal Labor Government is committed to returning the Federal Budget to surplus and will be looking to constrain government expenditure in the 2012 Federal Budget. In this context, FRSA has been disciplined in its list of priorities for spending on family support and has not put forward major new initiatives for consideration. The costs associated with improving remuneration rates will be significant but represent an investment in program effectiveness and future capacity. Other priorities presented in this submission require only modest expenditure.

FRSA has not identified savings measures as this is not our area of expertise. We do not believe that there are savings to be made in the Family Support Program where most services are under-resourced with community demand outstripping their capacity. There is significant scope for increasing the reach of services and addressing unmet need through additional expenditure when the fiscal outlook improves. FRSA recognises that the Government has been increasing investment in programs such as Communities for Children in areas of high disadvantage and we support this. Additional priorities for future Federal Budgets might include:

- Investment in primary prevention strategies to strengthen family relationships – public education and information; strategies to increase workplace flexibility etc.
- Family support programs that have a demonstrable impact on the wellbeing of young children, including school readiness (potentially mapped against the AEDI)
- Services for children and young people – including expansion of the '*Supporting Children after Separation Program*', support for young people leaving care and young parents;
- Increased capacity in Children's Contact Centres and Family Relationship Centres in areas of consistent high demand to reduce waiting times and ensure timely access to support.

FRSA would be pleased to develop a detailed business case for any of the proposals above to assist Government decision-making.

In the absence of additional funding it is important that current programs of support are maintained. Family and relationship services have been subject to regular review and evaluation over the past 40 years and have consistently demonstrated that they are effective, efficient and widely supported by the community. The benefits to individuals, families and the broader community include improved relationships, cooperation between parents, reductions in stress, increased parental competency and confidence as well as appropriate help seeking. Early intervention can have a significant preventative impact on parental separation, parental conflict, family functioning, mental health and wellbeing as well as reducing the risk of child abuse or neglect. There are significant savings to be made from reducing rates of family breakdown and children removed from families into out-of-home-care. The cost of family breakdown alone has been estimated at over \$2.7 billion per annum.¹ Non-government service providers leverage Federal Government funding to secure donations, client contributions and volunteer support that substantially increases the outputs possible for the investment made. It makes good economic sense to maintain investment in the Family Support Program at or above current levels.

¹ FaCS & AGD(2004) pg 40 citing 1998 House of Representatives Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs assessment of the cost of marriage breakdown to the broader Australian community.



Budget Priorities

Priority 1: Equal Remuneration for Community Service Workers

Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) welcomed the announcement from Prime Minister Julia Gillard in November 2011 that the Federal Government will make a joint submission, with the Australian Services Union, to Fair Work Australia recommending increased wages for community sector workers including Family Service practitioners. FRSA supports the need for wage increases and welcomes the decision by Fair Work Australia on the 1st February 2012 endorsing significant increases of between 19-41%.

Of equal importance to addressing the rates of pay for community sector workers is the Federal Government's commitment to provide full supplementation for Federal Government funded services including the Family Support Program. This commitment ensures that vital services to vulnerable families will be sustained. FRSA recognises that full supplementation of wage increases will have a substantial cost. Past analysis has suggested that organisations spend over 54% of service funding on practitioner wages and 72% on wages overall². This is a sound investment in the service system that will better equip service providers to meet the needs of families now and in the future.

Family Support is Professional Work

There is increasing evidence and awareness of the complex stressors on families and the importance of effective support during critical transitions (eg household formation, separation, becoming parents, changes in income or workforce participation etc). To respond effectively family and relationship practice calls for the ability to identify a range of potentially high risk contributing factors, to have effective referral pathways and to know when and how to support, intervene and refer. Cultural sensitivity, high level interpersonal skills and judgment are also required and the intimate and personal nature of the work does not lend itself to the introduction of early career stage practitioners without close supervision and mentoring. Service providers need appropriately qualified practitioners, workforce stability and the capacity to offer ongoing career development opportunities to maintain and build practice experience.

Family Services Consistently Experience Workforce Challenges

A recent workforce mapping project undertaken by Colmar Brunton (2009) reported that one fifth of organisations delivering family relationship services experienced problems within a 12 month period: having unfilled vacancies after advertising and filling positions with staff that have less experience or fewer qualifications than intended. Almost two thirds (62%) of organisations had either a problem with unfilled vacancies after advertising (31%) or a problem filling positions with less qualified staff (31%). Only 18% of organisations indicated no problem with unfilled vacancies or employing less qualified staff. Organisations listed the top three key barriers they perceived to recruitment of staff. These were:

- Remuneration / salary (84%),
- Lack of career path opportunities (37%), and
- Type of work (31%).

² Ernst & Young (2006) Costing Methodology for the Family Relationships Services Program, Department of Family and Community Service



In the same project, the majority of employees surveyed (70%) listed pay rates and career opportunities as the two main elements they were least satisfied with in their current roles. Remuneration and salary were also reported by 78% of organisations as a barrier to retaining staff.

Colmar Brunton conclude *"It is clear that the most obvious issue to address in terms of retention is the perceived pay disparity between the FRS sector and (in particular) government; and also the relative pay disparity across organisations within the sector."*

Current Remuneration Levels

The family and relationship services workforce is predominantly female and aged 40 years or more (over 70%) and over two thirds of people in management positions and between one half and two thirds of those in clinical positions hold a tertiary degree or equivalent. Colmar Brunton found that the FRS sector seek to employ people with a high base of skills, qualifications and experience; however, the pay levels are not competitive with other sectors (e.g. public sector or private sector). In consultations conducted in 2008, FRSA estimated the gap in salaries for practitioners working in family and relationship service (including qualified and experienced counsellors, mediators and family dispute resolution practitioners) between the community-based FRS sector and the public sector as between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per annum for each full time equivalent position. A table of remuneration rates and examples of comparable salaries is provided in Appendix 1.

Support for Wage Equity

FRSA and its members have been strong supporters of the campaign to achieved wage equity for community sector workers. The provision of quality professional services to individuals, families and children has significant flow-on benefits for the recipients of the services, for communities, for the economy and for society in general. Conversely, inappropriate or poor quality services delivered by inexperienced or underqualified staff can have serious negative consequences.

Recommendation 1:

In light of the decision by Fair Work Australia (1/2/2012) supporting increased wage rates for community sector workers; FRSA believes that full supplementation to meet increased wage costs in Federal Government funded programs including, but not limited to, the Family Support Program is an appropriate priority for the 2012 Federal Budget. We recognise that this will have significant cost implications but it is important to maintain support to Australian families at or above current levels while addressing historical wage inequity. This is a significant investment in the future capacity of the community services sector.



Priority 2: Scholarships to Support Workforce Diversity

Workforce Shortages

As stated under Priority 1, organisations delivering family support services need to employ practitioners that have the appropriate skills to meet the complex and challenging needs of Australian families. 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 current undersupply of qualified practitioners poses a significant threat to the capacity of the family relationships sector to effectively deliver the program.

The Federal Government has recognised this and invested in the development of vocational qualifications, including:

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

These qualifications are now available through a number of Registered Training Organisations and universities across State and Territory jurisdictions. However, the cost of the training is often unsubsidised and can be prohibitive for both potential trainees and employer organisations. Cost can be a significant barrier for trainees that have limited workforce experience and/or come from a disadvantaged background.

Workforce Diversity

Increasing workforce diversity has been identified as an important strategy in improving access to under-represented population groups in the Family Support Program (FSP). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds remain under-represented in the national client population of Family Support Program, despite being identified as priority need groups for over 8 years.³ There are many contributing factors to this and increasing workforce diversity is not a panacea but it has been consistently identified as an important strategy in making services more accessible and culturally responsive.

Family and relationship services have consistently identified the need for investment in vocational and tertiary training to increase the number of Indigenous people qualified to work in family relationship services (see for example AGD & FaHCSIA, 2004, FRSA Budget Submission 2008, Colmar Brunton, 2009) most recently in consultations on a Workforce Development Strategy (2010). Similarly, investment in training for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has received strong endorsement from the sector.

³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are over represented in other family service systems including child protection (see for example Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Child Protection (2011)).



A Model for Training Scholarships

FRSA is currently piloting a model of scholarships funded by the Attorney-General's Department to increase opportunities for people from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to undertake training to obtain the Vocational Graduate Diploma in Family Dispute Resolution (FDR). The goal is to increase the number of FDR practitioners from these backgrounds, building workforce diversity and the capacity of the service sector to respond appropriately to community needs.

While this project has not yet concluded it is looking very promising. The model of scholarship is quite innovative, requiring commitments from both an employer organisation and an RTO to support the trainee through the obtaining of the qualification and on-the-job placement. Interest in the scholarships has been very encouraging with a relatively large number of eligible applications received. If successful this could provide an effective model for future scholarship schemes across the Family Support Program.

Recommendation 2:

FRSA seeks additional funding to expand the training scholarships pilot beyond the Family Dispute Resolution qualification. An additional \$150,000 would allow scholarships to be offered for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as people from culturally and linguistically diverse background to undertake vocational training in other qualifications relevant to family and relationship services.



Priority 3: Facilitate Integration of Financial Counselling and Microfinance in the Family Support Program

Project Overview

FRSA proposes a collaborative project in partnership with Financial Counselling Australia (FCA) with modest funding (\$200,000) to enhance connections between services funded through the Family Support Program and the Commonwealth Financial Counselling program. Specifically, we seek project funding to pilot different approaches to service integration across:

- Communities for Children;
- Family Relationship Centres; and
- Financial counselling & microfinance initiatives.

In addition to FRSA and FCA, other potential partners in this project would include the Department of Human Services, Child Support Agency, Centrelink's Financial Information Service and the Australian Securities and Investment Commission. FRSA and FCA would also contact potential research partners and academics for potential involvement.

The project would invite community based organisations that deliver family and relationship services and financial counselling services to develop integrated approaches to service delivery. For example:

- A high-level Project Steering Group to engage experts from both sectors. Developing financial literacy content within relationship education programs;
- Providing financial advice and counselling in settings such as the Family Relationship Centres and/or dispute resolution processes;
- Enhanced access to no interest loans and matched savings schemes for low income families including those separating or separated;
- Increasing referrals to relationship support for people experiencing financial difficulties to enhance communication and decision-making skills; and
- Raising awareness amongst relationship support practitioners of the resources available to enhance individual and family financial wellbeing.

Key features of the project would include:

- A dedicated project officer to support and resource participating agencies;
- Project funds to support agencies to implement initiatives and integration strategies, as well as to identify driving and restraining factors as well as barriers and how they were overcome;
- Regular sharing of information across project participants and the broader FRSP and financial counselling sectors through newsletters, online discussion boards and/or teleconferences;
- A final report analysing which approaches to services integration were more or less effective and why, identifying good practice and useful models for broader application ; and
- Development of a resource manual and training seminars to support broader implementation of service integration between family and relationship services and financial counselling services services.

FRSA and FCA are very well placed to facilitate the project and promote the results of the project to both sectors after it concludes. We have a number of member organisations that deliver both service types (Centacare Wilcannia Forbes, Anglicare NT, Lifeline Community Care, UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide, UnitingCare Wesley Bowdon, Anglicare TAS, Anglicare Victoria, Berry Street, Family



Mediation Centre) many of which have already expressed strong interest in participating. We are also familiar with the work of the Centrelink Financial Information Service (FIS) and the work of the Financial Literacy Foundation which has now transferred to ASIC.

Rationale

The rationale for this project arises from increasing recognition of the interaction between relationship difficulties and financial stress. Relationship conflict can be triggered or exacerbated by anxiety or disagreements over finances. Relationship breakdown, particularly divorce or separation involving children, can significantly strain financial resources and sometimes trigger a financial crisis. Timely access to professional financial advice or counselling can help families to address their financial issues and avoid or recover from a crisis.

Research supported by the Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service in Victoria⁴ highlights the gaps in financial advice particularly in cases where it would be possible to avert a crisis if help can be provided during significant life events including separation. To quote the report *"When people are immersed in change, especially the crisis-related change...they are not usually able to effectively pursue new information themselves. At these times, a more proactive provision of financial information is needed, reaching out to points of contact with people likely to be undergoing financial changes and financial stress. A continuum of proactive financial education opportunities is needed, from timely financial counselling services for those in crisis to preventative financial education for vulnerable individuals and groups who are not in crisis."*

Family and relationship services are uniquely placed to be part of the proactive continuum recommended by the author above. The relationship issues are often intertwined with financial issues and there may be the potential to help avoid events such as the loss of mortgage foreclosure, eviction from rental accommodation, repossession of key assets such as vehicles or a poor credit history through timely intervention.

While integrating service delivery is desirable and has strong support across sectors it is not easy and relies on more than good will. FRSA investigated driving and restraining factors in linkages and collaboration across family services in 2010 in a project funded by FaHCSIA. Integration can be impeded by barriers such as lack of capacity across programs, differences in eligibility requirements or data collection protocols, confidentiality issues, differences across jurisdictions with regard to practitioner registration and the need for inter-professional understanding. There are also uncertainties about which models may be more effective. For example, in some jurisdictions gambling services have embedded financial counsellors and this may be a model that would translate to relationship services but it has not been tested and there are some arguments for not going down this path (For example, isolation can occur diluting peer support, supervision and training opportunities). There is a need for development work to identify 'what works' and provide clear evidence of impacts on client outcomes and service costs.

The need for this is heightened by the expansion of income management to 5 areas of disadvantage from mid 2012 and the project could be focused in the areas where this is to occur. Stronger connections between child wellbeing, income support and family support will need to develop. FRSA has the capacity to facilitate this and to evaluate the relative success of different approaches. In addition, there is the potential for this project to evaluate the benefits of collocating or fully integrating new services into existing programs, where this occurs in trial locations.

⁴ Landvogt (2008) 'Money, Dignity and Inclusion: The role of financial capability', pg 80



This project can learn from the voluntary income management trial in Western Australia to improve awareness of the range of financial management supports available as well as take-up rates of specific supports such as financial counselling. If the project has sufficient scale, the relationship between awareness and take up of services available could also be incorporated into the evaluation of alternative approaches.

Recommendation 3:

FRSA and Financial Counselling Australia (FCA) propose a collaborative project to enhance connections between family and relationship services and financial counselling. This project could be delivered for a modest investment of \$200,000 with the bulk of the funding to be distributed to service providers to directly support service integration initiatives. The more funding provided the higher the number of initiatives that could be supported.

Conclusion

FRSA hopes that each of these priorities will be considered for inclusion in the 2012 Federal Budget. We would be happy to provide additional information or detail if that would be useful to decision-makers. We are also available to discuss alternative proposals or budget initiatives that may be under consideration.

Contact Details

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Appendix 1: Remuneration Rates & Comparisons

Table 1: Remuneration rates by position / role (Colmar Brunton, 2009)

Position	Mean FTE p.a. gross salary		Requisite Qualifications (% of organisations)
	Organisation survey	Employee survey	
Management (CEO / Senior Exec)	\$95,338	\$88,703	Bachelor degree (66%) or Post-graduate degree (48%)
Program Manager	\$65,457	\$67,965	Bachelor degree (73%) or Post-graduate degree (21%)
Supervisor / Team Leader	\$57,340	\$55,088	Bachelor degree (73% of organisations), or a Diploma (23%)
Practitioner	\$53,095	\$53,536	Bachelor degree (68% of organisations), or a Diploma (23%);
Counsellor	\$50,724	\$49,582	Bachelor degree (61%), Post-graduate degree (17%) or Diploma (17%)
Educator	\$47,792	\$49,170	Bachelor degree (56%) or Diploma (21%)
Children's Contact Service worker	\$43,703	\$49,250	Bachelor degree (30%) or Diploma (30%)
Administration	\$41,744	\$43,179	Certificate (48%)

Some examples provided by FRSA members include:

- 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.
- Relationship educator/counsellors have been offered positions in government at a salary more than double the hourly rate the current employer could afford to pay.
- A 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.