**About Us**

Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) provides national leadership and representation for services that work to strengthen the wellbeing, safety and resilience of families, children and communities. To achieve this, FRSA draws on the expertise of service providers to understand the changing needs of families accessing services and to inform public policy. FRSA receives Federal Government funding through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to provide industry representation and support.

FRSA acknowledges Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of this land. FRSA’s vision for reconciliation is that we recognise, respect and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in all of our efforts to enhance the wellbeing, safety and resilience of Australian children, families and communities. To help achieve this we have developed a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), which is available on our website.

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Community Engagement in Post-Separation Services: An Exploratory Study

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1. Executive Summary

Introduction
The purpose of this project is to explore community engagement activities undertaken in the post-separation services funded by the Attorney-General’s Department, through the Federal Government’s Family Support Program (FSP). These services include Family Relationship Centres, Children’s Contact Centres, Family Dispute Resolution, Family Counselling and programs that support parents and/or children after separation.

The Attorney-General’s Department is interested in community engagement as a mechanism for improving access to justice in both legal and non-legal service contexts including ‘gateway’ services such as the Family Relationship Centres and other State Government funded initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Justice Centres in Victoria, through which people can access a range of supports.

FRSA began by undertaking a review of the literature on Community Engagement and looking at the history of post-separation services in Australia. FRSA then invited all of the Family Support Program-funded organisations delivering post-separation services to complete an online survey to:

• identify and describe current community engagement activities;
• identify benefits (and risks) derived from community engagement; and
• explore driving and restraining factors contributing to the use of community engagement activities.

From the survey a number of examples of community engagement were selected for more in-depth study. FRSA visited the following to develop case examples:

• Anglicare WA
• Centacare New England North West (NSW)
• Centacare Tasmania (North-West Region)
• Centacare Toowoomba (QLD)
• Coffs Harbour Family Relationship Centre (NSW)
• Relationships Australia Victoria
• Port Augusta Family Relationship Centre (SA)
• Wodonga Family Relationship Centre (VIC)

Semi-structured interviews explored in some depth the community engagement activities undertaken at the organisational or program level, both past and current. We also asked interviewees to comment on factors that impact positively or negatively on community engagement.

Through this research FRSA sought to understand how community engagement should be defined and understood in the context of post-separation services. Post-separation service providers were invited to identify the purposes and benefits of engaging with the broader community and sought to identify factors that drive and restrain community engagement, both internal and external to the organisation. Comparisons between survey results, case examples and the literature have been analysed to identify common themes and lessons for post-separation service providers and policy makers. FRSA has outlined Key Messages that could encourage increased support for community engagement. FRSA and our membership are both willing and well placed to progress action in this area.
Key Messages

• A consistent definition of 'community engagement' should be adopted in the Family Support Program, in recognition that it is a cross-program activity of significant benefits to all clients.

• The activity of community engagement should be better recognised as a legitimate activity in the delivery of post-separation family support services, with some articulation of purpose for individuals, services and programs.

• Post-separation family support providers should be encouraged to document their community engagement activities and share information about what has or has not worked.

• Service providers should be further encouraged to share information about what has or has not worked to improve service responsiveness and access to services for historically under-represented population groups.

• There should be continued focus given to increasing workforce diversity and cultural competence in the post-separation services sector that builds the capacity of services for more culturally responsive engagement.

• There is scope for community engagement to be seen and undertaken as a multi-agency, coordinated activity that is resourced across individual services and service types to enhance access to the Family Law System.

• Resources for service providers could be developed to support and inform the use of community engagement in post-separation family support services, including guidance on practice that is most and least likely to result in service enhancements.

• For community engagement to be maintained in post-separation family support, strategies to meet demand and address waiting lists, while at the same time maintaining engagement activity, should be identified and agreed between the funding body and service providers.
2. Introduction

In 2011 the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department commissioned Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) to conduct an explorative study into community engagement in the post-separation services funded by the Attorney-General’s Department, through the Federal Government’s Family Support Program (FSP). The Australian Government provides funding to a wide range of agencies and services to help families strengthen their relationships and to provide assistance during family breakdown and when families are separating. Post-separation services and programs include:

- Family Relationship Centres (FRCs)
- Family Counselling
- Family Dispute Resolution (FDR)
- Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR)
- Post-separation Cooperative Parenting Program (PSCP)
- Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP)
- Parenting Orders Program (POP)
- Children’s Contact Services (CCSs)

The Attorney-General’s Department is interested in community engagement as a mechanism for improving access to justice in both legal and non-legal service contexts including ‘gateway’ services such as the Family Relationship Centres and other State Government funded services such as the Neighbourhood Justice Centres in Victoria, through which people can access a range of supports.

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the project is to explore the nature and extent of community engagement activities undertaken in post-separation services funded under the Federal Government’s Family Support Program (FSP), including:

- The range and frequency of community engagement activities, resources devoted to this task and innovative approaches;
- The benefits or outcomes derived from these activities;
- Any duplication within or across family law services funded under the Federal Government’s FSP in relation to community engagement tasks; and
- Driving and restraining factors that impact on the capacity of service providers to engage with their communities.

2.2 Project Design

A short review of relevant research literature was undertaken to inform the project design and provide a context for the analysis of the data collected through consultation.

FRSA then invited all post-separation services funded through the FSP to complete a 16-question online survey (the questions are listed in Appendix 1) which explored the nature and extent of community engagement activities within respondent organisations, including factors contributing to the use of community engagement. 60 survey responses were received from individuals across 43 organisations.

From the survey responses, eight examples were selected to more fully explore community engagement through field work that included visiting the service (with the exception of Anglicare WA where an interview was conducted by telephone) and interviewing the staff most directly involved in the community engagement activities.
The case examples include both standout and typical examples of community engagement, selected to include a cross-section of service types, geographical characteristics, population size and socioeconomic demographics within the local community. Factors contributing to successful community engagement were identified, as well as examples of challenges, problems or barriers that can prevent or inhibit community engagement. Comparisons between case examples were used to identify common themes in both success drivers and restraining factors.

2.3 Reporting

This report brings together the literature review, a summary of the case studies and FRSA’s analysis of the common themes identified. FRSA also identifies strategies and actions that may help to facilitate or support increased community engagement in post-separation family support services in the future.

Acknowledgements

FRSA is very grateful to the individuals and organisations that participated in this project.

We particularly appreciate the guidance, advice and feedback provided by members of the Project Reference Group:

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- Virginia Leeuwenberg, Practice Manager of Post-separation Services, Relationships Australia SA
- Clive Price, Director, Unifam Counselling & Mediation
- Sue Thompson, Senior Manager, FRSPs, Berry Street & Chair, Australian Children’s Contact Service Association (ACCSA)

We wish to extend our gratitude to the individuals within organisations who offered their time to participate in the case examples, and to all those who submitted survey responses (listed in Appendix 3).
3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Community Engagement

‘Community’ is a broad term used to define groups of people, whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, citizen groups, and so on. ‘Engagement’ can be understood as an inclusive, generic term describing a broad range of interactions between people. ‘Community engagement’ is thus a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people (DSE, 2005).

Many not-for-profit organisations (NFPs) have a long history of community engagement and community development. They will often have been established to address an identified community need and have then relied on both financial and in-kind support from benefactors and volunteers. In its Review of the Contribution of the Not-for-Profit Sector the Productivity Commission (2010) identifies some key characteristics of the sector:

‘The sector is diverse, but NFPs display some common behavioural patterns:

• Whereas the behaviour of for-profit business is driven mostly by their desire for profits, the behaviour of NFPs is driven mostly by their mission or community purpose.
• Demonstrated commitment to their community-purpose underpins support for their activities, whether by members for member-serving NFPs, or by donors and government who provide funding for community-serving NFPs.
• Processes, often highly participatory, matter for NFPs because they provide value to the volunteers and members, and because of their central importance to maintaining trusting relationships that form the basis for effective service delivery.’

Much of the more recent literature on community engagement refers to the process of increasing community participation in the work of government agencies and programs. There has been an emphasis over the past decade on Australian governments at state, federal and local levels developing policies and arrangements to better communicate and work with community members. Engagement is increasingly being considered in policy development, program planning and service delivery. Community engagement has also become a priority for private sector companies.

Community engagement is not a matter of one ‘best practice’ approach, but rather ‘a flexible process of interaction based on key principles’ (Cavaye, 2005). There is a body of literature with broad agreement on the basic principles of good community engagement practice. Brown and Isaacs (1994) developed a model of ‘six Cs’ of community engagement: capability, commitment, contribution, continuity, collaboration and conscience. Cavaye (2005) deals more specifically with avoiding common engagement mistakes, and lists the following as principles of good engagement:

• Continuity and sustainability of engagement;
• Trust and local relationships;
• Opportunities for deliberation;
• Dealing with anger and the legacy of poor previous engagement;
• Providing tailor-made opportunities for various stakeholder groups to participate;
• Coordination and avoiding over-consultation;
• Joint influence over issues; and
• Community ‘hubs’ and existing communication linkages.

There is considerable overlap between the themes of community engagement and the themes appearing in literature on ‘public engagement’, ‘community development’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘partnership’. Many of the principles are the same. For example according to Professor Brian Head, collaboration requires
trust, learning orientation, leadership, agreement on common objectives, clear roles and responsibilities, teamwork, sharing and building partnerships (ARACY, 2006). Ife describes community development as ‘the process of establishing, or re-establishing, structures of human community in which new ways of relating, organising social life and meeting human need become possible (cited in McDiarmid, 2011).

3.2 Types of Community Engagement

Popular community engagement tools include community events and forums, surveys, focus groups and roundtables. ‘Community engagement’ can also refer to a variety of approaches, which can be represented on a continuum from information delivery or consultation to involvement in decision-making and empowered action.

Successful community engagement depends on the ability to develop trust and provide support throughout. Most authors agree on the importance of specific measures to engage those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Engaging such groups comes with challenges because they may face more and greater barriers to participating. Effective engagement will therefore involve careful planning in terms of method, venue, time of day, time of year and incentives to encourage participation. The design and method of community engagement may also need to consider factors such as literacy levels, income, disability, age, gender, language, cultural and religious practices, carer responsibilities and access to transport (ACT Government, 2011). Events that require people to ‘come to’ government or agencies can self-select participants who are particularly confident, articulate or motivated while presenting barriers to minority groups. A successful alternative is to ‘go to them’ and ‘to consider and link with the natural hubs in communities that people congregate around such as a local school, sporting groups or community organisations’ (Cavaye, 2005).

Pretty and Hine (1999) developed a typology of participation to differentiate actions according to the level of power devolved to participants by the agent – summarised in Figure 1 below. It ranges from ‘manipulative participation’ at one end of the scale to ‘self-mobilisation’ at the other. It is important that agents do not promise more participation or power than is intended to be given, or adopt ‘token’ levels of engagement while claiming to be empowering.
### Figure 1: Pretty & Hine Typology of Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Characteristics of each type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Manipulative participation</td>
<td>Participation is simply pretence, with ‘people’s’ representatives on official boards but who are not elected and have no power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Passive participation</td>
<td>People participate by being told what has been decided or has already happened. It involves unilateral announcements by an administration or project management without listening to people’s responses. The information shared belongs only to external professionals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participation by consultation</td>
<td>People participate by being consulted, and external people listen to views. These external professionals define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in light of people’s responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people’s views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participation for material incentives</td>
<td>People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Much on-farm research falls into this category, as farmers provide their land but are not involved in the experimentation or the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation. People have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives run out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Functional participation</td>
<td>People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organisation. Such involvement does not tend to be at early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interactive participation</td>
<td>People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-mobilisation</td>
<td>People participate by taking initiatives independently of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for the resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Such self-initiated mobilisation and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distribution of wealth and power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘Soft entry points’ and a ‘no wrong door’ policy can remove much of the intimidation or perceived threat involved with accessing services. The Communities for Children initiative sets out to ‘provide communities with the opportunity to identify and resolve their own issues’ (FaHCSIA, 2005). Communities for Children programs can act as ‘soft entry’ points by seeking to engage families in community activities and providing universal, non-stigmatising services in non-threatening settings like shopping centres for families who may be considered hard-to-reach. When the no wrong number, no wrong door approach is in place, no matter which information provider or service a person approaches, by telephone or in person, a referral system will ensure they are connected with the most appropriate service. In the context of the justice system, this might mean a common and widely utilised referral database which lists available services, both legal and non-legal, by service type and location (Attorney-General’s Department, 2009).

3.3 Community Engagement to Improve Service Delivery

A common reason for undertaking community engagement is to improve the delivery of community based services or programs, particularly where the population of potential clients or stakeholders is diverse or has a diversity of needs. Programs are more likely to be successful if stakeholders are involved in the planning, operation and evaluation of programs. For example, research commissioned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People (ARACY) examined the benefits of community participation for children, families and communities in the context of Communities for Children. It found that community participation has a positive impact on the wellbeing of children, families and communities largely due to services adapting their programs to make them accessible for marginalised communities (Hoffmann-Ekstein, 2007).

Community engagement requires sustained investment. Hoffmann-Ekstein also noted the challenges involved, arguing that services can only facilitate community participation successfully when they have adequate resources; existing networks and established trust; the ability to maintain long-term contact with a community; and willingness to build community participation into every aspect of service planning and delivery and to work towards community goals utilising community skills (Hoffmann-Ekstein, 2007).

Where problems are complex, community engagement can result in prevention and early intervention as well as encouraging access to services. The Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne, for example, takes a ‘problem solving approach’ to justice. The centre was established to contribute to the reduction in, and prevention of, criminal activities by offering targeted services to address the underlying disadvantage and marginalisation in the community. It aims to do this by engaging with the local community. Onsite services are offered to victims, offenders, civil litigants and the local community, including drug and alcohol and mental health counselling, legal advice and housing support. The Neighbourhood Justice Centre also works with service providers, government and the local community to address local issues that may contribute to crime. It has been evaluated as having a positive impact on its clients and the community and making a positive contribution to the City of Yarra by providing services that address the factors that cause crime and disadvantage. It has also succeeded in creating a culture that is warm and accessible to both Centre participants and local residents (Victorian Auditor-General, 2011).

The community engagement landscape in Australia remains mixed. While many governments and organisations are making a more directed effort to enhance their work with communities, it is often not seen as ‘real work’ or ‘mainstream’. Engagement skills, where they are recognised, can sometimes be seen as the province of specialist staff and not clearly recognised or well supported. Cavaye (2005) argues the need for a change in the culture and practice of agencies, organisations and communities in order that engagement might become more sophisticated and deliberate.
3.4 Policy Context

There are three significant policy themes in which community engagement in post-separation services can be contextualised:

- The Attorney-General’s framework for improving Access to Justice;
- The Social Inclusion Agenda; and
- The National Compact for Improving Government-Sector Collaboration.

Increasing access to justice has been recognised by the Australian Government as a key means of promoting social inclusion. The Access to Justice initiative refers to ‘having the means to improve “everyday justice”; the justice quality of people’s social, civic and economic relations’ (Attorney-General’s Department, 2009). In 2009, the Government adopted central recommendations from a report of the Access to Justice Taskforce to guide the consideration of the future justice reforms. The need for community engagement, and collaboration between both legal and non-legal services is evident in the report, which highlights the importance of making information accessible and meaningful to people’s particular circumstances. Outreach to a community, it notes, is important both in relation to information about legal issues and information about the broader, non-legal issues in which legal issues have their foundation. Outreach enables information to be provided in community members’ language and by people who are sensitive and respectful of cultural difference. The fact that some cultures have an oral/story-telling approach to learning and may have a very limited response to written material is one example of this (Attorney-General’s Department, 2009: 81).

The Australian Government’s Social Inclusion Agenda is about ‘working to build a stronger, fairer Australia’ in which ‘all Australians have the opportunity and support to participate in our community’ (Australian Government, 2012). This is done through tackling increasingly complex and entrenched forms of disadvantage. One priority of the agenda is supporting children at greatest risk of disadvantage through providing health, education and family relationship services.

In recognition of the central role played by the not-for-profit sector in achieving an inclusive Australia, the ‘National Compact: working together’ is an agreement between the Australian Government and the not-for-profit sector to find new and better ways of working together. Implementation of the Compact is focused on eight priority actions and is aligned with the government’s reform agenda relating to the not-for-profit sector and social inclusion. One component of the National Compact is ensuring better communication between government and the not-for-profit sector, so that policy decisions are in the best interests of those who are most affected.
3.5 Family Services

Community engagement has been identified by as a necessity in the Family Support Program (FSP) and its predecessor the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) (FaHCSIA, 2004). A key motivation for both government and service providers has been to enhance the access to services for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. Because of distinctive barriers faced by these groups, it is not sufficient to simply try to make existing services more accessible to them. Rather, engagement is an essential first step to addressing the specific needs and circumstances of diverse communities, and it is widely noted that agencies need to be prepared to develop innovative approaches and to invest significant time in the process (FaHCSIA, 2004; Muir, 2009; Armstrong, 2010; Ross, Mallard & Fisher, 2010). Important steps in this process include:

- implementing strategies to develop relationships;
- identifying and building networks;
- engaging with leaders;
- working in partnership; and
- fostering community capacity (Armstrong, 2010: 13).

It is, however, simultaneously noted that community need for FRSP services is much greater than agencies’ capacity to provide them. One strategy reported by agencies for managing demand was limiting promotion and networking activities (FaHCSIA, 2004: 57). While most agencies surveyed as part of FaHCSIA’s Review of the Family Relationships Services Program (2004: 96) reported that linkages, partnerships and collaborative ventures were desirable and necessary, they also argued:

‘The current FRSP funding and reporting structure does not recognise the time required to develop and manage joint activities or conduct interagency work. Funding and reporting are based on client “throughput” and this is at odds with the policy rhetoric that agencies are expected to network and engage in joint activities and ventures.’
4. Consultation with Service Providers

4.1 Methodology

All family and relationship services funded by the Attorney-General’s Department to work with separated families were invited by FRSA to complete an online survey (see Appendix I for a list of the survey questions). The invitation was sent to service managers and senior executives with a request that they either complete the survey or pass it on to a staff member they considered best placed to answer the questions. A total of 60 survey responses were received in total from 43 different agencies (or, in some cases, from Family Relationship Centres run by agency consortia) – see Appendix 3. The graph below provides information on respondent provider service types and levels of community engagement.

**Figure 2: Survey Respondents by Service Types**

Which of the following post-separation services are delivered by your organisation?
4.2 Understanding of ‘Community Engagement’

Survey respondents were asked to define ‘community engagement’ as they understand it. Some offered broad definitions that echoed the literature – for example, ‘The process of working collaboratively with community groups to address issues that impact the wellbeing of those groups’. However, most provided more specific definitions that locate the activity within the context of their service. For example, ‘Community collaboration between service providers within the region’ or ‘Engaging with the community, including service providers, to ensure all agencies work together and share resources for the best service delivery’. One defined it simply as ‘meeting people’.

When asked about the basic or key principles of community engagement, virtually all responses concurred with the literature’s strong emphasis on principles such as collaboration, cooperation, trusting and respectful relationships, mutual benefit, long-term commitment, flexibility, integrity and empowerment. A few offered responses more specific to their service environment such as ‘creating a shared language about our services’ or ‘to develop/maintain a professional, well-respected presence in the community, then be out in the community engaging at all levels’.

The word cloud below illustrates the words most commonly used to describe community engagement by survey respondents.

Figure 3: Word Cloud Representation of the Definition of ‘Community Engagement’ by Respondents
4.3 Involvement in Community Engagement

Of the 60 survey respondents (representing 43 organisations), only three indicated that their organisation was not involved in some form of community engagement. There may be a response bias, as organisations that are actively involved in community engagement were perhaps more likely to want to participate in this survey. Nonetheless, 43 organisations comprises 62% of the total number of organisations delivering post-separation services under the FSP (FaHCSIA FOFMS, 2012), so it seems reasonable to conclude that a large majority of providers are involved in some form of community engagement. It is also possible to conclude that this is a relatively well understood concept and activity in community based family and relationship services.

**Figure 4: Proportion of Organisations Undertaking Community Engagement**

*Does your organisation engage with the broader community beyond direct service delivery? (For example, through community liaison, activities, sharing of facilities etc.) If yes, does this engagement happen at the program level or the organisation level?*

Examples of successful community engagement offered by survey respondents can be broadly categorised into three types of activity:

1. **Collaboration with other service providers** including Aboriginal or cultural organisations, family law pathways networks, legal services, police, schools, universities and, in one case, a prison.

2. **Participation in local community events**, including festivals, forums, meetings or council planning days.

3. **Co-location arrangements** with health services, schools or childcare centres, frequently with shared facilities or vehicles, or co-facilitation of education programs or advice sessions with other agencies.
4.4 Perceived Benefits of Community Engagement

Survey respondents were asked to identify the benefits or positive outcomes of community engagement. The most common responses included:

- Increased service visibility in the community – more self-referral and help seeking;
- Improved and more holistic service delivery including better understanding of the needs of specific groups (including improved cultural competence);
- Wider referral circles, more cooperation between services and reduced duplication of services;
- Improved outcomes for clients due to a better coverage of community need;
- Increased referral by solicitors and magistrates; and
- Enhanced coordination between NGOs, state, local and federal governments.

Such outcomes, all of which have the potential to promote social inclusion and better meet local needs, are consistent in nature with the benefits discussed in the community engagement literature. One response in particular reflected what is often described as the ideal outcome of community engagement: ‘more people have the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect their lives’.

Because much of the literature focusses on engagement undertaken by governments, there were some benefits discussed in the literature that were largely absent from the survey responses. These related to the ability of community engagement to enhance the quality of government policy, improve the relationship between government and the community, and improve government reputation as it is perceived as open, accountable and willing to listen (DSE, 2005).

4.5 Impact on Service Delivery

There was strong consensus amongst survey respondents that community engagement has a positive impact on service delivery, with 80% of respondents reporting that community engagement has changed the nature of how services are delivered. This concurs with the literature, which identifies that services can benefit from successful engagement that provides the opportunity for a diversity of voices to be heard, the chance for communities to identify priorities for themselves, more ownership of solutions to current problems, and a greater sense of belonging and empowerment within a community (DSE, 2005). Thus as a result of engagement, services and programs, whether delivered by government, business or community organisations, can be delivered in a more effective and responsive way.

As a result of engaging with and understanding the needs of new groups, some survey respondents reported their service had made changes to their intake processes, increased offsite or outreach service delivery and/or created stronger referral pathways. One service, through its involvement with local cultural groups, was motivated to develop a role within its service to assist culturally and linguistically diverse clients to navigate the family law and family support systems. Another reported that they are now facilitating a parenting group jointly with another provider of services for young mothers and a local child care provider. There were many such examples.

The survey results indicated that no single post-separation service or model seemed to stand out as being more suited to community engagement than others – as one respondent noted, ‘it comes down to the value the staff place on it’. However, it was FRSA’s experience through looking at the case examples that Family Relationship Centres are particularly well placed to engage with the broader community.

Beyond post-separation services, other FSP programs which were seen as lending themselves well to community engagement were Communities for Children and Relationship Education. Almost every area of the wider community was considered well suited to engagement with FSP providers. Those specifically mentioned were family law services, the child protection system, men’s sheds, domestic violence services, mental health programs, disability services, carers programs and drug and alcohol services. More broadly, schools, workplaces and health services were also mentioned as most have ‘direct consultation with or access to families’.
4.6 Driving Factors

Most respondents indicated that a major driver of engagement with the wider community was the imperative to promote their services and increase community access to those services. Engagement with other services is often driven by complex client needs, and means a ‘no wrong door’ approach can be better implemented. Many organisations are seeking to make services more efficient through engagement with other providers. One respondent noted that in a rural centre community engagement is ‘essential due to barriers of time, distance and money’. Seeking integration and coordination rather than duplication of services was a strong driver of engagement because more integrated service delivery ‘addresses the true needs of community members’ and addresses them more efficiently.

Beyond these more common responses, some survey respondents identified the need for a better understanding of the family law system as a driver of engagement with legal services and family law pathways networks. There was also a small number who were prompted to engage with the community as a result of service mapping or needs analysis, and one particularly mentioned the FaHCSIA-initiated Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Clients Access Strategy (VADCAS) for FSP funded services as their primary motivator. No respondents specifically mentioned seeking community feedback in the design phase of a program as a driving factor, whereas the literature would indicate that this is a key motivator for government community engagement.

4.7 Restraining Factors

Along with the benefits and driving factors, survey respondents noted a number of factors restraining or restricting their community engagement. Time constraints were most commonly cited, particularly given there are always competing priorities and often already long waiting lists for services. Many emphasised that the trust required to do ‘good’ community engagement takes a great deal of time. Thus community engagement in an environment of limited funding and resources, staff turnover and other workforce issues can be a significant challenge for some organisations. When time and money are tight, vital or promising engagement processes can be seen as ‘just another meeting someone ought to attend’.

Resource Limitations

The broader funding context was commonly mentioned, namely that there is no specific funding for community engagement and it can be difficult to measure and account for the resources spent on community engagement. Respondents suggested that service (funding) agreements with FaHCSIA and the Attorney-General’s Department need to better recognise community engagement as a funded activity and ensure that it is included in performance measurement and data collection. Data collection that requires all clients to fill in forms can be problematic for community engagement activity, particularly with vulnerable population groups who are often reluctant to fill in forms, may have poor literacy and may be accessing support through a ‘soft entry’ or community based activity that does not lend itself to formal intake processes. For example, if a service runs a sausage sizzle for young parents which includes some informal discussion on family law it would not be appropriate to ask all attendees to fill out a client intake form and identify each one as having received a service. However, it would be valuable to record how many people attended, estimate the proportion from different cultural groups and track over the following 12 months how many return to the service for individual assistance.

Complexity of Need

Another challenge for community engagement is that it will often identify community needs or priorities that don’t fit with current funding priorities. By its nature, the process of community engagement invites communities to define their priorities and raises an expectation that these priorities will be acknowledged and a response provided. If the response needed is outside the remit of the organisation or funded program this can become problematic. The organisation needs to demonstrate a genuine commitment to meeting community needs or it risks losing credibility. To continue the example of the sausage sizzle for young parents, many of the attendees may identify that they have unresolved parenting disputes that are having a negative impact on children but their more pressing or urgent issues relate to disputes with housing
providers which could result in homelessness if not addressed. The service hosting the event may need to respond to the housing disputes, either by bringing in other services or by offering direct assistance, in order to engage the client and build credibility with the target group. This can create dilemmas when the work required is outside funding or operating guidelines but necessary to working holistically with vulnerable clients whose family law issues may be very significant yet only one part of a broader set of complex needs.

**Distance and Safety**

For services operating in rural and remote areas, or covering a large geographic area, sheer distance can be the greatest barrier to community engagement, exacerbated by climatic challenges at certain times of the year.

Services must also deal with Occupational Health and Safety issues when engagement necessitates – which it usually does – working offsite in a diversity of settings not controlled by the organisation.

**Collaboration Difficulties**

Difficulties in establishing collaborative relationships with other organisations were described by a number of survey respondents. They mentioned difficulty communicating with other services, particularly where organisational protocols differed significantly, or the objectives of the engagement exercise may have been difficult to clarify or agree upon. Some had been put off by ‘gatekeepers’ or a sense of ‘protecting one’s own patch’. Competitive tendering can make engagement difficult as organisations may see one another as a threat to their next funding contract. Cultural barriers can also present difficulties – one organisation had found the local Aboriginal service had a ‘mistrust of white organisations’ while several others felt they needed to overcome cultural barriers in order to engage with local migrant groups.

### 4.8 Sharing the Lessons of Community Engagement

Over half of the survey respondents (60%) reported that there are ideas for proposed community engagement within their organisation which have not yet been undertaken. Presumably the restraining factors discussed above are responsible for some of what has not occurred. However, it is reasonable to conclude that many of these ideas may become reality in time and the survey responses strongly indicate that community engagement is increasing and gaining momentum among post-separation service providers.

Around 65% of survey respondents were aware of successful or innovative examples of community engagement from outside their own organisation, a figure which arguably needs to be improved if good community engagement practice is to be encouraged and ideas and lessons disseminated.

Common suggestions as to how lessons about community engagement could be more widely shared included through conferences, seminars, forums, newsletters and clearinghouses. More funding for research was called for, as was greater collaboration, not only through local discussion groups but through online forums such as discussion boards, blogs, social media and webinars. ‘How to’ guides or fact sheets would evidently be well received, with respondents calling for what one described as a ‘very detailed nuts and bolts retelling of the stories of how agencies went about the engagement rather than scholarly research articles’. Another suggested ‘an annual review of all community engagement opportunities and the outcomes... including suggested improvements for next time’.

The factors of time and resources that restrain community engagement may be the same reasons why lessons are not more frequently or widely shared – the sharing of lessons is an even more likely victim of competing demands and priorities than the work of engagement itself. One respondent also warned that the sharing of lessons ‘would require a great deal of honesty and trust between organisations about what has and hasn’t worked – a big ask if they considered that lack of community engagement painted them in an unflattering light’.
5. Case Examples

5.1 Anglicare WA

Introduction

Anglicare WA is a not-for-profit organisation that supports people, their families and communities to cope with the challenges of life by building their resilience and capacity. Anglicare has 38 service locations around Western Australia and runs Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) in three of these locations: Joondalup, Mandurah and the Kimberley. It also operates a number of other post-separation programs including Children’s Contact Services (CCS), Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP) and ‘Mums and Dads Forever’, a Parenting Orders Program that assists separated parents to focus on the best interests of their children and develop skills and knowledge in the areas of grief and loss, conflict resolution and problem solving. Across all programs it puts a strong emphasis on child-focused and child inclusive practice.

Community Engagement

The extent and nature of community engagement at Anglicare WA has shifted significantly over the past six years. In 2006, with the establishment of the first FRCs, excitement about promoting the centres drove robust community engagement. However, the challenges of funding cuts, service demand and long waiting list now impose significant restraints.

With the Government emphasising FRCs as ‘gateway’ services – ‘Helping Families Build Better Relationships’ – Anglicare WA was keen to see its FRCs marketed as cornerstones of the broader family law system. Acknowledging that encouraging a volume of appropriate referrals to FRCs would require strong relationships, Anglicare invested considerable time in engaging widely with other post-separation service providers, legal assistance services and the Family Court. Recognising that others had concerns about how the centres would manage victims of family violence, relationships with specialised family violence services were also formed. A local FRC Reference Group comprised members of the broader community and family law sectors, including state-funded services and universities. This Reference Group provided feedback on appropriate service delivery. In addition to the reference group the Consortium Partners were involved in ensuring that service delivery matched community demand. A Community Education Officer was employed dedicated to the work of community engagement, however this position has not been possible to sustain over the longer term due to funding cuts and increasing service demands.

Anglicare WA has engaged very successfully with Aboriginal communities, particularly in the North West of WA, but it is work that cannot be done in a ‘whitefella way’. That is, it cannot be done in a building, and involves visiting communities over and over again to build rapport and trust. Due to the remoteness of many Aboriginal communities and the vast distances that practitioners have to travel it is very resource intensive to deliver and takes staff away from the delivery of a centre based program.

Despite these pressures, Anglicare WA has a continuing commitment to collaboration, driven by a strong belief that families need integrated support during separation from outside the courts. Reference groups remain the primary engagement tool for Anglicare WA. These include the Anglicare Family Court Reference Group, a Community Sector Reference Group run by the Family Court, the WA Family Law Pathways Network, and the Child Support Agency Reference Group. FRC staff also meet with other WA FRC providers to strengthen FRC relationships and discuss issues arising with the centres such as working with clients across different FRCs. Anglicare WA would like to see more national reference groups on specific issues relating to post-separation service provision and family law particularly the FRCs.

Each of Anglicare’s three FRCs also has its own reference group. For example, the Mandurah FRC has a significant load of child protection and family violence cases, therefore its reference group includes representatives from local police, the Department for Child Protection and family violence programs. The benefits of such engagement are often very clear cut. According to the Manager of Separation Services, without this engagement ‘there would be more children at placed at risk by inappropriate and unsafe parenting arrangements’.
Driving and Restraining Factors

The average waiting list for post-separation services at Anglicare WA is eight weeks and there is persistent high demand that means services across the board are over-subscribed. Anglicare WA has had to reprioritise to manage demand, and as a result investment in community engagement has reduced. Staff no longer have the capacity to attend local events or promote services through community networks because it leads to frustration when waiting lists grow.

The organisation’s perception is that the funding of post-separation services no longer comes with a commitment to the 2006 philosophy of ‘helping families build better relationships’ and keeping families out of court, but rather has been replaced with a priority on delivering high volume services and keeping waiting times to a minimum with a focus on streamlined Family Dispute Resolution (FDR). This is reflected in the reporting of outcomes through the FSP data collection systems. Practitioners feel that the data collection does not recognise the value or importance of activities which can substantially impact on the quality of the support provided and the effectiveness of service delivery. These include:

- Child Inclusive Practice;
- Parenting seminars that assist the parents to shift their focus from one of parents’ rights to children’s needs;
- Pre-FDR sessions which prepare the parent for FDR by focusing the parent on the child and mentoring and coaching them in preparation for the joint sessions;
- Safety assessment;
- Warm referrals for clients who walk in off the street visibly distressed and looking for support which may or may not be in relation to separation; and
- Broader community engagement.

Anglicare WA is also concerned about the impact of changes to the fee regime in FRCs which has reduced the amount of ‘free time’ and increased the cost of accessing FDR. This seems at odds with the priority on strategies to better engage vulnerable and disadvantaged clients. These clients are the ones most unlikely to be able to pay the fees and they ‘take the longest to engage’.

Anglicare WA would like to see more resources invested in post-separation services so that they can better respond to demand while also engaging with the community. They would also like to see funding and performance frameworks better recognise community engagement as an important, long-term activity that warrants continued support.
5.2 Centacare New England North West

Introduction

New England North West is a region of NSW about 600km inland that includes the Northern Tablelands and the North West Slopes region in the north of the state. Over 20 towns are encompassed in the area and its population is about 202,000.

Centacare New England North West (NENW) was established in 2001 by the Bishop of the Armidale Diocese. The agency’s mission is ‘To provide leadership in the delivery of services to support and develop the wellbeing of people’. It has six offices, located in Tamworth, Armidale, Moree, Narrabri, Inverell and Walgett. Centacare NENW runs the Family Relationship Centre (FRC) in Tamworth in conjunction with Anglicare Northern Inland and Tamworth Family Support, and also offers a Children’s Contact Service (CCS) and Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR). Beyond post-separation services, the agency delivers the Catholic Schools Counselling and Assessment Program, a range of psychological services, problem gambling help, the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program and the Family Mental Health Support Service.

Community Engagement Activities & Benefits

Centacare NENW has a CEO who is passionate about engagement at any level, and regularly engages personally with programs and in conversation with clients. It is clear that engagement is also driven by staff whose passion to engage with the community goes beyond funded programs. For example, a recent conversation between a Centacare staff member and a community member working for a disability service led to the development of a relationship education program for people with intellectual disabilities.

Another staff member initiated ‘Beehive,’ a weekly social group open to all, but which generally attracts those who are vulnerable and isolated. The benefits of the group for participants, many of whom are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, are social inclusion and feeling supported to address relationship, health or mental health issues they are experiencing. The program is so successful Centacare would ‘like to replicate it in other areas’.

The FRC consortium (Centacare NENW, Tamworth Family Support and Anglicare Northern Inland meets regularly at both operational and management levels. This assists with referral and cross promotion of services. Client information packs available at the FRC are comprehensive and include information about all three services. Centacare NENW is also involved with a Family Focus Group run by Tamworth Family Support, a Youth Interagency Meeting, an Aboriginal Interagency Group, and has a staff member sitting on the National Mental Health Roundtable. Engagement with mental health services is particularly significant, with constant discussion and evaluation of local needs leading to collaboration in developing educational and support groups for children and adults. Centacare NENW also prioritises involvement in local events, including sponsorship of Harmony Day celebrations.

The consortium has been proactive in engaging with the legal profession. Although this has been challenging (see ‘Driving & Restraining Factors’), there have also been some successes. The staff from the Children’s Contact Service organised a road trip to meet with family lawyers and Family Court staff in Newcastle. This has resulted in more active collaboration with the Newcastle Court, which now uses rooms at the Tamworth FRC to conduct child consults and assessments when on circuit. Members of the FRC consortium attend the Tamworth Court House on a fortnightly basis to set up an information stand so those with court orders can access information easily and immediately. The benefits have come slowly but it is beginning to work well. Centacare has also been approached for assistance by the victim support service at the court, which has resulted in a CALD Liaison Worker spending one morning per week at the courts providing support to victims of domestic violence.

Collaborative relationships between the post-separation services and the broader health and welfare service sectors are an important factor in developing better responses to local community needs; an example is provided below.
FRC staff members were concerned about early warning signs of mental illness in some children of separating parents presenting at the FRC. Collaboration with mental health services resulted in the development of ‘My Speak’, a program aimed at normalising separation for children aged 8-11. The design was based on ‘Smiles’, a program for children of parents with a mental illness, and teaches skills to give feedback about feelings and manage emotions. Independent evaluation of the program by University of New England after six weeks showed that nearly 90% of children participating in ‘My Speak’ returned to the centre for counselling.

Driving & Restraining Factors

Engagement with the legal system has presented multiple challenges. The local Family Law Pathways Network is difficult to convene due to perceived lack of interest, and Centacare has been unable to engage either the legal profession or police. Police are particularly resistant to collaboration. FRC staff members feel that the Children’s Contact Service would be a better place for the relatively high number of child contact changeovers currently occurring at the police station, yet offers to run information sessions at the Police Station have been turned down.

Besides resistance from other groups, significant factors restraining community engagement are limited resources and staffing. This is exacerbated by the problems of distance in an area covering approximately 98,000km². Staff must travel up to 7 hours by car to meet with some groups, and agency travel costs are large. Climatic challenges, especially flooding, can make this even more difficult and time consuming.

Centacare NENW’s Manager Family Mental Health Support Service emphasises the significant time and resources required to engage genuinely with Aboriginal communities. She believes certain Centacare staff members have gained the trust of Aboriginal elders because they ‘stuck to their word and kept returning’. Working inclusively with communities so they feel ownership of solutions requires workers to take the time to ‘sit in the dirt and have a yarn’. There is a strong view that funding based on population does not factor in these challenges. According to Centacare NENW, funding should be multiplied in rural areas to factor much larger travel, staffing and resource costs.
5.3 Centacare Tasmania – North-West Region

Introduction

Centacare Tasmania was established in 1960 and delivers a broad range of specialised and professional support throughout Tasmania, taking a family centred approach. Committed to Christian principles, the agency responds to the needs of disadvantaged or marginalised individuals, families and the community by providing services which seek to enhance human dignity and freedom and enable people to realise their full potential.

FRSA met with Centacare Tasmania’s team in the north-west region. It has major offices in Burnie and Devonport as well as outreach and provides the full range of services under FaHCSIA’s Family Support Program. Overall the region has significant socio-economic difficulties such as high unemployment, low school retention, high rates of teenage pregnancies and transport issues.

Post-separation services offered by Centacare in this region include Family Dispute Resolution (FDR), Family Counselling and Post-separation Cooperative Parenting (PSCP). Centacare Tasmania is also the Facilitating Partner for the Burnie site of the Communities for Children initiative. In this role, they drive and manage a community development approach to improving outcomes for young children (0-12 years) within the local community.

Community Engagement

In collaboration with local primary schools, Centacare Tasmania runs ‘123 Magic’, an education program for parents of 2-12 year olds. Schools have historically been hard to engage but Centacare has developed positive relationships through this program, where the schools organise the venue and participants, and Centacare staff run the sessions. 123 Magic has attracted the participation of parents and teachers who may never have specifically sought post-separation services but who, through participating in this program, can develop the knowledge and confidence to access the services should they need to.

The production of a DVD promoting PSCP entitled ‘Weathering Family Separation’ has been another successful community engagement initiative. The DVD has been widely distributed among local psychologists, GPs, lawyers, schools and the child protection system, and has been successful in increasing referrals through these avenues. It has achieved its aim in ‘making mediation more possible and accessible’ for the wider community.

Without any specific funding for community engagement, many of the agency’s community engagement activities are generated by passionate staff working ‘off the side of the desk’. One previous staff member with a passion for working with men and fathers, for example, had developed a relationship with the local hospital’s antenatal unit. ‘Dads’ Bags’ were developed to hand out at antenatal workshops. He also developed dads’ cookbooks and e-articles to assist men with challenging life transitions.

Many of Centacare Tasmania’s community engagement programs run in conjunction with Communities for Children (CfC). Although CfC does not come under the banner of post-separation, such engagement often has the benefit of increasing access to post-separation services. The regional manager reported that the challenges encountered with community engagement don’t apply so much to CfC, where it is built into the model. Some examples:

- Centacare has established young mums’ and young dads’ groups as part of a ‘Building Australia’s Future Workforce’ trial.
- ‘Burnie on Wheels’ is a mobile family resource centre offering information, supportive conversations and referrals for parents and carers.
- ‘Billy’ is a billy-kart making initiative implemented at Montello Primary School in partnership with a high school, a retirement village and the Police-Citizens Youth Club (PCYC). A seemingly simple activity involving families from the schools meeting with retirement village residents to build a billy kart, its benefits for young people have included social and emotional development, literacy, and assistance with key transitional periods. This program works towards building more skilled and confident neighbourhoods and building intergenerational connections and bonds.
Driving & Restraining Factors

Centacare Tasmania staff experience tension between the time taken to create and maintain partnerships and the delivery of core work. The removal of specific targets in the new FSP contracts has improved flexibility but there remains an issue with community engagement activity not being adequately ‘counted’ in performance measurement. It is generally felt that the time required for fostering effective community engagement is not properly recognised in funding contracts and performance measurement. Potentially, the agency could run the risk of being considered ‘low performing’ because it is investing in community engagement rather than delivering a high number of individual client sessions. This is frequently discussed amongst practitioners who often find themselves working with clients in many different ways – often beyond the scope of the specific activity for which they are funded. As one practitioner said: ‘We just persevere. In this area if we don’t take on clients there’s nowhere else to refer them to’.

Attempts to engage with local Aboriginal groups have faced resistance. Centacare Tasmania receives some referrals, but overall perceives that these groups prefer to work on their own. Having made numerous attempts to connect, staff say it is difficult to know what to do with regard to the Indigenous Access Strategy, which they believe cannot be applied in certain areas.

Centacare Tasmania’s north-west region places strong emphasis on engagement and collaboration. The manager of the region is a strong driving force; his mantra is ‘relationship, relationship, relationship’. Several years ago the agency initiated regular meetings of service providers in Tasmania’s northwest for the purpose of sharing ideas and collaborating. The meetings regularly attract 30-50 people, with an email list of over 400, and it is said to be a highly successful network. According to the manager, the opinions of other agencies regarding the way Centacare operates are genuinely taken into account and there is a commitment to developing a culture of collaboration. Sharing food is also viewed as a vital part of this culture of bringing people together to share ideas and strengthen relationships.

Centacare Tasmania staff in the north-west have generally found that small, locally based agencies are very amenable to partnership. When attempting to collaborate with larger, centrally managed organisations, however, they have found that ‘competition rears its head’ and ‘unnecessary paperwork’ is generated. There is a strongly held view that competition between agencies is counterproductive, and competitive tendering does not in fact produce the most cost-effective services. For example, a number of local agencies have submitted expressions of interests for the next stage of the Communities for Children process, and Centacare has taken the initiative of bringing this group together to promote discussion rather than competition. This is acknowledged to be easier in a regional area. Centacare Tasmania recently commissioned an independent evaluation of how it was perceived by other agencies in the area, which generated very positive feedback.
5. Case Examples

5.4 Centacare Toowoomba

**Introduction**

Toowoomba is a city in Southern Queensland, located 127km west of Brisbane. With an estimated population of over 130,000, Toowoomba is Australia’s second largest inland city and its largest non-capital inland city. It has developed into a regional centre for business and government services.

Centacare Toowoomba is an official welfare agency of the Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba covering South West Queensland, an area of approximately 480,000km². It has offices, located in Toowoomba, Dalby, Chinchilla, Warwick, Charleville, St George, Goondiwindi, Roma, and Cunnamulla. Committed to Christian principles of social justice, the agency ‘responds to individuals, families and the community by providing services which enhance human dignity and freedom and enable people to realise their full potential’.

Centacare Toowoomba operates the Family Relationship Centre (FRC) in Toowoomba. Other post-separation services offered are Regional Family Dispute Resolution (RFDR), Post-separation Cooperative Parenting (PSCP) and Family Counselling.

**Community Engagement**

Centacare Toowoomba has been in operation for approximately 25 years and is strongly networked with the local community. Community engagement is seen as a necessity; according to one interviewee, ‘Clients need to be referred to agencies that support individuals, families and communities’. It was noted that the more recent Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategies (VADCAS) have also provided valuable momentum for engagement.

The Toowoomba and South West Queensland Family Law Pathways Network is generally regarded as a collaborative forum for workers in Family Law services. Centacare Toowoomba representatives attend African Community Action Group forums, Refugee and Migrant Support Services Interagency, Community Capacity Building meetings and regional interagency meetings. These are valuable because ‘as workers we know what services and programs are offered in the local region, and across Indigenous and the African communities’. Centacare Toowoomba’s counsellors visit local primary schools regularly, where they assess needs by speaking with principals, teachers, parents and students. Playgroups are also avenues for engagement with young mothers. Educational workshops are facilitated by Centacare staff in community settings. All these activities assist people in the present time or the future with knowing how to access family and relationship services.

There is considerable emphasis placed on participating in local and regional community events. Community events are placed on the ‘annual calendar’ so they are prioritised by staff in advance. These include agricultural shows, the Peace Festival, and NAIDOC Golf Days. Toowoomba’s annual Language and Cultural Festival is given particularly high priority. A diverse array of food, arts, crafts and dancing attract high numbers of local people, and Centacare staffs a display booth each year supporting their Toowoomba Refugee and Migrant Services. Activities are planned to keep the children busy while Centacare staff talk to parents. They are continually trying different ways to engage with local people in their communities.

Centacare Toowoomba has several staff positions dedicated to community engagement: an Indigenous Community Liaison Officer, an African Facilitator, an African Community Liaison Officer and a Community Development Officer. These positions are considered essential to the work of the agency. This is in recognition of the benefits of engagement which ultimately assists people to know about and to access the services they need. Despite this, it is felt that funding bodies give limited recognition to the importance of community engagement efforts.
Driving and Restraining Factors

Engaging with certain areas of the community can sometimes highlight a need for activities beyond the scope of existing funding. A strong need has been perceived in Stanthorpe, Warwick and Chinchilla for education for couples prior to beginning mediation, yet there is limited funding to deliver PSCP programs outside of Toowoomba. Centacare Toowoomba has explored other possibilities with the mediators, resulting in preparatory material developed for clients living outside Toowoomba. They source DVDs booklets and fact sheets from other agencies and government departments to ‘make do’ when funding does not stretch. It would be preferable to have flexible funding arrangements that would allow priority needs to be addressed once identified.

When asked about the greatest challenges or restraining factors, the response was time, distance, funding and annual targets. There is also the need to manage promotional event participation with the impact on waiting lists, although in this instance the end impact is usually minimal and does not occur directly after the event. More problematic, with such a large geographic area to cover, is the cost of travel for events, participation, outreach and training, which can be time consuming for staff, who aim to balance service capacity with provision of information to the community.
5.5 Coffs Harbour Family Relationship Centre

Introduction
Coffs Harbour is a city on the mid-north coast of NSW, 540km north of Sydney. The region has a wintertime population of over 70,000 which swells to 100,000 in the summer. Popular with people relocating from big cities, its population is growing at a rapid rate.

The Coffs Harbour Family Relationship Centre (FRC) is auspiced by Interrelate Family Centres (IFC), a large provider of relationship services across NSW which has had a presence in Coffs Harbour for over 35 years. Interrelate exists to help ‘individuals, couples, families and children to develop better communication, effective solutions and strong relationships’. Along with the FRC’s information referral service and family dispute resolution service, Interrelate’s combined Coffs Harbour centre also offers a Children’s Contact Service (CCS), post-separation cooperative parenting support, counselling and a range of individual and group programs to assist family relationships for men, women, young people and children.

Community Engagement
Staff at the Coffs Harbour FRC are exceptionally positive about the current extent and nature of community engagement in the local area. When the FRC first opened, staff promoted post-separation services ‘constantly’ so as to become well known in the local community. A marketing committee was established, regularly setting up information tables at local markets and shopping centres. Staff met with groups which were traditionally polarised from one another (e.g. men’s groups and women’s groups) and deliberately positioned the FRC as neutral. This has helped avoid any misconceptions about the nature of the services. Similarly, presence at local events has been and continues to be important. The combined Coffs Harbour IFC/FRC service has a regular presence at events such as child protection week events, Senior Citizens’ Week (running a course for grandparents in the past), Harmony Day and the local Coffs Area Men’s Alliance. Regularly inviting community, professional, and interagency members to events held on the FRC premises is also vital to ensure community members are comfortable and familiar with the space. In addition, the space is made available to other agencies and community groups as a meeting space: one staff member commented, ‘there’s always someone here using the FRC facility’.

FRC staff report that the city has developed over the past few years into a ‘collaborative service-networking area’. They have observed an increasing openness to collaboration and general goodwill between community service agencies, leading to strong local accountability, and a greatly improved referral culture. There is a good relationship with the local Federal Magistrate’s Court circuit magistrate and support staff. The local Family Law Pathways Network, auspiced by Interrelate, enjoys high participation rates and has facilitated a number of important partnerships. There has also been an active and vibrant growth in interagency and email networking in the local area, including such initiatives as an Aboriginal Service Providers’ Forum, CALD/refugee agency interactions, a Domestic Violence Committee and the FLPN. Interrelate has its own Community Reference Group with invited community and sector members from a large variety of local groups.

Engagement with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities
In a number of cases, Coffs Harbour FRC programs have been tailored as a result of feedback from other agencies. For example, CALD/Resettlement Interagency Meetings have helped to identify gaps in support for CALD communities and resettling refugees as they adapt to relationship needs in a new culture and post-trauma. This has led to the development of a CALD Community Liaison Worker position within the FRC. This person will assist in identifying service gaps and working with Family Relationship Services clients from CALD communities and the agencies that support them, and help them negotiate and culturally understand the Australian family law and relationship support context. By raising awareness of cultural diversity and developing stronger service networks, cultural collaboration is fostered.
Introduction to Court-Ordered Post-Separation Parenting Programs for Solicitors & Others

A series of presentation events at the Coffs Harbour FRC have been arranged by the Family Law Pathways Network Project Officer. Family Law Solicitors and other professionals and agencies have attended experiential presentations from Interrelate Family Centre’s counsellors and group facilitators on the various post-separation cooperative parenting courses that are run by the centre. These courses assist clients who are referred internally from the FRC, as well as from solicitors and the Federal Magistrate’s Court processes. One local solicitor in attendance commented, ‘It’s made me realise that we work at odds with what you’re trying to do. What can we do to help you?’ Staff report that their relationship with local lawyers is ‘beginning to feel more like teamwork’.

Driving and Restraining Factors

Coffs Harbour FRC’s community engagement is driven by a strong focus on clients. The centre’s area manager emphasises the importance of avoiding a ‘service-centric bias’ – not being too precious about their own service. He believes a genuine concern for clients cannot be separated from agencies getting to know each other and building trust and rapport. For them, a client focus means working to develop a culture of warm intra-organisation referrals, a strength-based approach to service delivery and a collaborative attitude. This includes a willingness to share their specific expertise and experience and to support smaller, less resourced services: ‘we can be a bit more generous’. It is acknowledged that networking ‘won’t have legs’ in the real world unless internal relationships are good, and thus significant time is devoted to team building and internal case management meetings. FRC staff are proud of what they do and clearly respectful of the organisation for which they work. This adds to the good reputation of the organisation in the community.

Factors restraining community engagement are similar to those of most other agencies: time, resources and funding. There is often not the time to follow up from the initial contact with a group or community during which a need is expressed. Finding the right mix between ensuring they run an effective service, engaging and servicing as many clients as possible, and achieving the external engagement needed to drive good client outcomes is sometimes a balancing act. Data collection and compliance is another challenge: along with considering how a project will work, staff must ensure its implementation will comply with funding conditions and targets, balance case management with collaboration, and still meet allocated internal and external targets. This means that supporting staff to meet targets can potentially detract from engagement opportunities. There is also concern about client fee-payment in a low socio-demographic region. Yet staff members remain positive about their ability to creatively address these challenges.
5.6 Relationships Australia Victoria - Community Liaison Officers

Introduction

Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations that has its roots in the marriage guidance movement which developed in Melbourne in 1948. Today, RAV aims to help Victorians achieve positive and respectful relationships. It works to achieve this though the delivery of a diverse range of relationship services from five centres in metropolitan Melbourne (Boronia, Cranbourne, Greensborough, Kew and Sunshine) and three regional centres (Ballarat, Shepparton and Traralgon). Along with its consortium partners, RAV is involved in eight of the 15 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) in Victoria, four as the lead agency at Berwick, Greensborough, Melbourne City and Sunshine. It is also an active consortium partner in the centres at Ballarat, Broadmeadows, Geelong and Ringwood. Other post-separation services provided include family counselling, Post-separation Cooperative Parenting (PSCP) and a broad range of relationship education courses and groups.

Community Engagement

RAV supports a range of different community engagement activities across each of its centres, responding to the unique profile and demographic characteristics of each local area. Community engagement is also central to many of its projects. The Manager of Social Inclusion oversees the work of eight Community Liaison Officers (CLOs). RAV also employs a ‘Liaison Officer – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services’. At the time of writing, a role had recently been created for a CALD Liaison Officer.

The organisation acknowledges the time consuming nature of community engagement and allows its staff the time it takes to do it well. As one manager commented ‘proper change takes time because you’ve got to bring people with you on the journey’. RAV seeks to support its CLOs in a range of ways. RAV recognises that community engagement does not always show immediate results. CLOs are therefore not always able to document an immediate outcome of engagement activities such as attending community events or running educational sessions – but rather they record informal information about what they have done using project brief templates. It is acknowledged that sometimes the impact of engagement is only seen down the track: a client may attribute knowledge of a service to an event held 6-12 months earlier at which RAV was present.

Two population groups have been identified as priority for engagement by CLOs as described below.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients is given specific attention at RAV. The organisation works with Aboriginal organisations and community groups to develop its capacity to deliver appropriate service to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A number of specific program initiatives are aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including ‘Brutha’s Day Out’, a project which enables Aboriginal men to gather in a safe environment and to feel connected to community, culture and each other.

Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) are assisted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services Liaison Officer to work in a way that is culturally competent. This person can advise them, for example, on navigating a balance of loyalties to tribes, groups or families, or on the need for awareness about which Aboriginal person can comment on cultural protocols in a particular area. All CLOs have undertaken cultural awareness training with the Koori Heritage Trust, a not-for-profit Aboriginal community organisation, and are now calling for the next level of training. Issues they are currently encountering include the different manifestations of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities, and difficulty knowing how to respond to bullying and lateral violence among Aboriginal people in an organisational context.

RAV has a separate website designed specifically to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access family and relationship support. The website also provides information for professionals. It features Aboriginal artwork, contains information about RAV’s Aboriginal programs and training, information about upcoming events, useful documents relating to Victorian Aboriginal frameworks, and other relevant links. It can be found at www.afrsv.com.au.
Engagement with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities

Many of RAV’s family and relationship services programs, including the FRCs and post-separation services, are operating in very diverse communities with a significant mix of cultural and religious populations, including newly arrived migrants and refugees. Working with CALD communities can be challenging and requires specific skills and awareness. One Community Liaison Officer discussed the challenge of working with his own people – the Somali community – who have a cultural tendency towards a more relaxed attitude to time. Somali clients were frequently hours late for appointments or events. He discussed creative solutions to the frustrations encountered, for example creating event flyers which listed the start time as 1-2 hours earlier than the time for which the guest speaker was scheduled.

Driving and Restraining Factors

Centrally, RAV uses mapping exercises to help assess the work being undertaken in each centre and how the big picture of RAV’s work links back to, for example, the Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Clients Access Strategy (VADCAS). However, it can be difficult to register clients supported through the CLO activities, meaning that collecting data can be a significant challenge. The need to capture data is acknowledged, but there are issues with registering some clients. Trust is not easily gained with some groups. For example, vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups may be particularly sensitive about reporting, for example, date of birth or income, or whether they have a disability. There are also instances where the data collection system will not allow a field to be left blank, which means that if a client cannot answer every question then the entire record is lost. Similarly there are difficulties with capturing activities undertaken by CLOs and the impact of these activities. For example, if a CLO is a guest speaker at a school or community information session (in some cases a significant component of their work) data on the characteristics of the audience and their presenting needs or requests for assistance are not able to be reported on the FSP Online data collection system because they are not registered clients. There are also some logistical challenges in managing a team of CLOs where much of the work is done out in the community, away from the services provided and often during non-regular work hours.

It was suggested that funding bodies could do more to acknowledge community engagement as a legitimate service activity and develop better processes for reporting both outputs and outcomes.
5.7 Port Augusta Family Relationship Centre

Introduction
Port Augusta is a seaport and railway city located on the east coast of the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. It has a population of approximately 15,000 of which 20% identify as Aboriginal. Because of the mining boom to the north and west hinterlands the population is expected to double within the next decade.

The Port Augusta Family Relationship Centre (FRC) is funded through its auspicing agency, Centacare Catholic Family Services, Country SA, Catholic Diocese of Port Pirie (CDPP). Centacare CDPP was established in 1996 with the vision to ‘build safe, sustainable, vibrant, interactive and engaged communities’. Centacare provides a range of mainstream services including counselling, relationship education, skills training, critical incident response, domestic violence services, financial support, foster care, family and relationship services as well as programs specifically developed for Aboriginal communities. Other post-separation services offered include family counselling.

The Port Augusta FRC was established in 2007 and is a gateway to services for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families. The FRC provides family dispute resolution services to Ceduna, Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Wudinna and Port Pirie, Roxby Downs and Coober Pedy, as well as Port Augusta. It also provides outreach services throughout the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in the remote north west of South Australia, which has a population of around 2,500 people.

Community Engagement
Port Augusta FRC’s community engagement approaches are significantly shaped by the local Aboriginal population and the need to ‘do things differently’ when working with Aboriginal families and communities. Professional networks in the area tend to be fluid rather than formal and relationships between people are emphasised over relationships between organisations – particularly when working with Aboriginal people. For example, if a relationship is established between an Aboriginal community and a staff member who then leaves the organisation, a new staff member should not expect to be able to ‘pick up where the other person left off’ – but rather approach the community as if establishing a new relationship. This means face to face contact, allowing plenty of time for ‘yarning’ and always asking ‘what’s in it for the client?’ As a result of ongoing engagement, particularly with Aboriginal leaders and service providers, the FRC staff have a much better understanding of how to best deliver culturally appropriate services.

Before the FRC was well known in the community, presence at local events such as agricultural field days was considered important. Now that the FRC is well known within the community, National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week is considered the most important week of the year, and NAIDOC events are a high priority. The FRC runs a ‘boomerang colouring competition’ in local schools, which facilitates important connections with the school communities. Boomerangs are then displayed in the FRC, encouraging local families to spend time in the space. Competition prizes are awarded at the NAIDOC Closing Ceremony and ‘parents love their children being recognised on the front stage’. The FRC also produces a colourful NAIDOC Week newsletter each year to celebrate local Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal flag is flown and Aboriginal community members clearly feel comfortable coming in and out of the FRC for a range of reasons. The FRC is also a proud supporter of the Mulka Art Exhibition which is the first exhibition of works by local Aboriginal artists in the Port Augusta region.
Staff members within the FRC have also developed significant relationships with members of groups as diverse as the Family Violence Legal Service Aboriginal Corporation, the Flinders & Far North Division of General Practice, the SA Family Law Pathways Network and the South Australian Film Corporation.

‘Child Focused Dreaming’

Local agency and community relationships in Port Augusta have resulted in the recent production of a short film, ‘Child Focused Dreaming’, which uses a contemporary Aboriginal dreaming story as a tool to assist separating parents to make child-focussed decisions when determining future arrangements. It is narrated by Faith Thomas, an elder of the Port Augusta Community, who explains that children are negatively affected when parents fight and do not consider the needs of their children first and foremost. The film has been distributed on DVD to a range of family law and family relationship services. It is also felt that the film is accessible to non-Aboriginal people and may help break down some cultural barriers between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in the area. The DVD was funded by the SA Film Corporation, Family Law Pathways (SA) and Centacare Catholic Family Services, Country SA. Currently the DVD is being ‘dubbed’ into Language, including Pitjitjintjara. Further information about the film is available at www.childfocuseddreaming.com.au.

‘Aboriginal with Aboriginal Staff’

‘Aboriginal people always know what to do to bring the people in’. Local elder

The Port Augusta FRC employs a number of Aboriginal practitioners and community workers who are considered vital to the engagement work of the centre. For non-Aboriginal staff, lessons about the need to work differently with Aboriginal people were sometimes difficult to learn, but have been extremely valuable. There is now an attempt to balance the boundaries of a ‘white’ employment relationship with an understanding of Aboriginal cultural and family obligations. For example, some Aboriginal staff members have experienced suicide within their families and the centre needed to allow them space for grieving and supporting their wider community. Normal ‘personal leave’ arrangements don’t allow for this. There has also been a need to accommodate linguistic diversity as some Aboriginal staff have limited competency in written English (which may be their second or third language). This creates difficulties for the service where all policies, forms and data collection systems are in English. Yet there is significant value in having community workers that speak or understand Indigenous languages as this helps to facilitate community engagement and improves service accessibility. There are also cultural accommodations that need to be made. For example:

‘Trust in Aboriginal workers means knowing that having a cup of coffee with someone isn’t “bludging”. Aboriginal staff must be given yarning time – this is a crucial part of the networking process. Emails don’t work so well as Aboriginal people tend to prefer face to face contact. Many organisations employ Aboriginal people but don’t give them the freedom to do what they think needs to be done, like going to a funeral. We need to acknowledge who they are, where they come from and the years of experience they bring… Apply the job to the person not the person to the job. Helping people reach their full potential includes giving them the freedom to make mistakes.’ Port Augusta FRC Manager

Driving and Restraining Factors

Port Augusta FRC’s community engagement is driven by a strong commitment to social justice and equity, and to a belief that change comes from the grassroots within a community. In an area with many Aboriginal groups with different languages, customs and traditions, however, establishing trusting relationships to facilitate change takes time, patience and perseverance. This leads to significant challenges balancing community engagement with reporting outcomes to funding bodies. Three year funding cycles don’t make this any easier. Working in remote regions such as the APY Lands also means resources must be stretched much further.
5.8 Wodonga Family Relationship Centre

Introduction

Wodonga is a small city on the Victorian side of the border with New South Wales, 300 kilometres north-east of Melbourne. Adjacent to Wodonga across the border is the New South Wales city of Albury. Wodonga’s population is approximately 30,000 people, and together with Albury forms an urban area with approximately 90,000 people.

Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC) is an independent, non-government, community managed agency which has been operating since 1979. UMFC delivers a range of post-separation services including Integrated Mediation Services, Children’s Contact Service, Parenting Orders Program and the Wodonga Family Relationship Centre (FRC). UMFC also operates a Children’s Services Team, Integrated Family Services, Out of Home Care, Aged and Disability Services, the Hume Riverina Community Legal Service and Community Financial Services. The organisation’s mission is ‘Strengthening families to build vibrant communities’; its mission for post-separation services is ‘to improve outcomes for children by educating, supporting and empowering families who are experiencing significant conflict, change and transition as a result of parental separation or divorce’.

Community Engagement

The Wodonga FRC reports excellent relationships with the local community. Community events are prioritised by the FRC, which attempts to have a presence (such as a stand) at any event with a family focus. This includes the Gateway Community Health Children’s Fair and any widely attended event such as the Deniliquin Roadshow.

Interagency networks are another important form of engagement. UMFC provides coordination support to the Family Law Pathways Network Albury-Wodonga which has achieved a high rate of engagement across the local family law sector and is widely considered to be extremely successful. UMFC also participates in the local Koori Interagency Meeting and the Albury and Wodonga Family Violence Committee. These provide opportunities for vital feedback and consultation on service delivery, with extensive email lists that are useful for disseminating information and keeping people updated when they are unable to attend a meeting. The relationships that develop between practitioners through interagency network participation were identified as a key precursor to effective community engagement. As one interviewee commented, ‘We can just pick up the phone and say, what can we do to make this happen?’ These connections are also a mechanism for identifying and understanding local needs, which has led to a number of community engagement projects.

School Education Project

The Wodonga FRC’s School Education Project was driven by the need to equip school communities to understand and respond appropriately to parental separation and its effects on children. The impetus for the project was a local school community member raising the issue informally with an FRC staff member. The FRC then had further discussions with various parties, including the Coordinator of Student Wellbeing and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This identified a need for more support to be given to schools across the region. The project began with the FRC producing fact sheets on separation for distribution among school staff. Further contact with principals resulted in the decision to deliver a professional development program for the school community, with an accompanying resource booklet.

The project was ultimately a collaboration between the Wodonga FRC, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Family Law Pathways Network Albury-Wodonga, Hume Riverina Community Legal Service and two private legal firms. After piloting the project in Catholic schools, the FRC began to receive requests for it to be delivered in other schools. Feedback gathered from participants by UMFC has been very positive. The project continues to run, however it does not attract any specific funding.
Beechworth Prison Project

The Beechworth Correctional Centre, approximately 55km from Wodonga, is a minimum-security prison that focuses on reparation and pre-release activities. Its programs seek to help prisoners re-integrate into the community when they are released. Correctional Centre staff contacted the Wodonga FRC inviting them to deliver a program on ‘reconnecting relationships’. The FRC took an existing program developed by Interrelate Family Centres and the Child Support Agency entitled ‘Staying Connected – Tips and Hints for Separated Dads’ and adapted it for use in the prison. The pilot program assists prisoners to consider their relationships as they transition back to the outside world, and educates them about support networks and services available to support relationships. The project can be adapted and is highly responsive to the needs of the group.

Driving and Restraining Factors

There are a number of community engagement ‘champions’ within UMFC who are key drivers of engagement activities. Determining which initiatives are likely to have the greatest impact helps with decisions about which projects to focus on. Staff emphasised that all FRC activities are driven by need; only those that clearly address a recognised need are given priority. Community engagement is also a way to ensure that trust is built between the organisation and the community, which is vital if community members are to feel comfortable accessing services such as Family Dispute Resolution.

Restraining factors faced by UMFC include a lack of resources and restrictions on the use of funding (both state and federal). Across a range of funding programs (including most post-separation services) community engagement activities are not specifically funded or ‘counted’ in performance or activity measures. Services have been required to meet performance targets which do not necessarily allow for an investment in community engagement activities to build trust and encourage ‘harder-to-reach’ groups to access the programs. Balancing the investment of resources in community engagement and direct service delivery can be difficult. As one UMFC Manager commented, ‘it’s a very tricky balance’ which is continually worked at.
6. Analysis & Key Findings

6.1 Definitions and Understandings

As not-for-profit organisations, the providers of post-separation family support services have a long history of community engagement, though it has not always been described in this way. It is relatively recently that community engagement is being recognised as a mechanism for enhancing the delivery of government funded programs, including those that are part of the Family Law System. This is influenced by major policy frameworks designed to improve access to justice, promote social inclusion and recognise the role of service providers in identifying as well as responding to community needs.

In the post-separation family support sector, the Family Relationship Centre (FRC) service model, introduced in 2006, was the first with explicit requirements to undertake community engagement. Resources such as community liaison positions were integrated into the service model – as reflected in the Service Agreements and Operating Guidelines. This has since become a feature of other programs, such as the Supporting Children After Separation Program (SCASP).

**Understanding Community Engagement**

The term ‘community engagement’ is not currently well defined in the Family Law System or the Family Support System. Participants in this study generally shared an understanding of community engagement as a flexible, respectful process which can be tailored to different groups, needs, personalities and or levels of skills or resources. The purpose of engagement – increasing access to services – is oriented towards ultimate benefits for the wellbeing of children and families. There is significant overlap with the principles of collaboration, community development, and partnership: concepts such as trust, respect, mutual benefit and long term commitment were mentioned repeatedly throughout the study and in the literature. FRSA suggests the following definition of community engagement would be useful in the family support context: ‘Building trusting relationships with community groups in order increase access to support and work collaboratively to improve the wellbeing of children and families’.

**Key Message 1**

A consistent definition of ‘community engagement’ should be adopted in the Family Support Program, in recognition that it is a cross-program activity that brings significant benefits to all clients.

**Purpose of Community Engagement**

In post-separation family support services, community engagement is primarily based on the desire to:

- Improve access to services, particularly for under-represented groups within the local community; and
- Adapt service delivery to best meet community needs – with the goal of ensuring the most appropriate support is provided to assist families with their post-separation parenting arrangements.

These are priorities for both the Attorney-General’s Department and for service providers, but fulfilling them raises the issue of competing priorities for resource allocation. This will be discussed further on.

There is agreement that successful community engagement mobilises the strengths, skills and capacities of the group it is supposed to benefit. Ideally community engagement should involve local people not only in the identification of needs but in the designing of ways to address those needs. Pretty & Hine’s typology of participation (Figure 1) can be applied to engagement and can assist with identifying how different forms of engagement range from manipulative to mobilising and empowering. They argue that the sharing of information with a particular group without giving them any power is simply pretence. It could be argued that in a service delivery context, where the programs and people are accountable to government, ‘self mobilisation’ is a difficult goal; ‘functional participation’ may be a more realistic objective.
Consistent with the literature, this project has emphasised the importance of specifically engaging those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. Considering barriers to access is important, and usually means a ‘go to them’ approach. Most groups respond far better to face-to-face engagement. For example, Anglicare WA’s engagement with Aboriginal communities in the North West of WA has been successful because they have visited communities repeatedly to build trust and rapport, rather than defaulting to a ‘whitefella’ expectation that community members would travel large distances in order to meet with staff in an FRC building.

Key Message 2
The activity of community engagement should be better recognised as a legitimate activity in the delivery of post-separation family support services, with some articulation of purpose for individuals, services and programs.

Types of Community Engagement

Drawing on the results of both the survey and the more in-depth field work undertaken as part of this project, FRSA concludes that most post-separation family support services are involved in a range of community engagement activities. The majority of service providers see these activities as integral to fulfilling their mission or purpose. The delivery of government programs is also a mechanism for fulfilling their mission and the two come together when community engagement is used as a mechanism to enhance service delivery and improve access to services for population groups that might otherwise miss out.

The most common examples of community engagement identified in this project were inter-agency collaborations such as networks, advisory forums and reference groups. These vary in form and function. Most providers would be involved in multiple groups, some of which would have a diverse range of participants working across service systems (such as the service provider network initiated by Centacare Tasmania), while others are more issue-specific (such as Domestic Violence Committees). The Family Law Pathways Networks were commonly mentioned as examples of successful engagement. Multi-disciplinary reference groups established to provide advice on the delivery of specific services or programs were also common and seen as valuable. For Anglicare WA, for example, the high number of child protection and family violence cases at one of its FRCs led to the deliberate inclusion on the FRC Reference Group of representatives from local police, the Department for Child Protection and family violence programs.

Participating in local events or festivals was mentioned by virtually all survey respondents and case example participants as a method of building local relationships and promoting services. This may include holding a stand or stall with information about services, running activities for children and families, or the delivery of workshops (such as basic relationship education) at the event. Local cultural events were especially prioritised. NAIDOC Week is the most important week on the calendar for the Port Augusta FRC, providing multiple opportunities to engage. Some agencies also host events on their premises for local families, providers or lawyers. The Coffs Harbour FRC’s presentation events for Family Law Solicitors and other professionals and agencies, arranged through the local Family Law Pathways Network, have been a way of successfully increasing the community’s understanding of post-separation cooperative parenting courses.

Other forms of engagement include the lending or hiring out of agency facilities, initiating meetings with strategic local groups or individuals, letterbox drops, distribution of resources such as DVDs, and representation on roundtables or committees. The road trip organised by the Tamworth Children’s Contact Centre staff to meet with lawyers and Family Court staff in Newcastle was an initiative that resulted in more active collaboration with the Newcastle Court. Centacare Tasmania’s production of a DVD promoting post-separation cooperative parenting was another successful example of engagement, with the DVD distributed among a range of local professionals in order to make mediation more accessible for the wider community.
Key Message 3
Post-separation family support providers should be encouraged to document their community engagement activities and share information about what has or has not worked.

Community Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

Particular emphasis is often placed on engagement with specific groups within the community. Many of the organisations involved in this project had developed engagement initiatives to better connect with the local Aboriginal or Islander communities but with varying levels of success. Some survey respondents and case example participants, despite numerous attempts to engage with Aboriginal groups in the area, had met resistance. Others had been welcomed by local Aboriginal communities or groups after a number of visits and had been able to work with these groups to develop programs specifically for Aboriginal communities and families. In Port Augusta, where Aboriginal people make up more than 20% of the local population, the engagement approaches and employment practices of the local FRC are significantly shaped by the priorities of local Aboriginal people. Having Indigenous community workers on staff is highly valued, and has assisted non-Aboriginal staff in a number of cases to implement changes to improve service accessibility.

FRSA’s submission to the Family Law Council’s review of access to the family law system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families identifies some of the barriers reported by post-separation services, including:

- A critical undersupply of suitably qualified Indigenous practitioners – for example, FRCs report difficulty in recruiting Indigenous liaison workers, with some positions vacant for extended periods of time;
- Training opportunities are often limited and expensive, particularly in rural/remote areas, while other barriers to gaining qualifications can include extensive travel and/or pre-requisite skills;
- Traditional service models are often not the most appropriate way to deliver services (to Aboriginal families) but contractual requirements, performance measurement frameworks 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 where English is not the primary spoken language.

Community Engagement with Migrant & Refugee Communities

Many service providers also have strategies in place to engage migrant, refugee or cultural groups, either directly through community liaison work or through building relationships with other organisations such as refugee and migrant support services. The participation of the Coffs Harbour FRC in CALD/Resettlement Interagency meetings, for example, helped to identify gaps in support for the relationship needs for CALD communities and resettling refugees as they adapt to a new culture. The FRC in turn created a community liaison position to work with other agencies that support CALD families to help them negotiate and understand the Australian family law and relationship support context.

FRSA’s submission to the Family Law Council’s review of access to the Family Law System for culturally and linguistically diverse families identified the need for a multiplicity of approaches across the domains of:

- Increasing engagement with migrant and refugee communities to better understand different needs – particularly for newly arrived humanitarian entrants;
- Building capacity across the system to work with communities, families and individuals in a culturally competent and responsive way;
- Increasing the diversity of the workforce within the family law system to better reflect the diversity of Australian society;
• Heightened focus on CALD issues in the development of responses to family violence and child protection concerns;
• Improving data collection and performance measurement to better inform decisions regarding access, equity and effectiveness of support.

There are some common themes across both pieces of work. The first is that effective community engagement with culturally diverse communities requires cultural competence and strategies to address language barriers. The second is that there is a need for workforce development to increase cultural competence and build a more diverse workforce in post-separation services. The Attorney-General’s Department’s investment in scholarships for trainees with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to complete the Vocational Graduate Diploma in Family Dispute Resolution is a significant contribution to building future capacity in this area. There is the potential to expand scholarships to other relevant disciplines (e.g. counselling, contact centre work) in the future. There is also scope to increase the cultural competence of staff across the post-separation services sector – skills development packages are available but there is a significant cost to organisations of providing this training to all front-line staff.

**Key Message 4**
Service providers should be further encouraged to share information about what has or has not worked to improve service responsiveness and access to services for historically under-represented population groups.

**Key Message 5**
There should be continued focus given to increasing workforce diversity and cultural competence in the post-separation services sector that builds the capacity of services for more culturally responsive engagement.

**Community Engagement Across Programs**
Consultation with post-separation service providers in this study has confirmed that community engagement is not and cannot be considered a ‘silod’ activity, applied to a single program or service. Rather, it is a way of building relationships in order to recognise and be in a position to respond to actual local needs and priorities. In the same way that relationship issues are not experienced as distinct from and separate to health, level of income, culture and context, post-separation services are placed within a broader service system that meet a range of needs. For example, Centacare NENW’s ‘Beehive’ program for people who are vulnerable and isolated is not restricted to engagement in the area of post-separation, but is designed to meet a range of group members’ social and emotional needs. Yet through their involvement in Beehive group members are more likely to access support for a range of needs they may face, including family and relationship services.

**Key Message 6**
There is scope for community engagement to be seen and undertaken as a multi-agency, coordinated activity that is resourced across individual services and service types to enhance access to the Family Law System.
6.2 Benefits of Community Engagement

Participants in this project reported significant benefits from community engagement activities. In summary, these include:

1. **Better service access**
   - Service promotion so that community members and other providers know about the service and what it can offer families;
   - Services are integrated, leading to warm and appropriate referrals between agencies/programs/other local services – ‘no wrong numbers, no wrong doors’; and
   - Overcoming barriers to people accessing post-separation services.

2. **Improved service delivery**
   - Services are adapted to the local community, reflecting the diverse needs of specific population groups;
   - More efficient sharing of information and resources leads to an increase in collaboration and innovation, and a decrease in service and resource duplication;
   - Improved capacity to deal with complex or entrenched issues from a strengths-based perspective; and
   - Involvement of specific community groups in service delivery design.

3. **Better family relationships in the local community**
   - Effective prevention and early intervention support structures to reduce conflict between separated parents and ‘normalise’ cooperative parenting;
   - Fewer children placed at risk by inappropriate parenting arrangements;
   - Improved family wellbeing in the community; and
   - More families empowered to come to appropriate post-separation parenting arrangements without going through the courts.

An excellent example of the multiple benefits derived from community engagement is the School Education Project in Wodonga. The project arose from an informal conversation between an FRC staff member and member of the school community about the effect of parental separation on children within the school. Ideas were shared via existing networks and ultimately this resulted in a diverse range of groups collaborating to offer resources to help schools respond appropriately to parental separation. The implementation of the project over time is also likely to result in clearer and warmer pathways for families who will benefit from access to post-separation services.

The ‘Child Focused Dreaming’ DVD, which resulted from local agency and community relationships in Port Augusta, also has multiple benefits. The production of the DVD was highly collaborative, strengthening local relationships, and even recruiting local community members (rather than actors) to play the characters in the film. It uses a contemporary Aboriginal dreaming story as a tool to assist separating parents to make child-focused decisions. Distribution of the DVD to a range of family law and family relationship services in the area has strengthened pathways to post-separation services. It is currently being ‘dubbed’ into Language, including Pitjitjinjara, to provide even wider access.

Despite the benefits identified, community engagement is constrained by resource limitations and a range of factors described below. It is also likely that not all community engagement has been successful or led to clear benefits. More information and support for practitioners working across post-separation service settings could assist in ensuring that scarce resources invested in community engagement are used effectively.

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**Key Message 7**

Resources for service providers could be developed to support and inform the use of community engagement in post-separation family support services, including guidance on practice that is most and least likely to result in service enhancements.
6.3 Driving and Restraining Factors

Throughout this project FRSA invited participants to identify both factors that support or drive community engagement and those that restrain or inhibit community engagement. Factors identified are summarised in the table below.

**Figure 5: Driving and Restraining Factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Restraining factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Culture of engagement’ – often stemming from a leadership passionate about and encouraging of community engagement.</td>
<td>Service demand and long waiting lists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff roles, or components of roles, dedicated to community engagement; formal or informal ‘champions’ within the organisation.</td>
<td>Insufficient time and resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff feeling well supported, proud and respectful of the organisation for which they work; strong internal relationships.</td>
<td>Lack of or loss of a community engagement ‘champion’ or poor staff morale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration of factors that affect people’s ability to engage; focus on the strengths of a group/community.</td>
<td>Workforce issues including staff turnover, difficulty with recruiting qualified or suitable staff, or lack of experience/capacity in supporting Aboriginal staff or staff from different cultural backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being ‘non service-centric’ – a focus on needs of community and mission of agency in meeting those needs rather than the service itself.</td>
<td>Occupational Health and Safety issues when working offsite, e.g. large travel distances, outdoor meeting locations etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services that are locally managed tend to be more amenable to engagement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community engagement that is funded across programs.</td>
<td>Funding contract issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good local relationships, particularly with other service providers and with the family law system, often conducted via local networks &amp; reference groups.</td>
<td>• Inadequate recognition of the work of engagement;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong focus on relationships rather than on problems to be fixed.</td>
<td>• Impact on targets/benchmarks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong local presence and good reputation in community e.g. location in main street; ‘soft entry points’; presence at local events.</td>
<td>• Insufficient funding;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible funding arrangements; good relationships with funding bodies.</td>
<td>• Cuts to funding which have reduced ‘free time’ and increased costs of accessing services;</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding based on population – does not factor in extra time taken to engage in rural/remote areas;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tension between national priorities and local needs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Complexity of certain client groups.</td>
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<td>Competition between agencies, including competitive tendering for contracts; resistance from groups who prefer to work alone.</td>
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The primary driving factor identified was a ‘culture of engagement’, usually driven by key leaders or ‘champions’ in an organisation who are passionate about and encourage community engagement. This leads to a strong emphasis on building good relationships, both internally and externally. Staff who feel well supported tend to be more respectful of the organisation for which they work, strengthening their commitment to the broader organisational mission and vision. In many such cases, staff spend time engaging with the community even when this is not part of their formal position description – although organisations with dedicated community liaison positions tend to have better engagement success.

Success in engaging groups who face access barriers (due to literacy levels, income, disability, age, gender, language, cultural and religious practices, carer responsibilities or access to transport) requires sensitivity to the nature of those barriers, and staff who have the skills and resources to engage accordingly. For example, Centacare NENW staff spoke of the need to ‘keep returning’ to local Aboriginal communities in order to gain the trust of community leaders and begin to work inclusively. This has required a ‘willingness to sit in the dirt and have a yarn’.

The most significant restraining factor identified was the tension between the need for community engagement and meeting high demand for services. Anglicare WA, for example, which has an average waiting list of eight weeks for post-separation services, has had to reprioritise to manage this demand. This has necessitated reduced investment in community engagement activities, despite the fact that these are seen as important. This is not an uncommon challenge. Ideally there would be adequate resources to meet demand and engage with the community, but when this is not the case priorities compete for resources. Community engagement can generate more demand, so in a high demand environment it is not surprising that this activity would become lower priority. Yet maintaining community engagement could serve to reduce demand down the track by providing earlier intervention and more efficient service delivery (e.g. group education on post-separation parenting). It is also an important mechanism for ensuring equity of access across population groups.

**Key Message 8**

For community engagement to be maintained in post-separation family support, strategies to meet demand and address waiting lists, while at the same time maintaining engagement activity, should be identified and agreed between the funding body and service providers.
6.4 Summary of Key Findings

Drawing together the data collected across the activities of this project, the following key findings have emerged as relevant to service providers and program administrators:

**Service Providers**

- High level management, combined with trusted local representatives, is the ideal driver of a culture of engagement.
- Family Law Pathways Networks can be excellent vehicles for collaboration, innovation and information sharing, ultimately improving access to services.
- Well run interagency networks can lead to increased collaboration and warm referrals, while decreasing competition.
- Presence of staff at local events increases community familiarity with services, as does offering organisation facilities/FRC premises for use by others.
- A focus on relationships with people should come before a focus on the organisation. The needs of the local community and of clients should come before those of the organisation—building trust, not empires.
- Passionate, well supported staff who respect the organisation and have good internal relationships will engage much more willingly and effectively.
- Engagement must be long term in nature, and face to face wherever possible. Agencies should expect resistance from some groups and make an appropriate judgment about whether and for how long to persevere.
- Sharing good food helps with relationship building.

**Program Administrators**

- Greater recognition should be given to the importance of community engagement and its long-term nature. It should be seen as ‘mainstream’, operating across the whole organisation and the broader community, rather than the province of specialist staff or specific programs.
- Community engagement positions should ideally be funded across programs to holistically meet the support needs of families and children.
- Family Relationship Centres have potential as a platform for a range of services, not just post-separation services. Building on FRC infrastructure to increase the capacity of the premises would be a cost effective measure.
- Pressure to maintain client loads can be unhelpful and at the cost of good community engagement.
7. Conclusion

FRSA wishes to commend the Attorney-General’s Department on its investment in this project. The research process has been valuable both in recognising the community engagement work currently taking place in the sector, and additionally identifying gaps and areas for future consideration. It has validated the vital role of community engagement in prevention and early intervention as well as encouraging access to services. It has also provided an insight into the practical realities that services face across different geographic, demographic and service environments. It is FRSA’s hope that this report may also prove useful to a diversity of family support agencies as a practical guide to engagement.

Across the case examples, a clear and consistent message was that community engagement requires long term commitment, the development of relationships of trust and respect, and the utilisation of community strengths and skills. Participants also discussed the importance of specific measures to engage those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged or face barriers to participation. Again and again, they reminded us that they can only facilitate community participation successfully when they have adequate time and resources, the ability to maintain long-term contact with a community, and permission to build engagement into every aspect of service planning and delivery. In some cases the barriers to engagement have proved frustrating and disabling.

FRSA hopes this report will be valuable to the Attorney-General’s Department in progressing our shared goal of better, stronger family relationships within diverse local communities, so that fewer children are placed at risk by inappropriate parenting arrangements. FRSA has outlined Key Messages that encourage support for community engagement in the post-separation field and the broader family support arena. FRSA and our membership are both willing and well placed to help progress action in this area.

The FRSA team is very grateful for the time and enthusiasm that all participants gave to this project. The depth and richness of the information provided is due to the significant work of dedicated local service providers and their willingness to share their experiences with us.
8. References


Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2012) *FaHCSIA Online Funding Management System (FOFMS).*


Greet, P. (2005) *80s, 90s and now...Sustainable core values in community engagement from Blantyre to Brisbane.* Paper presented at the International Conference on Engaging Communities.


9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: Online Survey Questions

1. Please tell us about yourself.

2. Which of the following post-separation services are delivered by your organisation?
   - Family Relationship Centre(s)
   - Children’s Contact Service(s)
   - Supporting Children After Separation Program
   - Family Dispute Resolution
   - Regional Family Dispute Resolution
   - Parenting Orders Program
   - Post-separation Cooperative Parenting Program
   - Family Counselling

3. Does your organisation engage with the broader community beyond direct service delivery? (For example, through community liaison, activities, sharing of facilities etc.) If yes, does this engagement happen at the program level or the organisation level?

4. What factors have driven community engagement in your organisation?

5. In your experience, what are the outcomes/benefits derived from successful community engagement?

6. Are there any examples of how community engagement has changed the nature of how services are delivered?

7. What have been the challenges encountered in community engagement?

8. Are there other issues that arise in community engagement? (For example relating to service demand, client complexity, data collection, accountability)

9. What do you think is meant by ‘community engagement’?

10. What do you see as the basic or key principles of community engagement?

11. Are you aware of some examples of successful or innovative community engagement outside of your own organisation?

12. In your opinion are there any specific FSP programs (post-separation or otherwise) that lend themselves particularly well to community engagement and why?

13. In your opinion, are there areas of the wider community, or programs within the community, that are particularly well suited to engagement with FSP providers and why?

14. What do you think are the factors restraining community engagement?

15. In your organisations are there any ideas or examples of proposed community engagement which have not yet been undertaken?

16. How do you think lessons about community engagement can be more widely shared?
9.2 Appendix 2: Field Work Questions

1. How long have you been located in this area?
2. Could you describe the history of community engagement over that period?
3. How would you describe current community engagement at the organisational or program level?
4. Are there particular staff roles/positions set aside for engaging with the community?
5. Has community engagement changed the nature of service delivery?
6. What have been the outcomes/benefits derived from community engagement?
7. Have some community engagement initiatives or service types been more successful than others?
8. Which groups appear to benefit most from engagement? Are there different needs?
9. What have been the challenges or issues encountered in community engagement?
10. What factors have driven community engagement within the organisation?
11. What factors have restrained or prevented community engagement?
12. Are there any additional community engagement activities you would like to undertake and what prevents this?
13. How do you think the lessons about community engagement can be more widely shared?
9.3 Appendix 3: Survey Respondents

Anglicare Resolve NT
Anglicare WA
CatholicCare Melbourne
Centacare Adelaide
Centacare Bathurst
Centacare Bendigo
Centacare Catholic Family Services CDPP
Centacare Geraldton
Centacare Tasmania
Centacare Toowoomba
Centacare New England North West
Centacare Sandhurst
Chermside Family Relationship Centre
Child and Family Services Ballarat
Coffs Harbour Family Relationship Centre
Family Mediation Centre
Foundations Child and Family Support
Gateway Community Health
Gold Coast Children’s Contact Centre
Gold Coast Family Relationship Centre
Interrelate Family Centres
Ipswich Family Relationship Centre
KinWay/Anglicare
Mackay Children’s Contact Service
MacKillop Family Services
Macquarie Legal Centre
Mallee Family Care
Marymead
Port Augusta Family Relationship Centre
Relationships Australia Canberra & Region
Relationships Australia Northern Territory
Relationships Australia NSW
Relationships Australia Queensland
Relationships Australia South Australia
Relationships Australia Tasmania
Relationships Australia Victoria
Ringwood Family Relationship Centre
Sunshine Family Relationship Centre
Unifam Counselling & Mediation
UnitingCare Community
Upper Murray Family Care
Wagga Wagga Family Relationship Centre
Warrnambool Family Relationship Centre