

6 February 2015

The Hon. Joe Hockey MP
Treasurer
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Treasurer

Family and Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) provides the following information, on behalf of member organisations, on budget priorities for the 2015-16 Federal Budget process.

We acknowledge that the Federal Government faces a tight fiscal environment. However, FRSA recommends that funding for the delivery of front-line services under the Families and Communities and Disability, Mental Health and Carers' Programmes be maintained at current levels in real terms. Member organisations (183) are funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD) to deliver family relationship services to approximately 400,000 clients from 1,300 outlets across Australia each year. This submission reflects members' views and information provided to respective government departments and parliamentary inquiries throughout the year namely that, as a minimum,:

1. funding to front-line services under the Department of Social Services' Families and Communities and Disability, Mental Health and Carers Programmes be maintained
2. a fair and consistent approach to indexation be implemented
3. early dispute resolution in child support and family law matters be supported
4. funding for specialised family violence services and family dispute resolution cases involving violence be maintained
5. funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy for Indigenous parenting and family support services be maintained
6. funding to improve access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients to family relationship services and increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff be provided

Figures quoted in this submission are annual amounts for the 2013-14 financial year. We have included the high priority items that require immediate attention as identified at **Attachment A**. Given the tight fiscal environment we have not included lesser priority items or those that involve significant new expenditure. This submission largely calls for a re-instatement of funds that have been withdrawn from front-line services under the guise of programme reforms conducted in 2013-14, to be implemented in 2015. We understand the importance of bringing the Budget back to surplus but believe that this

should not be done at the expense of front line services to Australian families. The recent shift in Government policy on paid parental leave provides an opportunity to review savings decisions proposed, for the 2015-16 financial year, within the DSS portfolio and we request that the items contained in this submission receive priority. These services have been funded by Government for many years, have a long, established history, a proven performance record and provide direct assistance to some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

Funding maintenance of Families and Communities and Disability, Mental Health and Carers Programmes (DSS)

In the 2013-14 financial year, member organisations funded by DSS to deliver a range of activities under the previous Families and Children Programme were required to reapply for funding as part of the DSS reform measures. Consequently, many services that were previously funded no longer satisfied the revised programme guidelines for the Children and Parenting Programme. Specific activities that were targeted include: Kids in Focus (\$1.7M, assisting 1,502 clients), Specialised Family Violence (\$2.4M, assisting 4,576 clients), Community Playgroups (\$1.9M, accessed by 207,781 clients), Family Relationship Services for Humanitarian Entrants (\$0.8M, assisting 1,109 clients) and Communities for Children Direct (\$17.4M, assisting 106,596 clients). Final funding decisions have not yet been publicly released by DSS, although a four month extension was announced to June 2014. Our concern is that funding for four of these activities will cease (Kids in Focus, Specialised Family Violence, Community Playgroups and Family Relationship Services for Humanitarian Entrants) or be significantly reduced (Communities for Children Direct). Funding these activities ensured front line services to some of the most vulnerable members of our community – those experiencing family violence, children of alcohol and drug-affected parents, and humanitarian entrants.

Fair and consistent indexation (DSS, AGD)

In 2013-14, many member organisations were offered five year funding agreements to deliver family relationship and family law services. While multi-year funding agreements provide surety, the lack of a fair, transparent and consistent approach to adjusting annual funding compromises business planning and, in turn, impacts on front line service delivery. In 2013-14, DSS advised that it will pass indexation on to organisations but the amount has not been specified. In previous years it has been low (1.9% (2011-12), 2.1% (2012-13) and 1.6% (2013-14)), The Attorney-General's Department has not committed to passing on any indexation at this stage. We request that the Federal Government adopts a whole-of-Government approach to indexation and that a fair, equitable and transparent process be implemented that keeps pace with the increasing cost of service provision. This issue is particularly pertinent to member organisations as they receive Commonwealth funds from a number of departments.

Promotion of early dispute resolution in child support and family law matters (AGD)

We appeared before the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs' Inquiry into the Child Support Program on Friday 29th August 2014 and provided two submissions to that Inquiry. We recommended that a working group be established to identify system flash points and possible system changes (along with appropriate resourcing) to streamline processes, improve information sharing and increase early dispute resolution. We fully support greater use of family dispute resolution, legally assisted family dispute resolution and legal services to avoid entrenched conflict. We recommended that, as a minimum, AGD continue to fund the Family Relationship Centre legal assistance partnerships program post 30 June 2015 (\$4.2M) and that funding should be made available to further trial and evaluate legally assisted FDR services for complex cases (\$2M). FRSA's submissions to the Inquiry and rationale for these recommendations are at **Attachment B**.

Funding for specialised family violence services and family dispute resolution cases involving violence be maintained (AGD)

We appeared before the Finance and Public Administration References Committee's Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia on Wednesday 15th October 2014 and provided two submissions to that Inquiry. We recommended that, as a minimum, DSS funding for specialised family violence services (\$2.4M) be retained. These services assisted 4,576 clients in 2012-13 of which 11% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and 52% were receiving income support. We also recommended that AGD fund legally assisted and supported family dispute resolution in family violence cases (\$5M). FRSA's submissions to the Inquiry and rationale for these recommendations are at **Attachment C**.

Funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy for Indigenous parenting and family support services be maintained (PM&C)

With the shift of DSS Indigenous Programmes to Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), programme guidelines have been redrafted and member organisations have had to reapply for funding to deliver Indigenous family safety, parenting programmes and playgroups. The Indigenous Advancement Strategy Programme Guidelines focus on community safety, Aboriginal employment, health and school attendance and do not directly refer to family functioning. Members are concerned that these reforms will see an end to the funding of family safety, parenting programs and playgroups. The significant over-representation of Aboriginal women experiencing high levels of domestic violence necessitates immediate action and the continuation of existing services is essential. We request that funding for Communities for Children – Indigenous Parenting Program (\$6.0M), Indigenous Family Safety (\$2.3M), Indigenous Parenting (\$3.9M) and Indigenous Playgroups (\$3.5M) be retained.

Funding to improve access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients to family relationship services

We are currently working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff from member organisations to develop a National Strategic Framework that will increase access of family support services by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. We continue to receive in-kind support from our member organisations with this work but require funding to support a designated policy officer to progress this work. There is currently no capacity within the Indigenous Advancement Strategy to support funding of this nature (\$0.1M).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on our priorities for the 2015-16 Budget.

Yours sincerely



Jackie Brady
Executive Director