



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Aspects of family services

ADELAIDE

Tuesday, 26 November 1996

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Members:

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mr Andrew	Mr Mutch
Mr Barresi	Mr Randall
Mrs Elizabeth Grace	Mr Sinclair
Mr Hatton	Dr Southcott
Mr Kerr	Mr Tony Smith
Mr McClelland	Mr Kelvin Thomson
Mr Melham	

Matters referred to the committee:

To inquire and report on:

the range of community views on the factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown;

those categories of individuals most likely to benefit from programs aimed at preventing marriage and relationship breakdown;

the most effective strategies to address the needs of identified target groups; and

the role of governments in the provisions of these services.

WITNESSES

ALVEY, Mrs Elizabeth Ann, Treasurer/Secretary, Marriage Educators Association of Australia, c/- Anglican Community Services, PO Box 395, North Adelaide, South Australia	529
BUCKLEY, Ms Kay Susan, Co-Executive Officer, National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, 21 Hurtle Square, Adelaide, South Australia 5000	538
FITZPATRICK, Mrs Colleen Astrid, Director, Lutheran Community Care, 309 Prospect Road, Blair Athol, South Australia 5084	520
HARRIS, Dr Roger McLeod, Director, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, South Australia 5032	502
HODGSON, Ms Alice Meredith, Manager, Northern Suburbs Family Resource Centre Inc., 4 Bayer Road, Elizabeth South, South Australia 5112	551
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MADDOX, Mr Wayne Vernon, Manager of Helping Services, Lutheran Community Care, 309 Prospect Road, Blair Athol, South Australia 5084	520
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SIMONS, Ms Michele Anne, Researcher and Lecturer, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, South Australia 5032	502

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AFFAIRS

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Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mrs Grace

Mr Mutch

The committee met at 9.05 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

HARRIS, Dr Roger McLeod, Director, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, South Australia 5032

SIMONS, Ms Michele Anne, Researcher and Lecturer, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, South Australia 5032

CHAIR—These hearings in Adelaide are the committee's seventh day of public hearings. We have had some 150 submissions to date and there are more to come. I thank those here and those who are coming today for their contributions to the work of the committee.

I welcome Ms Simons and Dr Harris. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We have received from you an outline of your proposed submission. I understand that your submission is still forthcoming and we look forward to receiving that in due course. At the outset, please make whatever introductory remarks you would like to make.

Ms Simons—First of all, we would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear. We commend you for the work that you are doing in an area that we think is very important and worthwhile of the attention that is being paid to it. In the outline of our proposed submission, we made a number of points. Perhaps the summary points are the ones that we would like to draw to your attention at the moment.

Firstly, having worked in the field of marriage and relationship education now for a large number of years, we are concerned that, in some cases, there seems to be a lack of conceptual clarity about exactly what marriage and relationship education is. Particularly over the last three to five years, there has been some muddying of the waters in terms of what exactly are meant to be the aims and purposes of marriage and relationship education. Needing to develop clearer understanding about the potentials of benefits of such undertakings is important in considering what should be done, particularly in relation to the government's role.

Secondly, the work that we have done in research at the university, particularly in the last four years, has indicated to us that the notion of identifying target populations for services to be directed at is, we believe, problematic. Our research has shown that, in general, the attitudes and values that are held by people towards marriage and relationship education are not conducive to their participating in it. Therefore, any ideas of promoting or expanding the services need to be seen in the light of people's attitudes and values and the importance that people attach to marriage and relationship education.

The third point that we would like to make is that any attention to the field needs to be seen in the context of where the development of the field is at the moment. Marriage and relationship education programs in general often lack infrastructure and support, and the field has often been characterised by a lack of theoretical underpinnings, poor training opportunities. These, we believe, go to the heart of quality service provision and are issues that need to be addressed, along with the notion of how we might further enhance

the provision of marriage education. It is one of a number of family services but we probably feel most capable of being able to talk about it since it is our area of expertise.

Dr Harris—I would like to add to that and say that we are here as researchers in the field of marriage education over the last four or five years. As Michele said, what we feel is our special contribution here may well be issues coming out of the research that we have done. There are two books, *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* and *Pathways to Marriage*, one produced in 1992 and the other in 1994, which we would like to table and leave with you. They are the sorts of issues where we feel we might have some contribution to make to the committee.

CHAIR—For the benefit of the committee could you provide us with a summary of the major findings of both *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* and *Pathways to Marriage*?

Ms Simons—I will talk about *Love, Sex and Waterskiing*. That was the first piece of major research to be undertaken in the field of marriage and relationship education in Australia. Prior to the completion of that study, there had been some small, single-course focused studies done. This was the first attempt on a national basis to try and get some picture of what was being provided in the area of pre-marriage education in particular. We need to acknowledge that marriage and relationship education is much broader than pre-marriage education, but at the time—and certainly to this point in time—pre-marriage education seems to be the largest area of activity in the field.

Love, Sex and Waterskiing attempted first of all to map the provision of pre-marriage education, to find out where it was being provided and by whom and to get participant couples' reactions to the programs that they attended. It tried to find out how satisfied they were with the services, how helpful they found the content and processes of the courses that they attended and what were some of the outcomes that were achieved. The sorts of outcomes that were achieved were things like couples believed that the courses offered opportunities for them to increase their communication and conflict resolution skills. It gave them positive attitudes to dealing with differences in their future marriages. Couples also talked about the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their partner and to discuss issues that previously had not been considered as part of their preparation leading up to marriage.

Other couples talked about the importance of pre-marriage education in giving them understanding of how their relationship works, an understanding of what marriage is and what is involved in undertaking a commitment to marriage. Two of the more significant findings were that approximately five per cent of couples who attended pre-marriage education programs cancelled or postponed their weddings. While the study was not able to directly attribute that totally to the programs, certainly the comments we received from some of the respondents indicated that the programs were a contributing factor.

The other finding that was particularly important was a replication of a finding that had been done in Canada. We found that couples reported an increasing likelihood of seeking counselling should there be difficulties in their marriage as a result of attending pre-marriage education programs. So it seemed that the benefits of pre-marriage education were not only in the skills, knowledge and understanding it offered at the time, but also in opening up the possibility into their thinking of seeking counselling should problems arise in their marriage. We think that is a fairly significant finding.

What was also significant was that the increase in openness to counselling amongst the men in the sample was very strong. Initially, women had a reasonably high propensity to attend counselling before the course and this increased, but men had a lower propensity to want to attend counselling and this increased markedly over the period of attending a pre-marriage education program. I think that is quite significant in that we need to see pre-marriage education as one of a number of interventional supports and, if it is opening them up to the possibility of saying, 'Perhaps if we need help, we would go to it', I think that is a very positive and important outcome.

Dr Harris—One of the interesting findings, or the key finding, out of that earlier study, I guess, was that there was quite a bit of evidence in different ways that pre-marriage education programs were having some sort of an effect in the eyes of those who attended them. One of the interesting things that came out of that was that if, therefore, they were of some benefit why were more people not attending them? So that really was the catalyst for beginning the second study, which was more about barriers—what were the barriers to pre-marriage education—and plotting the pathways to marriage. I guess the significant finding out of that study was perhaps not unexpected, but it was certainly illuminated for us all, and that was that the key barrier was attitudinal rather than anything else.

Patricia Cross, in the field of adult education, had published a lot of studies on barriers to adult education courses in general. The sort of prevailing framework for analysing barriers was dispositional—by which she meant attitudinal or thereabouts—situational and institutional. That was for adult education in general. It was around that sort of framework that we analysed the sorts of responses we were getting. Quite clearly, the dispositional or attitudinal barriers came out very heavily. In other words, it was intrinsic barriers to attending such courses rather than extrinsic ones that counted.

In trying to explore those attitudinal barriers, we came across a lot of ways of expressing that, such as: 'We do not need it; we are okay. Is it really marriage counselling we are going to and not marriage education?'—there is a good deal of confusion about that, because in the public mind it tends to be counselling—'All of this is very much a private affair; what do I need to go to courses for?' Often from ignorance, there are questions by participants or non-participants about programs, their quality, the professionalism of the educators and all those sorts of issues. There are some about logistics, about cost, about distance to travel, about availability of their programs, about roles of celebrants, friends and family and the attitudes they had—all those sorts of things. There are questions about marketing and about timing. Sometimes the attitude was that going along to a short course just prior to marriage was too little too late. Most do not want their boat rocked at that particular time.

Our chapter 9 in that book on the concept of non-participation was the most important chapter, I think, in all of that. I guess there were four major issues that came through affecting participation. One was the role of the celebrant and what he or she did. The second was views about marriage which the couples and their families and friends held. The third was the kinds of courses that were available or perceived to be available. The fourth was how well these programs are described, promoted and marketed. Generally the sorts of issues that we discussed were around those four themes.

CHAIR—You say:

There needs to be some conceptual clarity injected into the debate about what is marriage and relationship education and clearer understandings developed about the scope and potential benefits that can accrue from the provision of particular services.

Can you elaborate on that?

Ms Simons—First of all, I think that often marriage education is most equated with pre-marriage education because it is the most prevalent type that is around, but I think that people often are not aware of the other types of education for married and family life. The field, I think, and those who are involved in research would strongly promote the notion that marriage education needs to be seen broadly to include things like marriage enrichment and education for marriage across specific life stage events; for example, education to strengthen relationships around the time of the birth of the first child. That is shown to be a very stressful time. There has certainly been research done here in South Australia which indicates that the relationship quality deteriorates markedly through the later stage of the pregnancy and through the first 18 months after the birth of the child. Another life stage would be also around the time adolescents are appearing in the family. It is an incredibly stressful time. So there is the notion, first of all, that the concept needs to include that broader understanding, but also the concept of what is relationship education as distinct from what is marriage education often has not been clearly articulated.

In my understanding, and from what I have read in the literature, marriage education, because it is linked to a particular life stage event, has a very strongly preventative focus. That means that if it is being done well it is very much underpinned by an understanding of what are the factors that contributes to marital breakdown—not relationship breakdown but marital breakdown. So how can we identify the factors that are most amenable to education and therefore educate for those in the courses? There is a lot of good work going on, particularly in relation to pre-marriage education, but often it is done more in hope that something will stick. This course is based on a set of sound theoretical principles that have been identified in the literature and therefore we follow those through in a course.

Relationship education may still carry that preventative focus but it is not targeted towards marriage. It may not be. It may be targeted more broadly to relationship skills which may be communication skills. Sometimes I have the impression in the field that, with relationship and marriage education, the terms have been used synonymously and that strongly preventative focus has perhaps been lost in terms of preventing marital breakdown.

CHAIR—It seems to me that there is a push—‘push’ might be too strong a word but I will use it because I cannot think of another one at the moment—from certain people involved in the field broadly to change the emphasis from marriage education to relationship education and to substitute relationship education for marriage education. As I understand you—and I do not want to put words into your mouth—you are saying that in effect they are two different things and the words should not simply be used synonymously. They are talking about different concepts that have different objectives or aims at their base and therefore will have different programs, if I can use that broadly, resulting from whatever the different objectives or aims are. Is that what you are suggesting?

Ms Simons—Yes. I think we need to be guarded about using the term synonymously. We really need

to go to very much the core of saying: what is the purpose of this program? Is it to prevent marital breakdown? Is it the focus of the participants' marriage in some shape or form, whether they are married or contemplating marriage or moving into marriage? Or is it just general relationship skills that they are seeking perhaps to enhance their quality of life? The two are not separate; they certainly very much overlap.

I guess the fear I have in seeing the two used synonymously is that there is a downplaying of the importance of marriage. People have often said that there is a sense of anti-marriage involved in this, which I am not altogether sure there is. To some degree I think there is evidence to suggest that there is a rising sentiment against marriage. But also there is the importance of not wanting to be exclusive. One of the realities that we are dealing with is that there are increasingly numbers of people, for example, who are cohabiting. The concept of the notion of marriage education is alienating to them. They are not married, they do not wish to come to marriage education programs. So obviously the notion of relationship education may be more acceptable to them. We also know that cohabiting relationships are notoriously unstable. So they are in need of support, particularly where there are children involved. I guess I am saying that we need to be clear about what services are being provided and, as such, if we are on about promoting and enhancing the stability of marriage, that that is different from the general promotion of relationship skills within the population more broadly.

CHAIR—If cohabiting relationships are notoriously unstable, as the research seems to indicate—I think, on the latest ABS statistics, something like 57 per cent of couples who marry cohabit for some period of time before they marry, although, as I recall, the period of knowing each other before cohabiting is very short, being on average a number of months—and if there is a difference between cohabiting and marriage, is there a danger, if we just talk about relationship education, that that difference and the importance of it for the individual couple will be lost?

Ms Simons—Yes, I think it will. The whole issue of trying to get cohabiting couples to come along to some sort of education before there are difficulties is a very fraught area. People often tend to commence cohabitation in private, and it is not until they wish to formalise it, for some reason, that they present for marriage education. In my opinion, the needs of cohabiting couples are very different from the needs of non-cohabiting couples who are presenting for marriage education.

CHAIR—If the change in terminology from 'marriage education' to 'marriage and relationship education' was meant because it seemed more inclusive, I suppose what I am asking is: are there dangers that, in doing that, you actually miss what the key point of it all is about?

Ms Simons—Yes. It is marriage and relationship education, not marriage/relationship. I think there probably needs to be some separation.

CHAIR—Just finally on that, given that there is going to be an evaluation of marriage and relationship education, is that part of the evaluation? Do you understand what is happening with the evaluation?

Ms Simons—At this stage, I do not have much idea of what will happen in the evaluation but I certainly think that, if the evaluation is done well, it should, in fact, inject some clarity; it should, I think, be

looking at what is being offered as relationship education and what is being offered as marriage education; and it should be trying to look separately as well as collectively at what they have to offer to enhance the stability of family life.

CHAIR—It would be useful if, in your written submission, you could address that point and expand on it a bit so that you give us some assistance about the clarity which you are suggesting ought to exist.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—In your comments, Dr Harris, you said that the things that were holding people back from these educational programs were basically intrinsic, and one of them was attitude. We have had a lot of that coming through in the inquiry. It is coming up quite regularly that the community attitude is one of the things that holds people back. There has also been the suggestion that that is an area into which we, as a government, could put funds to help advertise and promote these—whatever we are going to call them—classes, courses or programs. They want us to take it from funding. They want us to add to it so that it is something that we, as a government, can do to help. Would you like to expand on that? Have you any comment to make in that area?

Dr Harris—Yes. We certainly got the impression from our combined research here that minimising external barriers like costs, making sure that there are courses available in each locality and all those sorts of situational-type factors probably would not be greatly effective unless there were some attempt to strike at this dispositional area—the attitudinal area—in some way, to promote the value of these courses and how professional they are, and to make sure that the quality of them is up to what is being promoted.

So, it is certainly an area of importance. As to how we should do it, I am not altogether sure; but in watching soapies and things like that—I do not, but my daughters do—the impression portrayed, if you ever see it, of married life is not a particularly healthy one. So, it starts right back there. There may be programs in schools that could be conducted that would help to create a more positive attitude. There may be more that could be done about marketing the benefits of programs from the various bits of research around Australia that seem to suggest that they do have value.

Just to digress for a moment, one of the interesting things that is possible about this is that, if pre-marriage education programs, even if they are very short, are done very well, that may create a disposition in people a bit further down the track after marriage—five, 10 or 25 years down the track—to go to marriage enrichment or other sorts of marriage enhancing or relationship enhancing programs, if their experience initially had been a good one. We know that from general schooling. We would say that that was the case. Those who have gone and done adult education and continuing education are those who have already got the schooling. It is more for those who already have, in a way, because their attitudes are okay. They are positive towards further education of some sort. The same might be the case here. If it is done well, they are aware that they exist, first of all; and, secondly, they may be more favourably disposed towards attending.

Those are the sorts of things that we were thinking of. It does depend on trying to counteract the impression, as Michele was saying, that marriage is not in a healthy state these days; trying to tell everybody that most people will marry someone—the positive side of it often gets neglected because of the emphasis on the negative—and trying to break down this idea that marriage education is counselling, in fact. Those of us who work in the area are quite aware of the difference; but I do not think most of the public are, from what I

know from talking generally to friends. When I say that I have done research in this area, they come back to me with a question about counselling all the time. I say, 'No, it is not counselling; it is about education. It is the preventive side of things.' So, it is matter of trying to highlight what pre-marriage education, marriage education and marriage enrichment are all about. It is not necessarily for those who have got problems.

In a lot of the quotes in the book, people are saying, 'I never really thought about going to these courses. They are for people with problems. Why should we go?' So, it is a matter of trying to make it seem a natural thing; that, just as we undergo some sort of short course in educational skills training in something—whether it is to do with work or anything else—actually doing something on behalf of a relationship or a marriage might well be a good thing as well. I am not sure that that is deeply embedded in our consciousness in the country. So, in some way, we have got to tackle the roots of it right there.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—The other thing that has been suggested in the marketing is that we attach a voucher to the marriage certificate in the form of \$100, \$150 or something that is redeemable in a time frame of five years or something like that by going to an education-type program. What would be your reaction to something like that?

Dr Harris—I cannot say that I have thought deeply through all of the implications about it. I am just thinking of gynaecologists, pharmacists and accountants. Continuing professional education in general is becoming an in thing in this rapidly changing world. I agree that every now and again all of us need to do some sort of refresher something, and have the evidence to show that we have. Maybe in marriage education it is a good thing, too. I would think that would help to instil that idea that going along to some sort of enrichment activity may be quite a natural thing to do and a good thing for a relationship.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—You also touched, in your preamble this morning, on training opportunities. Again, this is another area we have canvassed and suggested that it is something that we as a government could do: provide money for training, both volunteers and professionals, in marriage education and in relationships education. Would you like to comment on that one?

Ms Simons—Yes. I think the area of training is really important and the notion of training needs to be broadly conceptualised. There needs to be training of professionals in allied areas to the benefits of marriage education.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Could you expand that, please?

Ms Simons—For example, the notion that social workers, teachers and other people are aware that marriage education exists, that relationships education exists. For example, for parents who want to do something to assist their children succeed at school, one of the best things they can do is to have a healthy, strong relationship and have a vibrant family. The work of Dr Moira Eastman has pointed to this strongly over and over again. Looking for ways through the schools to destigmatise marriage education is quite vital.

I actually think schools have a vital role to play, not so much in teaching the children about the importance of learning about marriage, but also as sites for parents to be able to do something. To go back the point of training, I think that professionals who deal with families need to understand the importance of

marriage and relationship education. My experience would show that even marriage counsellors in some instances are not aware of the benefits or there is not that flow of referrals from counselling to marriage education that perhaps one would expect or hope for.

That is one area of training and that really goes to the heart of going to universities and looking at what has been done in the training of these professional people. Sadly, in some instances, marriage is not being promoted fairly or in an evenhanded way in some courses. The detriments of marriage may be promoted more than the benefits of marriage and family life. That goes to that training, but in that broader notion.

Moving closer to home, certainly the training of relationship and marriage educators is absolutely vital to quality service provision. Certainly the government does have a role to play. In fact, the government has been active in supporting the development of national competency standards for marriage and relationship educators and they have just been developed. As for all occupations, these now form the benchmarks for training.

So now that the field has defined what the outcomes of training should be, and what the standards are for performance in the workplace of trainers and educators, mechanisms now need to be put in place to provide that training for the educators, be they volunteers or be they paid. One of the things that is very apparent in the field is that the field usually becomes known by its weakest link. There are always going to be volunteer programs but, if they are of poor quality, it is often those that are talked about in the broader sense rather than the very high quality innovative programs that are going on in some of the funded agencies—and some of the funded church agencies, too.

So there should be mechanisms for using the competency standards that have been developed to provide flexible training approaches, tapping into a lot of the things that are happening to vocational education and training in general so that we have flexible packages available for people to do in the workplace. We should have some system of accreditation where people can have their skills recognised and be assessed by competent people. Then the government is given assurance that when they do fund an agency that the people have been trained to a certain level and they can be assured of a quality service provision. Then the government is given an assurance that, when it does fund an agency, the people have been trained to a certain level and they can be assured of a quality service provision. It is a vital area but all of us would be aware of perhaps some work going on in the field at the moment that is of quite poor quality.

CHAIR—The point was made by one of the witnesses yesterday that the distinction between professional and voluntary is not the distinction that is important; it is the distinction between trained and untrained. It is not whether people do it because they are paid full-time to do it or they do it because they get a sessional fee for doing it, or whether they see that as their vocation in life—whether they are trained or untrained is what the government ought to be worried about, not whether people get paid or not. The government would even have some interest in people not getting paid, I suppose! I mean that genuinely, because I think—I am speaking personally now, not for the committee—voluntary services are important to the community and governments ought to support that and foster it. But yes, there is the other side, the need for training.

Can I just explore that a little bit further. You have been involved in developing the competency standards, which is something that we will probably look at in our report in the context of training and standards, so I would like to have your input on this. The question is what sort of framework is put in place. For example, do we say that there is now a set of national competency standards and, in order for an agency to be funded by government, the educators working in that agency ought to achieve a certain level in those competency standards as a minimum basis? Provided the agency indicated to the funding body that the educators had reached that standard, or they were training to reach that standard—I am trying to be flexible too—within a period of time, then that would be okay. That is one way of doing it.

Another way of doing it would be for the government to recognise membership of some association which itself required certain standards to be met. For example, the Marriage Educators Association are coming along later this morning to speak. Hypothetically, is membership of the Marriage Educators Association, if they have a certain standard in order to be a professional member or whatever you like to call it, the way to do it or is there some other way? I have got a second question when you have answered that. You do not have to have a concluded view—we are just interested in a discussion.

Ms Simons—There are probably merits in both ways. For example, the social workers have an association and people recognise that membership of that association is at a certain standard. They have accredited the university courses and those sorts of things. There is some merit in that. The reality is that, with the large number of volunteer organisations and those sorts of things, the first way may in fact be more attractive in the sense that you are then transferring the maintenance of quality to within the organisation, and that would perhaps be in more in line with some of the total quality management concepts that are being mooted in the field at the moment.

In setting up that framework there would have to be extensive work done to ensure that the agency itself could, in fact, achieve and maintain those standards. That is one of the drawbacks. Also, there would be a long lead time, I imagine, for some agencies to actually get to the standard that would be embedded in the competency standards. That was a comment that we had in developing them. While the field was almost unanimous in support for the set standards, there was a lot of concern raised, ‘How we can actually achieve it? We have got volunteers. This is going to spell the end of volunteerism in the field because they cannot possibly achieve that.’

CHAIR—You mention a long lead time but if we were to say, hypothetically, three years, would that be a reasonable lead time to achieve a certain goal?

Ms Simons—It may well be. Some agencies, I think, will just—

CHAIR—Some will achieve it straight away—

Ms Simons—Yes, but some groups which are more volunteer groups may decide that they just cannot maintain their work. I do not think we are going to stop them from working anyway, but it would take time and maybe three years is not right. It is hard to judge. There are a lot of agencies, I believe, who are already working to that standard, particularly in the funded area. It is probably the unfunded area—

CHAIR—That leads me to the second question. One thing coming through from submissions is that there is a large group of individuals and organisations that are unfunded. If we are interested in trying to promote this nationally, then the concentration solely on the funded agencies is too narrow and part of the role of government should be to support those agencies which are currently unfunded, particularly in trying to raise their standards and provide them with resources and services. Could you comment on that?

Ms Simons—There are a lot of really good programs that are unfunded at the moment, doing very good work. As to how they might be supported without expanding this great bureaucracy, some of the unfunded programs are unfunded by choice because they do not wish to subject themselves to the sorts of restraints that are often put upon people when they get government funding. You probably would have heard—

CHAIR—We had suggestions such as that there ought to be provision of some training facilities that all agencies could call upon, whether they were funded or not. There were suggestions yesterday from a couple of agencies that the government ought to subsidise the marriage education conferences, certainly to the extent of helping people in rural and remote areas to attend when they would not otherwise get that input. It was suggested that there should be some subsidisation of resources and magazines and things like that, again so those people can be assisted. Even though their agency might not be getting a \$20,000 or \$30,000 or \$50,000 grant from the Attorney-General's Department, maybe \$20,000 that went to the field would help a lot of people that do not get any help at the moment.

Ms Simons—Yes, and maybe even looking at some funded agency sponsoring or being able to provide help to unfunded agencies. Perhaps a monitoring or supervision, or things like that, would be the sorts of things that could actually spread that. I know, for example, that under the Catholic Church umbrella structure there are unfunded programs but, for example, the Centacares are often funded. I guess they could be provided to support some of those unfunded programs through quality assurance mechanisms and things like that. In addition to the sponsoring of some of those broader things like access to training and to materials and things like that, that would be probably be of benefit.

Mr MUTCH—I would like to go back to a point you made earlier. You talked about a link between pre-marriage education and seeking help later. You talked also about the notorious unreliability of cohabitation relationships. I was a bit confused about that. I am not sure if you have done any research on that, but I imagine there would be a big difference in terms of the longevity of those relationships. Have you done any research, for instance, on what happens after cohabiting couples have the first child, or after they have been together for two or say three years? Does the stability of those relationships tend to merge then with that of couples that are traditionally married?

Ms Simons—We personally have not done any research but certainly some overseas research is starting to give some results. For example, the work of John Haskey in Britain has shown that the longer couples live together prior to their marriage, the more likely is the break-up of that marriage within five years. It is far higher than for the cohort who do not cohabit prior to marriage.

Mr MUTCH—It is higher?

Ms Simons—The break-up rate for couples who cohabit is higher. So the notion that living together is good preparation for marriage is starting to be questioned. I guess that is what we are saying.

Mr MUTCH—Because of that link between pre-marriage education and seeking counselling later, should we really be looking at the situation of cohabiting couples and maybe targeting them because they do not get that formalised education prior to the formal event of marriage?

Ms Simons—Yes, I certainly think that is important. Currently, we are undertaking some research at the University of South Australia to try to identify the mediating factors that will enhance the ability of a couple who cohabit to transit successfully into marriage. One of the findings of *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* was that some of the courses do not attend to the needs of cohabiting couples all that well. They tend to do one of two things: equate them with single, non-cohabiting couples and therefore deal with issues that they consider to be irrelevant or things that they have dealt with; or equate them with married couples and hence miss out on questioning things like their notion of commitment or undertaking a deeper analysis of what the issues are for them in their relationship. They tend to deal with them in a marriage enrichment, ‘let’s make it better’ sort of mould.

CHAIR—As in, are they deciding to get married or are they kind of drifting into it because they are getting older or do not want to go through the disco scene again or whatever it might be?

Ms Simons—Or it seems like a good idea, yes. Cohabiting couples are one group, along with older couples—which was also identified in *Love, Sex and Waterskiing*—that perhaps are not having their needs met by some current premarital courses. Certainly our research and what we have explored overseas suggest that there are strong issues around notions of commitment and attitudes towards independence and autonomy, and that the way the couple bond is formed through the period of the cohabitation, which is affected by understandings of independence and autonomy. These are really key issues. Special courses that are targeted to meeting the needs of cohabiting couples would be very important.

Mr MUTCH—With certain religious marriages there is a requirement that you attend pre-marriage education classes. Should this also apply in the civil jurisdiction?

Dr Harris—It is a contentious issue, isn’t it? Yes, I agree that in many church organisations that is the case. There is a requirement that they undergo some form of pre-marriage educational activity, which varies a lot. It would be difficult to monitor and police and enforce, I guess, but it would not be a bad idea. I have not thought through the full implications of all of that. In fact, I wonder to what extent it might be a barrier to getting married for the cohabiting couples. If we have to go through a course then we will not bother to get married.

Mr MUTCH—Michael Jackson might have had a few problems.

Dr Harris—That is right. I am not sure whether we have any research available—apart from anecdotal evidence that we have from people saying this—and there has not been a longitudinal study to show the benefits of that sort of thing. Whether making it mandatory for everyone is a good idea or not, I am not sure. It is in Canada, isn’t it?

Ms Simons—In some areas it is. I would be giving guarded support. What would you make mandatory? Would you make a two-hour Saturday afternoon course mandatory, or would you make a more substantive 12-hour weekend course mandatory? Would you make completing a focus inventory or a prepare inventory mandatory? What would you do?

Mr MUTCH—Would the time element be of some interest? It is customary in some countries to publish bans, and that goes over a period of time. It is a bit like going to buy a firearm and requiring a cooling off period.

Ms Simons—Certainly there has been mooted, over the years, a lot of concern about the three-month period for notification of marriage. In the case of civil celebrants, an extension might be good because my experience is that couples will often only appear at the civil celebrant's door with the minimum amount of time to organise it. When they are getting married in churches—because often churches are heavily booked—they can appear a year before, then quickly disappear into the woodwork and materialise again a month before the wedding.

The notion of mandatory pre-marriage education, I think, needs to be given guarded support, for the reasons that Roger mentioned. I think we have to be a little bit clearer about what we hope would be the outcome of that. My understanding is that, if we take the notion that a 12-hour course at the beginning of a marriage is going to be enough to mitigate all of the things that could happen that would precipitate a marital breakdown, that is too simplistic a view. But, if we can say that there are things we can do that are going to increase the likelihood of people wanting to continually work at their marriage and to continually value their relationships throughout their lives, that they see as something that is important and worthwhile to invest in, that shift in attitude is more likely to see longer-term benefits and something to be done to the rate of marital breakdown than any one particular intervention.

The notion is that over the life cycle a couple may use education, mediation and counselling in any combination that encourages them to really work at building a vibrant family life that is going to be of benefit to themselves in terms of their mental, emotional and physical health as well as looking after their children, should there be children in that relationship. If mandatory education at the beginning can contribute in some way to a broader activity, I would certainly say that it should be given guarded support. But what we would make mandatory would be—

Mr MUTCH—That is interesting. There probably has not been any research done on the value of community courses. If you go along and there are another 10 couples there—maybe it is an individual situation too—is there any research on the value of those sorts of training methods or education methods, as opposed to one on one or a couple with an educator personally?

Ms Simons—Certainly some of the people who use inventories like prepare are speaking about the high validity. Prepare is an instrument that is used with premarital couples and it is claimed to have a strong predictive value. If couples score low in four categories, it is an 80 per cent likelihood that their marriage will fail. You need to be guarded about a questionnaire being used as a base for a decision about marriage. There are some people who would promote the individual approach over the more group based approach. I know that there are some innovative agencies within Australia who have actually combined the two

approaches. In my opinion, as an educator, they come closer to the notion of being preventive in focus.

I think that any marriage education program, if you are talking about preventing marital breakdown, needs to include that component of being able to in some way assess the relationship to see what factors are present that are impacting upon that. That often is best done in an individual situation. But, if you are wanting to promote and support change and encourage the development of skills, a group based program is good for that. I know, for example, in Adelaide one agency has a program called focus on marriage, which is a five-week program which combines the use of the focus inventory and individual sessions with couples along with group sessions as well. That has been highly successful in engaging couples in looking at issues. Anecdotally, it certainly has resulted in a number of couples deciding that they need to reconsider their decision to marry. That rate is far in excess of what would be just a normal four-week group program. But there has not been any major research done on that.

Mr MUTCH—If we were to say that this pre-marriage education was mandatory, would you then look at maybe having exceptions to that? Do older couples need education just as much as the 20-year-olds?

Dr Harris—I think they were telling us in that first research that they did, although the sort of pre-marriage education programs that they saw available they were telling us were not the sorts of things that they wanted to do. Michele was raising the point there that even thinking about the difference between pre-marriage education and relationship education is a big thing, but within pre-marriage education itself there is a big difference. I think our study highlighted the need for different sorts of pre-marriage education courses. The typical one was based on the assumption that here we had a couple who were not living together, who were young and getting married for the first time. Many of the people that we surveyed across Australia were, of course, cohabiting or older couples or getting married for the second or third time—

Mr MUTCH—Or the yours, mine and ours syndrome, where they have got kids as well.

Dr Harris—Yes. Therefore, child care became an important situational factor where they said that there is no child care. Even within the pre-marriage education there was a need for different sorts of courses. So, I guess, if it was mandatory, we would need to think about whom it is mandatory for and whether there are exceptions.

Ms Simons—Take people who have been married and are entering into subsequent marriages. In our research, there was one couple who between them were entering their sixth marriage and they were certainly sure that they had no need for any education at all because their previous marriages had totally prepared them. There was this unshakeable faith that marriage is a natural thing that any normal adult can do. It is a very strong attitude to break down. We laugh at it and find it remarkable, but they were insistent.

CHAIR—Samuel Johnson said that marriage was the triumph of hope over experience.

Ms Simons—Marriage holds great hope and potential for people. It is something that they hold very dear to them. I think that sometimes that invasion of bringing the logic into it is very hard for people to take. It is a very delicate area.

Mr MUTCH—This whole area of research seems to me to be a big worry. Maybe we should be specifically looking at that. There are a lot of questions, and perhaps there needs to be greater emphasis on research.

Ms Simons—I certainly think so. I think it is exacerbated to some degree by the fact that a lot of our research base that we draw from is American, and the reality is that in America they do not have marriage education and relationship education in the same way as we do. Australia is probably one of the very few countries that actually publicly fund and support marriage and relationship education. So, a lot of the basis for research in the states is programs specifically set up in colleges, where they then use the undergraduate or the graduate population of students to test programs. The research is not done on the broader populations, or it is done within specific church communities—in the bible belt and that sort of thing.

In lots of ways we are caught betwixt and between. We are using stuff that is very useful. There is increasingly some research being done. Kim Halsford in Queensland is certainly doing some work with Howard Markman's program, which has been found to be highly successful. There are a few small-scale PhD and masters research projects under way that are certainly building up the knowledge. But it is a very slow process. Funding is extremely difficult to get hold of. We do not actually seem to fit. The health people do not want to know us. We are constantly having to argue why marriage education should be a health issue. That does not really wash very well. Therefore, we are left often having to compete for Australian Research Council grants. The reality is that competing for those is—

CHAIR—And, as we understood from yesterday, there is no specific category under ARC grants for this area of endeavour.

Ms Simons—No.

CHAIR—We were also told yesterday—you can comment or otherwise—that the Australian Institute of Family Studies, as an objective appraisal of their research over the last 10 years, does not seem to indicate that this has been a high priority either.

Dr Harris—Marriage education as a priority?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Simons—Or even the whole area of marriage perhaps.

CHAIR—Or even marriage, more broadly.

Ms Simons—Yes. Just on total numbers, if you look at their publications and major research, a lot of it has been done on divorce and settling up and settling down and settling over and whatever.

CHAIR—Rather than settling in.

Ms Simons—Yes. But that is not to discredit them. Their work is useful and it has been good. But I

think that maybe the judgment, as the balance, has perhaps been in favour of one rather than the other.

CHAIR—Some of the Canadian programs linking pre-wedding with post-wedding education are now starting to link in that second stage of post-wedding with birth of the first child education. You spoke earlier about the stresses and pressures around the birth of the first child. Very little of that seems to have been done in Australia. Is it simply because of a lack of resources that those developments have not occurred? People are talking about life cycle changes and you are saying pre-wedding education is important in creating a disposition to do something further. So linking it from one part of a program to another where couples come back, and maybe come back a second time around the birth of the first child, seems to fit into that notion. Is it a resource issue?

Ms Simons—It is a resource issue, and maybe it is also looking at exploring the way marriage education agencies who provide it can perhaps link in with hospitals to antenatal programs. Antenatal programs exist. Many couples go to them. They do not have a relationship education component. When we talked before about the destigmatisation, a lot of couples will naturally go along to these courses. It is looking for opportunities where people would naturally go into situations.

CHAIR—Couples will naturally go to those courses but a generation ago, when I was born, fathers were excluded from the whole birthing process. It might be natural now but it was not natural a generation ago.

Dr Harris—That is a good analogy.

CHAIR—Why did it become natural? Because it became culturally acceptable.

Ms Simons—That is probably an illustration of that and using baby vouchers and things like that to link in to those sorts of things—orientation programs at schools for children starting school, things like that. That is part of changing that culture. I certainly think that one of the best things parents can do for their children is to strengthen their relationship. This is probably a notion that is worth exploring.

CHAIR—On that note, can I thank you very much for coming along today. We look forward to your in-depth submission.

Is it the wish of the committee that the publications *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* and *Pathways to Marriage* be made exhibits to the inquiry? There being no objection, it is so resolved.

[10.06 a.m.]

FITZPATRICK, Mrs Colleen Astrid, Director, Lutheran Community Care, 309 Prospect Road, Blair Athol, South Australia 5084

LOCKWOOD, Mrs Helen Rosalie, Coordinator of Marriage Education Program, Lutheran Community Care, 309 Prospect Road, Blair Athol, South Australia 5084

MADDOX, Mr Wayne Vernon, Manager of Helping Services, Lutheran Community Care, 309 Prospect Road, Blair Athol, South Australia 5084

CHAIR—I welcome you to the inquiry. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We are in receipt of your submission dated the 17 October. Would you like some introductory remarks?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—I would just like to speak briefly. We are an unfunded church based organisation and that is where our expertise lies. We provide marriage education and we provide counselling. We would like to reiterate the fact that the church as an institution is much more accessible than the bank in these days in rural and remote communities. In rural areas the church leaders are often the community leaders and have a very valid role and a very important role within the community. Within our church, and within most Christian churches, families are highly valued. Family life is central to church life, so much so that in our own church we have had to develop a specific ministry to single people who felt excluded by the focus on families within the church.

Also in the wider context of the inquiry, churches provide opportunities for young people to develop leadership skills, to have a sense of belonging and to develop confidence as well as a role within the community that we think is an important and a valid one. We see that within our own church and other churches that we worship in that young people have roles in leading worship in their music. We have an intern program within our church where young people give many hours voluntarily to develop leadership skills and to work within the community. In the church based youth programs the leaders receive training and support. Their skills are valued and they receive a lot of positive feedback.

We believe that churches can nurture and harvest the skills of young people but they can also educate them as well. The role of the churches in strengthening families, we believe, needs to be acknowledged and to be validated by funding. Within the church there is a structure and a culture of volunteerism and that is something that we believe can be used further. It is something that our agency endeavours to use. It is reflected in the marriage education and counselling programs where we rely very extensively on volunteers.

As an organisation we are committed to excellence and so in our use of volunteers, training and ongoing training and supervision are an essential part of the program. If we use volunteers it is not until they have been trained and it is not without supervision that they are used.

I believe that churches have a growing awareness of the need to reach out to the community to meet human needs. It now is an important time to increase the role of churches as caring and as meeting needs within the communities. I think that this year particularly we have seen some tragedies that have affected the world. I think of Port Arthur and also Dunblane where the churches played a really important role in assisting the community to grieve. My vision is that the churches are able to help people to celebrate and to be there in more normal times as well as in the really tragic times.

The community needs education for change and, as we work with people in our relationship education program and in counselling and in the other programs that we offer, we are aware of changes that have occurred over the last generations. They were alluded to, some of them, by the previous witnesses. We see the impact that they have had on families and we believe that families need help to cope with and to accept difference rather than try to highlight it and to say to people, 'You are too different, we cannot get on together,' or 'There is no difference,' which is not true either, but we need to acknowledge and accept difference and to celebrate that.

My final remark is that we believe that there is a lot of potential within churches to strengthen families and we need to acknowledge that and work more with it.

CHAIR—Thank you. Can I take up with you something I was raising with Michele Simons and Roger Harris, and that was something which has been raised with us by quite a number of people, the place of the currently unfunded agencies and the role of government in relation to them. By way of background, have you applied for funding?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—Yes, many times.

CHAIR—And is there any particular reason that you are aware of why you have not received it?

Mr Maddox—I think it is just a matter of a great deal of competition. I do not know whether there are any thoughts about the church undertaking some of these activities, any concerns; I am not sure if there is bias or anything like that. I am not suggesting that, but there are a number of agencies wanting to conduct the same sort of services. There may be an impression that the church will fund these sorts of things, has adequate resources. There may be some myths around that too.

CHAIR—Presumably, given that government funds Centacare and funds Anglican Services, it is not an anti-religious bias. I only asked that by way of background so we can be informed. I do not know what decisions the government will make in the future, but there could remain some agencies that are funded and some that are unfunded, and I suspect that always, even if we increased the number of funded agencies, there would still be some that are unfunded because, particularly in marriage and relationship education, the figures show that about 20 per cent of couples attend a program now. So, even if you doubled the funding and doubled the number of agencies, you are probably only getting 40 or 50 per cent, so we are still going to have some unfunded agencies. I am just interested, from your experience, accepting that as a base for the point of discussion at the moment, what role the government should play in relation to those agencies which are providing services and being funded or otherwise.

Let us accept for the moment you are saying that your educators are trained, supervised and all of that, so there is not necessarily any difference between what they are offering by way of programs and what an agency next door is offering by way of programs except one is funded and one is not. I will assume all that for the purposes of the discussion. Given that, what should be the role of government where because of limited resources it says, 'We cannot fund everybody in the field. We've funded some and we'd like to fund more'? Are there particular things that government can be doing for those agencies that are not directly funded?

Mrs Lockwood—I would say that already so far there has been a great deal of cooperation between agencies, particularly in Adelaide. We have had a great deal of support from the funded agencies in terms of helping us with training and being able to observe courses so that we know what they are doing, sharing of resources and so on. It has been very helpful for us. It would seem to me that if we were given that we will not be funded. The areas that could be done to help will be in the areas of training, which is a very expensive thing to do for a smaller agency with smaller numbers of volunteers. If there could be some way in which training could even be centralised so that there is a funded training program available that all agencies can tap into, that would be a very helpful one.

The other way is resources such as *Threshold*, in that if we continue to get publications through which we can tap into ongoing research and interesting articles about what is happening in other places, that would be very helpful to us as well. So it is those more central things. Also, there should be more funding to MEAA, the Marriage Educators Association of Australia, because we can tap into the training that they provide as well.

CHAIR—So you are saying that some things could be done on more of a collective level, if I can use that expression.

Mrs Lockwood—State level.

CHAIR—Perhaps state by state, which is not necessarily direct funding to any agency but it could help a lot of agencies and organisations that are currently unfunded.

Mrs Lockwood—Yes. Very definitely.

CHAIR—I am not sure whether your agency has this, but for people in more rural and remote areas—the Lutheran church is quite well spread throughout South Australia from my recollection, and even western Victoria is quite a strong Lutheran area—what is provided? I am trying to think of places out of Adelaide. What is provided in Mount Gambier, or what is provided in Keith or Clare?

Mr Maddox—In terms of people first entering marriage, the church attempts to take a three-pronged approach to preparing people. You may have heard this before, but they will use the facility of the prepare program, the instrument to invite people to participate in a questionnaire type of format. They will work with their local pastor. They are invited to begin their preparations for the actual wedding day, for their marriage, on a one-to-one basis. As a third component, they will be invited to participate in courses that are running.

Sometimes pastors may run a course for a few couples in the country area, but the pastors themselves are seeking assistance for external support to say, 'All right, we can do two of those things, but we would like some assistance from you to develop the third.'

CHAIR—For something like the prepare or focus programs, presumably pastors can be trained to facilitate that process, but the group course is different. Do you run courses out of Adelaide? Do you run courses in Murray Bridge or Mount Gambier or wherever?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—Helen has run a weekend course on the Yorke Peninsula and we would respond to invitations to do that if there were a group of people. We encourage our pastors to work ecumenically in the local communities. Also, there is an active group up in the Barossa which is working in the area of marriage education, marriage preparation. Interstate, I am aware that the Lutheran church is promoting the marriage encounter weekends as well.

I have not seen any research, but I know when I was at a gathering recently it was very obvious to see that there were happy couples and I was saying to some people, 'What is it with this place?' because they were people who had much more of a sparkle in their marriage than we are used to seeing in the wider community. They were saying, 'They went to a marriage encounter weekend. They went to marriage encounter, and they went to marriage encounter.' That is something that is promoted quite strongly and it has a very visible effect within the church community there.

Mr Maddox—The Riverland has also invited us to participate up there early next year as well. We have been invited to go back to the Yorke Peninsula again and do some more work on those existing marriages as there are a number in trouble down there.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—You mentioned in passing that there was an ecumenical combination in some of these areas. When you have one of these courses like you have had on the Yorke Peninsula or in the Barossa, do you open it up to the general public? Do you open it up to anybody in the community, or is it only the ones that have been identified within the church community?

Mrs Lockwood—The Yorke Peninsula one was opened up but no-one else took up the challenge. That was very much a pilot for us. We have had quite a few requests that we have not been able to respond to because we just do not have the resources to be running many weekends. I was recently over on Eyre Peninsula and they were saying, 'We don't have a lot of couples that are still on the farms but we would like to have these things available', but we do not have the resources to continue to supply that for them.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—What sort of requests are you getting that you have not got resources for? Weekend programs?

Mrs Lockwood—Most of the time it would have to be weekends there, unless we could develop something longer in which we actually train people who live there to run the six-week courses.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It is one or the other. Perhaps if we could provide funding for training you could train people who would be resident in those areas and be able to cover quite a big area. I am

thinking of the Kadina, Whyalla and Moonta area down there. You could cover quite a bit, couldn't you, if you had a couple of trained people resident down there?

Mrs Lockwood—Wayne works very much with counsellors. He trains volunteer counsellors to be based within a parish so that other areas are covered than just Adelaide.

Mr Maddox—There are two models. We are really looking at training the trainer, so we can have local people or, if we conduct it from Adelaide, then we will do weekends for the sake of efficiency.

Mr MUTCH—What sort of qualifications would you suggest your trainers have? What are the standing requirements?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—In marriage education?

Mr MUTCH—Yes.

Mrs Lockwood—At the moment we have been working on being accredited through the competency standards. We have asked people from other agencies to sit in on courses and to work through the competency standards and give a report, so we are working through peer accreditation with our volunteers at the moment. That is in the process. But in recruiting new volunteers, which we hope we will do next year, we are looking for someone with the background education qualification, some kind of relationship education qualification or something in the social work area. We would ask that they come with something already.

CHAIR—I am not sure whether you were here when I asked the question of Michele Simons and Roger Harris. In terms of standards and training, obviously everybody is interested in there being a standard achieved, people in the field as much as the government providing the funds. I would be interested in your comments about how would be the best way of achieving that short of having some bureaucratic system, which I am personally not in favour of.

Having expressed my view, would it be reasonable, particularly where government is providing funds to agencies, to require that educators working for those agencies meet a certain level of the competency standards or be training to meet them? People have to be training as well. There could also be some encouragement to non-funded agencies to achieve that. Or would it be preferable to have a system whereby if you are an educator in a funded agency, then you have to be a member of some body such as the Marriage Educators Association—just to pick one out—and it gets some funding for training on the basis that if you are a professional member you have met a certain competency standard. There may be other ways. These were just two ideas off the top of my head when the earlier discussion occurred. Do you have any thoughts about either of those approaches or any other for that matter?

Mrs Lockwood—The first one you were talking about—having some standard which is then met within agencies—I think might be better than the other way. I see the association as being more a professional association, but I think that to say you have to meet the standard to join it might defeat the purpose to some extent. It would be more beneficial for it within the agencies for the agencies to reach certain standards than even the non-funded ones. I wonder, without it becoming bureaucratic, whether you

could have certain people accredited to accredit so that, in a sense, you have a number of people who can then observe and accredit in a similar way to the way that we have used—

CHAIR—Could they be accredited, though, within the field? Let me be upfront about what I am trying to avoid. I personally do not think it is the role of government to have people going around the country looking over everybody's shoulder to see whether they have reached a standard, if that can be achieved satisfactorily within the field itself.

If we are prepared, as a matter of accountability, to say you send in an audited report saying that your finances are in order, I do not see why, as a matter of accountability, you cannot simply sign a statement to say that we meet these standards by way of training and competency. Personally, I do not think it is the role of the Attorney-General's Department to have people going around the country looking over everybody's shoulder if you can do it in a much simpler yet accountable way.

Mrs Fitzpatrick—As somebody who is peripheral to the marriage education scene here in South Australia, I see that there is such a high degree of cooperation and collaboration within the sector that I believe that it could be self-regulating, very much so. People know each other; people are able to share with each other and give feedback. We have really appreciated the assistance we had when Helen was being accredited, from Michele particularly.

CHAIR—I suppose you are saying—and do not let me put words in your mouth—that a system of peer review would be adequate?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—Yes, definitely.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I feel there has to be some sort of XYZ or PQR put after your name or after your agency to say that you have reached a competency level. How else do Mr and Mrs Average out there in the street know that you are competent? It seems to me that anyone who has done a course in psychology or a course in social work can hang up their shingle as a marriage counsellor or marriage educator, but you have no way of knowing whether that person has actually worked in that particular area. The more we move around and talk to people, it seems to be an area which needs some sort of specialist education for the counsellors and for the teachers.

Mrs Fitzpatrick—Yes, and some sort of public acknowledgment.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Yes, that is what I mean. What is your opinion there?

Mr Maddox—There is another comment I would like to make on that. I am training a number of volunteers to be involved in the counselling service. I see that that meets a particular need—and this is just a little bit off the track of marriage education, but in the counselling area, particularly with relationship education and counselling. The counsellors meet a need. It seems to bridge a gap between getting the backyard type of counselling from somebody just trying to help out versus somebody who is seen as being a therapist or a psychiatrist or whatever in the area of concern. It seems to bridge that sort of gap where our counsellors are sufficiently trained to be able to listen, reflect and care and, in a very purposeful sort of way,

they do counsel people around their relationship difficulties until they reach a point where they are sufficiently skilled to know and to say, ‘This is as far as I can go. For this particular area of concern I might refer you to somebody who is more expert in this particular area.’

Hence, at Lutheran Community Care, we have nearly two dozen people now—when this last training group is finished—who are scattered around throughout the state, supervised by one person and some sub-supervisors. They can, in their local communities, care and respond to needs without people having to go to Adelaide, having to go to a super professional person with a string of letters after their name, or somebody who is particular skilled in that area.

So we have somebody who is a volunteer in Renmark, for instance, who is able to respond to challenges within relationships. People can go there with that sort of confidence—outside of the church—and go there with the same sort of degree of confidence and expertise, but still not have that qualification in social work, psychology work.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—That is what I mean. It should read something like, ‘Wayne Maddox, volunteer counsellor’, or whatever you want to call them, ‘accredited by’ or ‘has accreditation under’, or something along those lines.

Mr Maddox—That is right.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—That is the way I am understanding it. Is that the way you would like to see it? I do not want to turn them into social workers, or psychologists, or anything, but I think that we have got to have something out there in the community where Mr and Mrs Average can pick up a piece of paper and say, ‘Yes. They are at that level of training, therefore, I am sure they can help me.’

Mr Maddox—Yes. And we have set a standard and not everybody gets through the training course we provide because there are standards to attain.

Mrs Fitzpatrick—That also helps with accountability, as well.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Yes. That is getting a level. I think that it has got to be a national accreditation so that it is throughout the country. That is something that we will look into.

CHAIR—In your view, would the competency standards that have been developed for marriage and relationship education be an appropriate standard?

Mrs Fitzpatrick—Yes.

Mr Maddox—I think so because they are fairly thorough and fairly broad.

Mrs Lockwood—In terms of my own accreditation, going through the process with those standards was very helpful. I did that with Michele and that was, for me, a very helpful thing to do. It covered all areas and gave me the need then to look at what professional development I needed.

CHAIR—Just out of interest, as I understand in the counselling area—leaving aside marriage and relationship education—there are no national standards for marriage counselling, are there? That is up to individual agencies as far as I am aware.

Mr Maddox—There are two things. There is a marriage counsellor association, or something like that, where people can get that sort of standard, I think.

CHAIR—The Australian Association of Marriage and Family Therapists?

Mr Maddox—Something like that. Other agencies employ social workers, psychologists and other people skilled in that area. Relationships Australia run their own training, et cetera, and have their own standard. One of our volunteers has done that course as well. We have our own centre. So in answer to your question, there are varying standards in relation to counsellors, too.

CHAIR—I thank you for coming along this morning and also for your submissions. They were quite useful. Thank you.

[10.49 a.m.]

ALVEY, Mrs Elizabeth Ann, Treasurer/Secretary, Marriage Educators Association of Australia, c/- Anglican Community Services, PO Box 395, North Adelaide, South Australia

MICKAN, Mrs Gillian Margaret, President, Marriage Educators Association of Australia, c/- Anglican Community Services, 18 King William Road, North Adelaide, South Australia 5006

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for coming along. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. We are in receipt of your submission to the inquiry. Would you like to make some introductory remarks?

Mrs Mickan—I just want to emphasise some of the things in our submission. The first would be that relationship education does make a positive difference. This is building on the experience of relationship educators around the nation. Generally when people have been in relationship education—there are various forms of that—they tend to give positive feedback of that experience. But there has now also been some research done—I am referring to Michele Simons's work—about the effect of relationship education on people's skills in relating and their attitudes towards the commitments they are making. I think this strengthens that position, which before was based just on experience.

This would strengthen us in our concern that a greater proportion of couples should be able to access relationship education. At present it is a smallish proportion, about one-fifth, and we are concerned that it should be a much greater proportion, a more accepted part of the general process of forming relationships. Perhaps it should even, eventually, be a standard part of celebrants' ongoing licence requirements that some element of relationship education is introduced into the process. It does make a positive difference.

A major concern of the Marriage Educators Association is that we do not have the means to form standards and to maintain accreditation to those standards. I have mentioned this in the submission, but an example is the attempt to organise competencies for marriage educators. There was a gap of three years between the first consultation with the field and the consultation offering the draft standards to the field for comment. That three-year gap was due very much to the fact that there simply were not funds for getting people together and paying for the time spent on the work.

The second consultation—just to give you the flavour of it—had to be in Adelaide, because that is where the researcher was working. We managed to get in, I think, one person from interstate, to try and increase the pool. That was a great experience for the Adelaide people, but very limiting for the field in developing these standards. That is how this work has been done up to now. What has been done is fine but it is very, very slow and very limited, because of lack of funding.

We are concerned that we have standards, because currently there is much marriage education going on that is not part of the LAFS system. There are actually not standards according to which LAFS marriage educators are accredited either. I will continue speaking about that later, but at present there is nothing. There

are no standard professional courses. There are no departments in universities really looking specifically at relationship education, apart from one in Queensland that is now functioning. We are very much lacking a professional base. I heard your question to the previous group of witnesses about the standards in counselling. As a manager of a counselling service I would comment that we rely very much on the professions of social work and psychology to provide us with people we know are qualified; in relationship education that is much more difficult. We look to the field to provide us with the knowledge of what is acceptable there, and that makes it very difficult.

We would like to be able to set those up and also to be able to continue monitoring them. Our experience in helping people who are in remote areas is that they come, they do a blockbuster course, they are keen about presenting these things, they go back out to their remote areas and do not access any ongoing training or supervision sometimes for 10 or 15 years, and there they are still busy. We are very concerned about the level of help given to those people which could affect the delivery of their services to people as well.

The existing methods of allocating funds on the needs based criteria to many involved with our association do not seem to take account of the capacity to deliver the services. There does not seem to be enough notice taken of whether an agency actually has the record or proven capacity to deliver the services. We feel that might be able to be addressed through professional standards so we can say, 'We have somebody here who can do these things.' We cannot do that at present.

In our submission we talked about support for the magazine that most marriage educators read, which is *Threshold*; for the professional association, which we are—there are others as well, but we are the marriage educators of Australia; and also for the national conference that we have jointly with other marriage educators, which is a very expensive exercise so that only those who are funded can go. I started in this field in a totally unfunded capacity. My funded friends got together and paid for me to go to my first conference. I was absolutely astonished—I had thought I was on my own, and I realised there were heaps of other people who were thinking, working and had experience of circumstances very close to my own. So, from my personal experience, I know the importance of those conferences, but also how expensive it is to get there. I am making a plea for the better delivery of these services because I think they are important, but at present we really do not have the funds to do things properly.

I also want to make the point that a lot of marriage and relationship education is not funded. There are many volunteers and community groups, as you would know. These are very diverse; they meet the needs of their own particular, sometimes quite small group. But they are definitely not all represented by the funded programs. You may know that Family Services Australia have had to put their affiliate membership fees up to above \$200, I think. That is something that is really beyond the budget of a small community group that can really just pay for tea and coffee, which is what many of these groups concerned with relationship education are. Our association is very concerned that we represent these people, bring them in, help educate and support them, and that is why we are concerned with professional support because they are not part of the normal funding system.

CHAIR—Thank you. A lot of what you are saying is on a common theme with what we heard from others this morning, so I will not necessarily repeat all of that, but just explore some of it. There is clearly

evidence that there needs to be a standard and there needs to be a certain level of training provided. You may have been there when I was speaking and discussing this with the previous witnesses. Do you believe that the competency standards that have been established now are an appropriate standard which people in the field, whether they are paid or volunteer or sessional or full time, should be encouraged to meet as marriage educators?

Mrs Mickan—They are functional; I guess they will be refined. But, yes, I think they are functional because they are set at various different levels, from what the expectations might be for somebody who does not have the facilities to administer everything properly to the various standards of how a properly administrated agency would function. It would have to be accepted that many people currently offering relationship education could not meet those standards, but those standards might be something towards which they would aim.

CHAIR—Can I break that down then? I am assuming for the purpose of discussion that there will always be unfunded agencies, either because there will not be enough government funding to go around or because, even if you double the funding and double the number of couples, you are still only getting 40 to 50 per cent turning up, so you are still a long way short. I am just trying to be realistic: in the foreseeable future there will be unfunded agencies in existence.

Taking the funded agencies first, where they are receiving direct funds from the Attorney-General's Department: would it be reasonable as a requirement for the funding of those agencies that the marriage educators that they utilise meet a certain level of competency standards, or if they do not, that they are training and that they meet them within a certain period of time. Would that be a reasonable requirement?

Mrs Mickan—That is something that we would want to see happen. If it were to happen, we would have to have transition possibilities because at present things have not been set up in a way that would cover that.

CHAIR—But I was saying that within three years, or something like that, they meet it. Would that be—

Mrs Mickan—Three years if the capacity to meet it is provided.

CHAIR—Yes, I understand that. I will come back to the capacity in a minute.

Mrs Mickan—We are talking about already funded agencies there.

CHAIR—Given that there is a great deal of education provided by unfunded agencies, and, as we heard earlier, there is not necessarily any difference in quality between those that are funded and unfunded, you could have two agencies side by side, each of similar quality but, just by historical accident or by the fact that there is a certain amount of funds to go around in the tender process, one gets it and the other one does not. Accepting that then, presumably we would also want to encourage the same standards in the unfunded agencies. Have you any suggestions about how we do that, given that you do not have the leverage of funding to achieve it?

Mrs Mickan—My experience in the field currently is that there is immense enthusiasm among the people working in it, many of whom are voluntary, or pretty well voluntary. They are qualified people who are working for much less, to absorb the training opportunities and the supervision opportunities. In Adelaide we have organised these things informally among ourselves. Marriage educators have been enthusiastic to take this up. It has not been at agency level so much. It has been the professional pride of the educators who are concerned about what they are delivering. So, I think there would be enthusiasm in that way. I would see it as part of the work of this organisation to encourage that and make it possible.

I would like to go back to the previous question. That was a query raised about the capacity of tertiary institutions to run courses. Three years—I do not know how that would go. I do not know enough about organising tertiary courses. We probably would want something along those lines to be able to implement those standards, and that might be a delay.

CHAIR—So, it is a question of timing, but the principle is not in contention?

Mrs Mickan—No.

CHAIR—If, for example, we were to recommend that the government provide some funds for training which are not earmarked for service delivery in particular agencies—and the evidence from the agencies so far is that all their money from the Attorney-General's Department plus a great deal more goes to service delivery, so there is no excess money to play around with—

Mrs Mickan—That is right.

CHAIR—If we were to say to the government, 'What you should be doing is providing a bucket of money specifically earmarked for training, not directed to a particular agency, but directed to a region, state or area,' would an association like yours be one which would be capable, if you had that resource, of implementing training programs, say, on a state-by-state basis? I am trying to think of how you do it without giving it to a particular agency.

Mrs Mickan—Our association is extremely young but it builds on AAME, which was the organisation before it. Even in the couple of years that the Marriage Educators Association has existed we have run state training events. The feedback we get from them is that they are extremely worth while and an important experience for the educators who come. I think that could be built on, and, at a national level, conferences and also the provision of newsletters and magazines, the written material. They all fit together to make the association able to support standards.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mrs Alvey—I think the organisation, in its membership, covers many people who are skilled to contribute to that. What is stopping that coming together in many of the areas that we are working in at the moment is the ability to get together, to have the time release from agency work to get to this broader issue.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—In your submission you mentioned things like videos, CD-ROMs and

correspondence courses. Would you see that as an alternative or as a supplement to training programs?

Mrs Mickan—I would see that as a supplement, particularly in Western Australia. The people in the association have been developing those kinds of ways of reaching the people who are further away; but also coming together, particularly for the initial picking up of the ideas and approaches and making the connections, has been very important.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—You mentioned access to training and continuing education in rural and remote areas. So, you see these as a way of helping those sorts of people keep their skills up to the mark?

Mrs Mickan—I think they are very important. I just heard yesterday that a very experienced educator in Sydney has been asked to go to Darwin for a fortnight. At a conference recently we met Darwin people, who are just so isolated. There is not a sufficient base there to build on. They do not have enough people who are skilled in enough areas. So, Carmel is going to Darwin for a fortnight, scratching around everywhere to find some way of paying for this. That is a very expensive trip. She would normally help—when she came to see us, there was personal money that helped along the way. We are a funded agency, but to go to Darwin for a fortnight, how do you do this? That is one of the big things stopping her, and yet everything is organised. When she gets there, people want to meet her and want to work with her and have ongoing programs that the visit is part of, but it is inhibited.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It makes it very difficult. The other thing that we have been talking about this morning is accreditation of counsellors, trainers and educators and that sort of thing. Do you think there should be an accreditation type recognition for agencies?

Mrs Mickan—I am speaking on behalf of the Marriage Educators Association. I guess we have been concentrating on accrediting the educators. I actually do feel, as part of an agency that gets funding under LAFS, some dissatisfaction with the process according to which the quality of the agencies is assessed. I understand there is to be some change in that, that there is emphasis on quality assurance. It is going to be addressed. It is certainly a very severe lack at present.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—And you think it is something we should be looking at?

Mrs Mickan—It is something that needs looking at. To some extent I think it may be being addressed, but how effective that will be and how long it will take, at present the frustration is that in a small place you know the capacity of other agencies to deliver and you know that they are going to have to poach educators from you to be able to fulfil the grant that they have received, and there is immense frustration in that. I wonder if the quality assurance measures that are proposed, and I think are under way already, in the department will be sufficient to address that. Certainly, being able to assess the quality of the service delivery of that agency needs to be part of deciding who should be allocated the funds to deliver programs.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Thank you.

CHAIR—Is that a problem with this new needs based funding approach? It seems to me—but, again, I do not want to put words in your mouth—that there was a decision to identify geographic areas and say,

‘We need to put services in there,’ call for tenders and whoever put their hands up, someone was selected out of that without looking at whether or not other agencies that may have had a metropolitan coverage or even a state coverage could have served that area.

Mrs Mickan—The difficulty with the process from the user’s end is one that we do not consult together because we are tendering against each other.

CHAIR—You are in competition.

Mrs Mickan—We consult together very well in our experience, but because we are in competition, we did not do that. The other is that there did not seem to be an assessment of who was already delivering services. Just a couple of weeks ago the department asked us to send in a list of where we were delivering services. That is just a list of centres, which does not seem quite an adequate basis for working out what exactly is happening from those centres. So yes, it is very much a problem.

CHAIR—I suppose I am asking now in relation to your agencies, but do you know the basis on which the needs based funding operates?

Mrs Mickan—No. Speaking now not from the Marriage Educators Association but as somebody tendering from an agency, which is an Anglican Community Services agency, I actually endeavoured to find out the criteria and found that I was unable to do that, which I experienced as quite illogical. The criteria are around certain areas—they would tell us that. I understand they are rating points according to various ways of meeting the criteria, so the next obvious question is how those points are allocated, and that information is not available. So the logic of the process just does not seem to be there—or it is not available to the people tendering.

CHAIR—Is it a question that it is not available, as in it does not exist, or it is not available to those who ask?

Mrs Mickan—I would not know the answer to that question. I have been frustrated in my attempt to find the answer. The answer that the department gives is that it would be unfair because then people would write tenders specifically to meet the criteria. My question to that is, if you have criteria, surely you are trying to shape the services? So not telling people what they are seems to be defeating the purpose. I am puzzled by that.

Mr MUTCH—I wanted to look at the area of cohabitation and relationships. Obviously, you have a great emphasis on marriage but, from some of the evidence we have heard, there is a huge field out there of people who are cohabiting who might wish to continue in that type of relationship rather than marriage. Would you be able to gear up to address that target audience who seem to need counselling or education as much as anyone?

Mrs Mickan—Elizabeth, you will have something to say on this, I am sure. I am not even sure that we need a lot of gearing up. There was a very interesting debate when this association was formed, just over a year ago, as to whether it should actually be named Marriage Educators Association of Australia or

Relationship Educators Association of Australia. The emphasis on marriage education prevailed for a variety of reasons, and they were good ones. But the capacity to deliver relationship education in a much broader way is certainly there, and it is almost a matter of marketing differently rather than delivering the service very much differently.

Mrs Alvey—I think this links in with training, the need for some recognised training, because more and more of our couples in a church based agency and across the board are already cohabiting couples and mature thinking couples. For that reason, whereas some time ago it was sufficient for people to be involved in this who had experience of marriage relationships themselves, I think the whole program is becoming a much more sophisticated one. There is this confusion about speaking from the Marriage Educators Association and from speaking from an agency point of view, but we have chosen to call our course now ‘Commitment: a decision to marry’, recognising that many couples are already in that cohabiting state.

Mrs Mickan—I have a quick apology: I was meant to introduce the handouts to you.

CHAIR—That is all right; do that now.

Mrs Mickan—We know there has been some talk about vouchers so we just wanted you to see an example of something from the agency that we work in of how a voucher might work.

CHAIR—What is your experience of the voucher?

Mrs Alvey—It is very new to the extent that the pamphlets have only recently been printed, and we are right at the very beginning of the promotion. But we plan to promote it amongst couples, amongst parents of couples preparing for marriage to purchase the voucher as a gift.

Mrs Mickan—The direct answer is that we launched it six months ago and have not had one request.

Mr MUTCH—Do you have any courses on how to cope with the first child?

Mrs Mickan—We actually do run courses at various stages but, once again, demand is extremely low.

Mr MUTCH—There you are, you can come to Adelaide.

Mrs Mickan—We have been creative about that. We have now decided that, as people come in with their particular difficulties, framed in the way they would, we will get them together in smaller groups because if we advertise about difficulties with the first child, we get two people wanting to come. It is not viable.

Mr MUTCH—Do you feel that courses that mix the individual approach to group sessions have a beneficial effect? Some men perhaps would come along and say, ‘Hey, I am not the only one with these feelings,’ and it would make them more amenable to counselling later on if they need it.

Mrs Alvey—I am not quite clear about your question.

Mr MUTCH—In terms of your courses, do you find that a mixture of having group sessions but also having personalised sessions with the couples makes for an ideal type of course?

Mrs Alvey—That is what I wanted to clarify. At this stage we have not the experience of having individualised sessions in combination with group sessions. At this stage we run either/or sessions so the choice is with the couple of how they wish to do their preparation.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—How have you been promoting this? Where have these brochures been put? Are they with your celebrants?

Mrs Alvey—At this stage we have had no response from civil celebrants. We have had interest through our agency with Anglican celebrants. As we have pointed out, the marketing is very new but we have plans for putting it into places such as bridal shops, giving it to groups where parents of couples meet—to be looking at the generation above showing their recognition of the importance of it—and also promoting it at the end of courses where couples have themselves had a good experience of marriage preparation and are looking at it as an idea to encourage their friends to attend.

Mrs Mickan—They tend to say things like, ‘This ought to be compulsory for everybody’ in their evaluations of the courses. Our thought is that if they, in their enthusiasm, go and thrust a few of those around to people then that might be a good marketing device.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your submission and also for coming along and discussing it with us this morning. I have as a motion that we accept as exhibits the brochures *An engagement present*, the Marriage Educators Association of Australia *Working together for marriage educators*, the Anglican Community Services *Caring about marriage and families* and a copy of a Marriage Preparation voucher. There being no objection, it is so resolved.

[11.20 a.m.]

BUCKLEY, Ms Kay Susan, Co-Executive Officer, National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, 21 Hurtle Square, Adelaide, South Australia 5000

McINNES, Ms Elspeth Margaret, Co-Executive Officer, National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, 21 Hurtle Square, Adelaide, South Australia 5000

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

We are in receipt of your submission to the inquiry. Would you like to make some introductory remarks?

Ms Buckley—Yes, I would like to introduce our service to you very briefly. The National Council for Single Mothers and Their Children was started almost 25 years ago by a group of women who gave birth to a child before they were married to the child's father or without being married to the child's father. The group has been based in every state in Australia and it has a strong focus on self-help. Over that 25-year period, the council has grown and matured, and now takes in women, and men also, who are sole parents. That, I guess, takes in about 80 per cent of the people who find themselves in a sole parenting situation. It is usually because of the breakdown of a relationship, the death of a spouse or the breakdown of a de facto relationship.

The national council is auspiced by the SPARK Resource Centre, which is a sole parents resource centre based in Adelaide. I should say that the national council is a moveable feast. It moves around Australia, and over the 25-year time frame many states in Australia have held the council. South Australia holds it at present.

To get back to the SPARK Resource Centre, we are particularly well placed. The SPARK Resource Centre is, as I said, a sole parent agency. It offers counselling, relationship education and parenting classes for male and female sole parents. We are able to get a very ground-up focus when we are researching issues, looking at issues and advocating for single parent and sole parent issues, and we are able to present that to many levels of government and society in the community.

CHAIR—I want to ask you some questions about the sole parent population. I was reading some statistics on the way over this morning which indicated that the number of children born out of wedlock now is about one in four. They were 1994 statistics. I think there were 66,000 born out of wedlock and 191,000 born in wedlock. We also know that the number of teenage confinements is quite small, compared even to what it was 25 years ago when the council was started. But my recollection of the statistics is that about 88 per cent of those were out of wedlock, which I suppose you would expect to be the case. My question is: have you done any research about the break-up of that population? The number of children born out of wedlock has increased from five per cent at the end of the Second World War to 25 per cent now, in round figures. So, it has been a marked increase. Yet, the popular perception is that they are all young teenagers,

which is not true. So what is the make-up of it? Can you tell me?

Ms McInnes—What you have to remember when you look at the statistic ‘born out of wedlock’ is that it is an artefact of definitions; that is, if the couple are not legally married at the time they give birth, even if they are living in a stable long-term relationship, it will be defined as a birth out of wedlock. That constitutes the majority of births out of wedlock. It is an artefact of the increase in de facto unions.

CHAIR—Is there some reference to that that you could provide us with? If we are talking about it, I would like to actually be able to go back and say, ‘This is what it is.’

Ms McInnes—The Australian Institute of Family Studies has got those statistics. I believe there is an ABS publication, particularly the families research that was published in 1994 to do with the Year of the Family. It actually does go into a breakdown of those statistics of the changes in the number of children born out of wedlock. But what we are seeing, inside that, is an increase in the popularity of de facto unions. So, yes, there is a proportion of women who are having children without being in a relationship at all; there are those who are in a relationship which breaks down during the pregnancy or shortly after the birth; and there are those who have lived and continue to live together. Those women will still be categorised as having a child out of wedlock.

CHAIR—I am just saying that it would be very useful for us to be able to actually break those figures down into those three categories that you have identified.

Ms McInnes—They are broken down, as I say, in *Patterns of Family Formation* or *Demographics of Family Formation* published, I think, by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Certainly the Australian Institute of Family Studies would also have that breakdown at their fingertips.

CHAIR—We will try to pursue that. You made mention of relationship education programs that you conduct. Can you elaborate on what is involved with that?

Ms Buckley—Yes. About 65 to 70 per cent of the women who walk through—and I will speak specifically—SPARK resource centre’s doors have been involved in a domestically violent relationship, and that is mums and their kids. We find that the best mode of first contact is to start an examination of relationships through a fairly long course of counselling and group work. The group program that SPARK has developed is being developed into a workbook and booklet now; we are just looking for some money to publish it. It is a 13-week course. It is broken up into six weeks and seven weeks—I think that is it—with a slight break in the middle and it is very successful.

Ms McInnes—It is basically aimed at getting women who have lived in domestically violent situations, or men although they are pretty rare in that instance, to look at how their lives have been shaped by events in their childhoods and their maturing years and the partnerships they have formed, to look at the kind of beliefs and the kinds of practices that have developed along with that and to look at what they need in the now. In a sense, it is about coming to terms with past griefs, examining and re-identifying what they need for themselves and revaluing themselves and then looking forward at a future that does not include battery or danger to their children.

It is around, I suppose, a premise that people cannot value others until they relearn how to value themselves. They have learned not to value themselves through often a lifetime of being abused, without safety.

CHAIR—A general psychological theory which has a great deal of currency these days, I suppose, is that one's family of origin determines one's relationships. If you agree with that, is that also true of relationships in which violence occurs? Is the cause often bedded in the relationship with parents in the first place?

Ms McInnes—It can be. Another context of the way I am talking to you is I have been doing a PhD over some eight or nine years on sole parents, and looking at precisely these sorts of issues as violence came to figure very significantly in sole parent lives. There is no question that the research shows that if you have had violent events in your childhood you are at elevated risk. That is a very disempowering presumption of a teleological nature. It is very disempowering to say, 'Well, you were battered then so you are going to,' and it does not follow nearly as truly as that. There are many kinds of things that can intervene: a kindly grandmother, a terrific schoolteacher, some therapy, a nervous breakdown and resultant re-examination. It is a very contingent process. There are a lot of things that can be done to alleviate the kind of impact of a childhood of violence.

If nothing is done, if that person simply stays as a child and grows in a situation where they are constantly exposed to violence, and they have no avenues to counter that, there is a strong likelihood that they will enter into a similarly violent relationship. When, and if, that relationship breaks down, as it possibly will because there are at least facilities for women to escape, again, unless some work is done around that person revaluing themselves and recovering from the trauma against them, they do not have the resources often to extend the nurturance that they have never had to their children. They have to find a way to recover a sense of valuing the self and ways to care about others. That is often very difficult, particularly where in a sense a woman's value is bound up in belonging to some fellow. They quite often recognise fellows who are like their father as the sort of fellow that they might take up with.

So it nothing as hard and fast as 'because this, then that.' But overwhelmingly research shows that you are at elevated risk of a whole series of subsequent life events and coping strategies to do with those life events. We find some common sequelae of experience of violence. It is linked to post-traumatic stress disorder. There are addictions, disorganised behaviour, aggressive behaviour, inability to protect themselves, feeling it is always hopeless—they will always get got, as it were—and high risk taking behaviour. That extends also to their children. So they often feel they cannot protect their children; they are subject to external influences. They are some of them.

We find the interventions that SPARK does, which focus on empowerment and revaluing and self-valuing and working out non-violent ways of dealing with child rearing, to be really effective. We do have a rule at SPARK- no hitting. If I wanted to change the world in terms of relationship breakdown, I would have legislation in Australia that said, 'Hitting children is an assault.' Currently our laws say that I cannot hit you, it would be criminal, but you can hit a tiny little kiddie and what we will go to court to determine is: was it reasonable for that big person to hit that little kid?

The arguments against that will be, ‘We have got to stop them going on roads.’ You could always just hold on to them or be there and supervise them. There are other methods, we find, and we consistently find a great deal of success. Once you break the boundaries that it is okay to hit kiddies, then you are arguing about how much you should hit them—not should you be hitting them at all.

CHAIR—Your educational intervention is post-crisis, largely. Can I just come back a step? What can we do educationally, pre-crises occurring, or even pre-relationships forming? I understand what you are saying. You can deal with what you are presented with, and that is important, and try to give people skills and a sense of self-worth and all of that so as not to fall into that trap again, if I can put it that way. Can we do something before that which is preventive in nature?

Ms McInnes—In the submission, I raise the issues of education via school process. Initially I was thinking of senior school students but really it comes through right from day one that we need to be in there with children around: how do you settle a dispute? How do you care for others? If children have a nurturing home where people do not hit each other, they are going to get some skills around that. If they do not have access to those opportunities, then there is really no avenue. The single other avenue that children engage with, apart from the family as an institution, is school, and we know that schools have a tremendous influence on children’s lives.

CHAIR—And television.

Ms McInnes—Television has to a certain extent, but also they can watch *Rambo* and they do not necessarily go out and ‘Rambo’. Why does one kid go like Rambo and another not? Television is an influence but it is the real, experienced relationships that tend to make a difference. When we say to a kid, ‘Don’t do as I do, do as I say,’ what you are looking at and what you are seeing are representations of things happening. That may more or less impact, depending on who is sitting there and how they are taking that up. What influences how they take up the messages on television? If we have a diet—and we do have a diet—of woman-killing, explosions and blokes with big guns, why is every child not like this? And they are not.

So, we cannot unproblematically take it back simply to media representations. It has also to be in children’s lived experience. Children see over and over again that an adult says, ‘You must do it like this,’ and then the adult goes off and does exactly the opposite. What the child learns is about social lying, about social dissembling and about power. You have the power to do exactly what you want, but you will make me do what you want. So, they become alienated from themselves, in a sense. We need to restore, I believe, some honesty in relationships that are about valuing people truly. I do not see that, socially, we do that on a wide scale basis. We are full of social lying to children and inappropriate power of expression over them.

I would come back to school as very important and formative and a place where nurturing relationships can be set up. But, of course, if a kid has come in with severe problems, they are going to need some space to unlearn. The space of school counsellors, the space of life education, needs to start very young and be very available in all schools, because that is the place where children can work out, away from the influence of their parents—or, ideally, in partnership with the influence of their parents—ways of being in the world that are positive.

Mr MUTCH—You are obviously only talking about where those rules are hypocritical. Obviously, there are many cases where the rule for daddy, who can drink a glass of wine, is not a rule for the child.

Ms McInnes—Yes, but there are explanations. I tell my children that alcohol is a poison for small children's bodies. They say, 'Don't give me the poison.' It is quite true. It is a poison. It is a toxic substance. Then, again, I have to model responsibility. If I get drunk and fall about on it, then obviously it is not a substance that I should have as much of as I like. I think, in honesty, when we say, 'Do not hit,' and we go and hit mum or, 'Always tell the truth,' and then we tell a lie, there are a thousand and one ways that adults are dishonest with children.

Ms Buckley—Could I come back to schools and models of conflict resolution as well. I think it is quite important that we start teaching children how to do this at a very young age. Kids of five and six can learn how to resolve conflict through particular strategies. We have mentioned this in our submission, but I would like to emphasise it. I am a parent educator in another life, but I have also noticed that children who know how to resolve conflict model it for their parents. They go home and they teach their parents how to do it too. It is very interesting to watch.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—You teach the children in school to control anger; you teach them conflict resolution and caring for others; they go home and they have got a dad that does not seem to have a caring bone in his body—but that is only an appearance—and they start to model these things within the home by saying, 'You should not do this.' I am not knocking what you are doing in the schools, because I think it is essential, but I also see a conflict there in the household where you have got that type of thing, where you have got the parents that are prepared to accept what is happening at school. Not everybody is going to be like that, but there will be households where there will be—

Ms Buckley—Without getting down to the nitty-gritty of how one resolves conflict, I will just say that the terminology is interesting. A child who is good at resolving conflict will not go home to its parent and say 'you shouldn't'. They will work out a different way of doing that. Kids are actually very creative about doing that.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—They know how to handle their parents.

Ms Buckley—That is right. Parents who can watch another parent model appropriate behaviour and get really good results from it will also then join in and do the same thing. It is important to remember that parents do not go out of their way to blow it in their parenting. They do blow it but they get there from all sorts of different directions. No-one ever sits down and says at the outset, 'I'm going to make a total mess of this.' So it is about introducing new skills.

CHAIR—To pick up on schools, obviously it varies—maybe even from school to school, let alone from state to state. What is being done in schools? Is there anything much being done?

Ms Buckley—There is a lot of work being done in South Australia on bullying, which is interesting, and there is a fair amount of national interest in that. There are two researchers down here, Phillip Slee and Professor Ken Rigby from the University of South Australia, who have put together a schools program that

works in South Australian government schools. I also know that the Catholic Education Office has a program against bullying. Both of those programs contain the kind of skills that I am speaking about, in negotiating a way to resolve conflict.

Ms McInnes—There are also counsellors in schools but the training and accreditation of counsellors is fairly variable, particularly in times of reductions in staffing in education departments.

CHAIR—I will ask you then about the other stage, where people—mostly women, I suppose—come to the post-crisis education. Do most of those go back into relationships, whether with the same person or with another person? Is that more often than not the case? If so, are you able to measure the success of the outcome of the program that they participate in?

Ms Buckley—That is difficult to judge. What the SPARK programs attempt to do is to interrupt the cycle of repartnering inappropriately. I guess a measure of success would be if that person, in fact, did not repartner for a certain amount of time—if someone had, perhaps, been having serial relationships over a couple of years and they then did not. But that is actually private information between a counsellor and a client and I do not have the knowledge of that to respond appropriately or adequately.

I guess a measure of whether the programs are successful is a measure of wellbeing and a measure of good outcomes. The kind of value we would put on good outcomes is whether women and children are safe in their subsequent partnerships, whether they are happy, whether they are healthy, whether they are growing and are nurturing each other. We see a lot of positive outcomes like that.

CHAIR—Is there some way we can measure that? I am not doubting your anecdotal witness that there are good outcomes. You might argue that that is sufficient, but generally when governments are looking at funding programs they want to be able to measure some sort of outcome. Maybe sometimes that is taken too far, nonetheless that is how it is. Has there been any research that you can point to, indicating outcomes?

Ms McInnes—We know that partnering is the prime method and mode of moving off the pension. It is higher than moving off the pension into paid work.

CHAIR—So repartnering is the major mode of moving off a pension?

Ms McInnes—Yes. More women move off the pension into partnerships than move off the pension into paid work and earnings.

CHAIR—Is that right?

Ms McInnes—Yes, that will be in your DSS statistics and DSS annual reports. That has held true for a long time. So we know that sole parents are certainly very open to repartnering. What I observe is that people who have not completed the kind of personal work they need to in their relationship courses are very vulnerable to meeting a fellow in the pub and deciding to marry him—that night. Then three weeks later it is all over. But it might involve a man moving into the home, which would potentially disrupt her housing tenancy. Particularly if she moves in with him, she might lose housing trust residence and have to go back on

waiting lists and what have you, and so then be trapped, in a certain sense.

You see women who are partnering rapidly with this attitude of ‘Oh, a man wants me. I must move in with him.’ Children are often very much at risk in those situations. Part of our work is supporting the parent in recognising—and I am thinking of cases where this is occurring or has occurred—that, firstly, the child is being abused by the new partner and, secondly, she needs to decide what she is going to put first. Will it be herself and her child’s safety, or being in a relationship? We do not count any relationship as okay and would much prefer to see somebody do a lot of personal work and come to a point where they truly value themselves and their children, and from there go into a relationship.

Ms Buckley—One of the things that are so difficult is that it is hard to be a sole parent out there. The community does not approve of and appreciate the very hard work that sole parents do in bringing up children. Actually, it is a job that two parents find quite difficult. I was listening to some evidence that was being given before, and this body has an appreciation of the fact that that is quite a difficult job to do but it does not have community recognition of that. I think women and men who bring up their children on their own are heroes, but it is very hard to do it out there.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Do you offer any courses to the partners of the women that you are dealing with in this crisis situation? Do you encourage them to go to counselling or to go to courses for them to resolve their anger and abusive behaviour, to find out why they do it and break their cycle so they do not take on another partner and do the same thing?

Ms Buckley—In the main, we tend to see people after the fact. There would be a small percentage of women that we would see in the throes of relationship breakdown and yes, we would refer them to appropriate places. But our agency is concerned with people who are not in a relationship with a partner.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—So they have actually really broken away and been on their own for some time, by the time—

Ms Buckley—Yes, or freshly alone. But yes, certainly we would pass on a referral if that was appropriate.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It seems to me that you are fixing up one half of the problem but you are not fixing up the other half. You are sending that person back out into the community to repeat offend—frequently.

Ms Buckley—We are funded only to fix one half of the problem.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Yes, that is what I am trying to resolve.

Ms McInnes—It is a curious phenomenon socially that in regard to, for instance, single parents and violence against women, a lot of our parliamentary, legislative and program responses focus on women. What we are not acknowledging, perhaps, is that we have got male issues. We have basically left the men to rot and made women the problem or the thing to be fixed and changed and worked on and policed. We have

really left men over there with very little by way of responses to them.

There is some research currently going on into the outcomes for men who have trouble managing their anger and whether such courses work. That is funded by the Australian Research Council. It is a major question as to whether it works, whether it should be mandatory for people who have gone through the courts and whether mandatory works better than voluntary referral. What I would say is that there are very few resources out there for men, and a major problem is getting men to see that they have a place in using those.

Those men who do voluntarily refer themselves—we do not have mandatory referral in South Australia or in Australia as far as I know—are referring themselves at a point where they see that they are going to lose everything they have ever valued unless they do something. There the message getting back from perpetrator programs, as they are called, is that group responses are extremely important because in a one to one situation there can be a great deal of denial or blaming the counsellor or ‘It is everyone else’s fault but mine’ sort of stuff, whereas if you have a group setting the group explores and disciplines each other, if you like, and they give social responses back.

Some arguments against perpetrator programs are that we cannot have them at the expense of cutting back shelter money which keeps women and children safe. Will such programs come out of the same bucket of money and, if so, will that mean more women are in danger or have fewer resources to get out? Another argument is that, and certainly it was true in the early days of perpetrator programs, the men learnt new and interesting ways to be violent to women. They got together and basically had an abusers’ club and shared all their tips of the trade, of which there were quite a few. But those who are running perpetrator programs—there are a couple in Victoria—have said that one of the primary ways they monitor that is being accountable to the organisations that assist women escaping violence. They also monitor the partners of the men who are in the programs. Always the men’s behaviour and activities are accountable back to the women that they have been violent towards. The jury is still out. That is why they funded the research, basically.

CHAIR—Who is doing the research?

Ms McInnes—One of the researchers is Margie Ripper at Flinders University of South Australia. I could not tell you the names of all the other researchers. That was just recently funded by the Australian Research Council.

On our submission, I would very much like to highlight a couple of other points around safety issues. The way your request for a submission was framed tended to emphasise marriage and relationship education. But another aspect of this is, of course, visiting and contact and supervised access services. We have one service in South Australia which operates for one weekend—only at the weekends. There are two-hour sessions of supervised contact available for a limited number of people. There are fees charged for supervised contact. I know of people who have had a serious need of such a service but have been unable to use it because they could not afford it, so they are looking at other kinds of strategies. These services, in my view, are critical to women’s and children’s safety. And there are not enough. If you look at this city of a million people, here is one service in one spot, doing one weekend.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Who funds it?.

Ms McInnes—Attorney-General's family services program. They have had a series of pilots but the demand for supervised access far outstrips supply. What we find is often the option for supervising the access is the parents of the abuser. I have circulated a letter in which a woman details really I think quite graphically the reasons that that kind of arrangement can be a problem. She lists point by point the ways in which the family are really unable to keep her child safe for one reason or another. That is common.

What we see a great deal of in our job are a lot of extremely distressed women, with extremely distressed children who are unable to become safe even after they have left. That is a great concern to us because it basically counteracts everything that we are trying to do in helping these women get safe and get control of their lives and go on to be productive, happy nurturers and hopefully in good relationships.

I would make the point strongly that there needs to be a great deal more such services. Have a look at what is happening in terms of contact in the Family Court. Currently we have a presumption of contact in all cases except in extraordinarily horrific circumstances. That is, even after child sexual assault, battering of children and mothers and weapons used against children, fathers will still usually be required to be in contact. It is very rare for the court not to order contact. That is continuing to create a lot of violence in the lives of a lot of families. The very least we need to be doing is responding by providing services to keep those children safe if they must see these people. I would prefer to see a reversal of the presumption of contact where domestic violence or child abuse has been established. That is if there is a proven record or history of domestic violence or child abuse, the presumption is you have to argue why you should have contact and what degree of contact you are able to sustain, rather than 'We'll automatically give you contact and any limitations will have to be argued for.'

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Could we put a proviso on that that there has to be proof that you are actually having assistance of some sort to help with your violent nature—controlling your anger, or something like that?

Ms McInnes—Certainly, that is possible. That is what I was talking before about mandatory perpetrator programs. The question is: do they work if someone is absolutely resistant? My response would be, 'We'll keep you there until they do. You can go to as mandatory courses as you need to.' That is one point I would make.

CHAIR—Just before you leave that one, when you say 'proven'—

Mrs McInnes—Or established.

CHAIR—'Established'. This has come up elsewhere in different hearings. One of my colleagues who is not here would undoubtedly raise it with you and I think it is probably a reasonable point. One of the difficulties in family law these days is that allegations of domestic violence fly around rapidly, which, I suspect, has the undesirable consequence that it diminishes the seriousness of the allegation in those circumstances where it is real. That is even if there are only a small number of allegations that are not substantiated, it reduces the currency, if I can put it that way. My question is what do you mean by 'established'? Do you mean a criminal conviction? Do you mean an observation of a Family Court judge that there is domestic violence? I am just trying to explore what you mean.

Mrs McInnes—One would be a criminal conviction. Another would be records of police attendances. Another would be records of injuries in hospitals. Another would be records of counselling services that the particular people had used during the course of the relationship—any of those kinds of external records. But I would come back to a risk management model. If I am taking a tanker through the Antarctic and I have got a load of oil, I do not say, ‘Well, if we hit an iceberg, we’ll worry about it then and see what we can do to clean it up.’ What we do is we build and design our ships and have our shipping and our laneways designed to contain a risk. We know we have got a huge risk on board. We have got a load of oil in an environmentally sensitive area. So we do what is called a risk management protocol. We manage for the risk. I think that in cases where violence is raised, we have to manage for the risk, because I would rather see a bit of inconvenience to a parent than a child being sexually assaulted or unable to attain safety. That is a huge betrayal.

My preference would be that we had a protocol that, if there is an allegation, we go through a protocol of risk management that comes down if and when those allegations are proven to be without basis. I would also add that—to place in your minds about false allegations which have a lot of currency, as you say—it is very rare that a sole parent, if they had a loving, caring father available for their children, even if they did not want to be in a relationship with that man, would refuse if he said, ‘Can I take the kids out and we will go out for a meal?’ If he says, ‘I will take them to that sporting game and I’ll bring them back on Sunday evening, having had a wonderful weekend’, I do not think there would be very many sole parents who would say, ‘No, I don’t want you to do that’. Okay, you have that anger that people have at the point of breakdown, but the reality of the day to day, week in, week out, month in, month out, year in, year out grind of no relief in looking after children means that if you have a positive father that you actually trust to do a good job of caring for your children, and they are available to do that, very few would say no. In fact, they are counted as the lucky ones. What we see is that where there are allegations of violence they usually do not surface in the Family Court, or they often have not.

In May 1996 the Family Court published a report which investigated domestic homicides and Family Court cases. They picked the cases which were domestic homicides that had been through the Family Court, and their question was: was there any record of the history of violence in the Family Court proceedings? In half the cases there was not. There was tremendous and horrific violence which eventually resulted in people’s deaths but it had never actually been presented in court as evidence. Part of that was that the old Family Law Act did not admit such issues explicitly as relevant, and in the new Family Law Act we are already encountering cases where lawyers tell us it is not relevant, or it will not matter, or they have not got the money to go through all of that business. They are only funded for so much for the legal aid case, so it is not raised. There is a tremendous amount of gate keeping. The lawyers do not want to be seen to be difficult, obstructive, raising false allegations, and themselves make judgments about whether women are telling the truth.

In consequence, a great deal of those records of violence do not ever actually reach the court as evidence, because we have not got a population which are coming in and hiring a gun lawyer. We have a population which are already beaten and battered and on the run pleading with legal aid, scurrying in and out of offices with 10,000 appointments, trying to get someone to help them. They are often not very personable. They are not people that one would relate to, really, as very nice, often. The research shows that people respond best to people who are like themselves. If you are white, middle-class and educated you respond best

to white, middle-class and educated people. You do not really have a great deal of comprehension of a poor person from a different culture, and you do not know really how to communicate, and a lot of our clients in this position are people who have come from tremendously deprived and disadvantaged histories, where they have had tremendous histories of abuse against them. They do not present to lawyers as somebody that should be believed and taken up.

I would really like you to follow up on that point about contact and supervised access services, and the other point I would make in relation to that is the Family Court services of counselling, and the proposal within the budget to take that out of the Family Court. We have in the Family Court, although it is, as I say, uneven, a great deal of expertise and also a degree of accountability in the processes. The letter I have circulated again shows how when it gets out into private agencies completely there is a tremendous amount of variability, and very little accountability, necessarily. If it does go out into the community it must be with a great deal of accountability, and a great deal of attention to practice standards and a watchdog because people are going to be very unprotected out there if there are no such facilities.

Ms Buckley—Can I add to that, too, to be careful to make sure that any new services are kept as accessible as possible to people on low incomes. It is very important.

Ms McInnes—We do a lot of Aboriginal and some non-English speaking background work although we do not have access to interpreters. We do not position ourselves as a migrant service. But they are not going to use mainstream, white Anglo-Saxon or even necessarily church based organisations, particularly if they have had a history of negative relationships with the church or been defined as bad by the things you think the church says. In such a case you are not going to go near them. There need to be services which account for that diversity. If you leave them out, those people are again left out.

CHAIR—There are more things we could explore but time is against us. Thank you very much for coming along and for your submission, it has been quite valuable.

I now have a motion that the committee accepts as an exhibit the letter reprinted from the *SPARK* newsletter of Autumn 1996. There being no objection, that is so agreed.

[12.05 p.m.]

HODGSON, Ms Alice Meredith, Manager, Northern Suburbs Family Resource Centre Inc., 4 Bayer Road, Elizabeth South, South Australia 5112

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath I should advise you the hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and warrants the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

We are in receipt of your submission of 11 October 1996. Would you like to make some introductory remarks?

Ms Hodgson—Thank you for inviting me to make this presentation. I understand that each of you has been given some background information on our organisation and I will be happy to take questions about our organisation and its role later on, if you wish. I just highlight that, as a family service, our main interests lie in the support and development of families, especially those with younger children, to make positive changes in their lives. While our comments relate mostly to family situations, I believe they have general applicability to relationships.

What I intend to do is to make some very short points arising from our written submission rather than restating any of that evidence. I will do that in the order of your terms of reference and then I understand that you might wish to ask me some questions.

Concerning the first of your terms of reference—factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown—at this time we would like to underscore the relatedness of family stress and relationship breakdown. In our view it is extremely difficult to maintain a positive relationship when dealing with poverty, unemployment, housing crisis, poor health, social or geographic isolation. Each of these compounds any existing relationship tension that may exist and also compounds each other. We believe it is even more difficult to deal with relationship stress if those involved have not the skills to communicate, reflect and problem solve, nor access to support services which might equip them to manage their relationships better.

We also believe these stresses are compounded if those involved have not experienced harmonious family life. We read daily, and I am sure this morning you have heard as well as at other times during this inquiry, of families across this spectrum in which abuse is a way of life. It is also important to remind ourselves, as I believe the last speakers did, that a majority of sole parents are battling on their own because of relationship breakdown, not because they have made the conscious choice to be sole parents from the outset.

The reasons for the breakdown can have a significant impact on their ability to deal with their situation. For those leaving a violent or abusive relationship, being a sole parent can be an enormous improvement in safety and security for parent and children. I recently attended a family summit held by the South Australian Office for Families and Children. We heard stories from children that they no longer came from a broken home but that, since they were children of a sole parent, they now came from a home that was

mended.

For me, one of the most wasted situations in relationship breakdown is when a person is leaving because of poor choices and a simple lack of the problem solving skills. I think this is part of the issue that you are wishing to address. You also sought information about beneficiaries of preventive programs. In our written submission, we highlighted the issue of how the community can benefit from a greater degree of relationship success. Daily we are reminded of the cost of marriage and of relationship breakdown but many of these relationships were formed without the understanding that relationships can mean work. Later in our submission we talk about strategies that we think might help improve that situation.

Harm, stress, poor health and lack of hope are some of the personal costs of marriage and relationship breakdown. In our written submission, we made some comment about the way in which these are also substantial community costs to all members of the community. Our research and consultation with our community—that is, the community of the northern suburbs of Adelaide—has underscored our view that preventive services, delivered through local venues alongside other neighbourhood services, are the way to provide skills, opportunities and fresh outcomes for those seeking to resolve or reduce relationship stress. By that, we mean in places that people are familiar with, in settings that they find acceptable and in ways that include them in the decision making.

In terms of the strategies, we acknowledge that many relationship services exist, are well used and do produce results. But, in our view, most of these services are skewed at the crisis end, continuing the notion that to seek help means that you have a problem, that you cannot manage and that you and your relationships are failures. We would like to put a point of view that encourages a much greater effort in preventive and community based strategies, and encourages people to seek support before they have reached a stage in their relationships where they are seen as the problem and where they are beginning to be defined as a failure. I will provide a short list of the sorts of strategies we would support.

We would like to see community based strategies which are integrated with the curriculum throughout schooling and which equip young people with the skills to make and maintain good relationship choices. We would like to see strategies that focus on the skills needed for relationships as positive aspects of life. In other words, to see learning about relationships and making good choices as a positive aspect in the development of young people.

We would like to see strategies that encourage the seeking of help to solve issues early and thus to prevent a crisis, and strategies that value individuals and the diversity in our culture. I think some of the comments made by the previous speaker about like finding it easier to communicate with like, have a great deal of importance here.

We would also like to see programs that include the community in the design and running of the program, that provide a range of supports and skills for different relationship issues, not just for marriage and parenting but also for the sorts of relationships that develop in neighbourhoods, through friendships, and changes in relationships as people age.

Some of the work you might be interested in, as a periphery to this inquiry, is work that we have

done in partnership with a neighbourhood house. We have looked at the situation where grandparents are the providers of care and support to their grandchildren and the very different issues that those people face in parenting a generation much younger than themselves, which is a very different set of issues than the parents themselves face.

We would also like to ensure that services are provided with dignified access, without requiring fees for those who cannot pay. In our written submission, we point out that there are many families that actually have to make the choice between paying for a relationship service and paying for food.

In terms of the role of government, I want to emphasise that we see government as having a key role in the provision of policy and services in this area but we do not see that being limited to the Attorney-General's portfolio. We believe that government should retain the policy role in consultation with community and other interest groups. It has been of concern to us both at a federal and state level that there have been some apparent moves to divest government of the policy role, which we think is a substantial role for government to retain.

We also believe that government should retain a funding role but deliver services in partnership with the private and the voluntary or community services sector. We do not see government as the sole funder, but certainly as having a responsibility in the funding area. We believe that government should retain the role to ensure access to services provided for those who are disadvantaged by location, poverty, culture or ethnic background.

Families have made their views clear to us that family services, including preventive services, should not continue to be part of a divisive political rhetoric but become an assured, funded and accessible safety net. This comment is quite out of step with the trend towards privatisation and contracting but it is based on the view that the government has a role to assure the future for all people, not just for those with the resources to assure their own.

CHAIR—Thank you. I want to ask a few questions about the resources centre. How long have you been established?

Ms Hodgson—For approximately 3½ years. The initial grant for the establishment of the Northern Suburbs Family Resource Centre was offered just over four years ago but there was some time taken before the initial establishment.

CHAIR—Excuse my ignorance, I do not know much about family resources centres. You say there are 11 of them across Australia. Have they all been established about the same time?

Ms Hodgson—Eleven centres were established about the same time with similar amounts of funding but with a brief to take particular regard of their own community's priorities in establishing the services. Although we have a similar framework and we are funded in a similar manner from the Commonwealth, each has a different range of services, often a different staff mix and often different priorities because of their relationship with the client group and the community within which they are placed. That is part of the model that was developed.

CHAIR—What was the catalyst for establishing them?

Ms Hodgson—Originally, it was part of the issues of locational disadvantage. All 11 family resource centres are placed in communities that are disadvantaged in some way in relation to location. Some, like our centre, are a mix of urban and rural communities but with a lot of new housing and limited employment and infrastructure opportunities. There are other family resource centres which are in very new high growth areas and others that are in areas of significant urban decline.

They deal with a combination of disadvantages on a scale that relates to public housing, access to transport and infrastructure, employment opportunities and location in their own right. There is only one family resource centre that is different in that regard. There is one at Alice Springs that works only with traditional Aboriginal people. That is set up slightly differently to reflect that community.

CHAIR—Some years ago the office of the family in Western Australia was establishing—this might not be the proper description—community resource centres, particularly in the suburban parts of Perth. Is there any relationship between your centre and what they were doing in Western Australia?

Ms Hodgson—There is no formal relationship at all. Western Australia did not participate in the initial pilot program so there is no family resource centre in Western Australia, nor is there is one in Tasmania.

CHAIR—Concerning the programs that are funded through the Attorney-General's department, are you in receipt of funds for any programs through the family services subprograms?

Ms Hodgson—No. The programs delivered in our community through the Attorney-General's funding are within agencies with which we work very closely. Part of our role is to provide infrastructure support and research and we do that with those agencies that are delivering a direct service in the way in which the Department of Health and Family Services funds us. We do not provide a direct client service in the sense of families coming to us for material aid or financial counselling or relationship counselling. Our clients are those people who provide those services. We work mostly with material aid providers, counsellors, managers and volunteers.

CHAIR—I am trying to work out how it integrates. Let us say you identify a need in Elizabeth or Gawler or somewhere like that. Would people come to you or would you have outworkers who come and say that there is a need for, say, an adolescent mediation program in Gawler? Once you have identified that, would you then go to Relationships Australia or COPE or someone else to provide a service? How does it work?

Ms Hodgson—It works both ways. We particularly work in the area of families with younger children. At the moment, we are doing work with local neighbourhood houses and with the state government to equip local agencies to apply for tender funding to deliver a neighbourhood based mental health service to support families where there is a family member with a mental health problem. That has happened by us being aware of the current tender out for that particular bucket of money. With respect to the agencies in our community, we know that they are seeing clients in an area and we know that they have the skills and the

opportunities to develop their service. We work with those agencies to equip them to apply for that funding.

We also work with the state government to ensure that they understand the needs in our community, that they have good documentation and good evidence about what is needed, what is available and the outcomes we would expect from delivering that service in a particular way in a neighbourhood. It goes both ways. We have people who come to us saying, ‘We think there is an issue here. Can you do some research for us on it? Can you provide us with some demographic information that might flesh out this issue?’ On the other side of it, we have government and other funding bodies coming to us saying, ‘We have this area of work that we want done. Can you help people work on their tenders and submissions so that they are able to apply for this funding?’ It really works in a partnership relationship.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—You were saying that the programs that you would like to see would have some sort of community base. Can you expand on that a little.

Ms Hodgson—There are two reasons why I think that. Firstly, we are a community development agency which uses as its philosophical position the view that working with people to help them develop their skills and solve their problems is a more effective way of enabling them to improve their circumstances than telling them what to do, how to do it and then do it for them. Part of our role is to work with people and equip them for the long term so that they can make better choices and enable them to move out of a crisis situation. For example, we work with volunteers in a family support program to enable them to equip parents with the sorts of skills that will move them forward rather than continue to stay in the same crisis situation.

We believe that on a philosophical level. On a practical level, we have seen it work. I think engaging the community, involving them in the planning and delivery of the service means that they own it, they value it and it works better for them in the long-term. If you are looking to do work that will make concrete changes over a period, we believe involving the community is a much more effective way than establishing something from a remote position and basically just dropping it from the sky and hoping it will work.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Following on from that, you were talking about using volunteers and people within the community. What are your views on accrediting these people so that when people go to them they know that they have some training or have some qualifications?

Ms Hodgson—We have always worked to ensure that volunteers are appropriately trained, appropriately supported and appropriately supervised, so that people who are seeking a service from an agency which has volunteers, as either part or all of their work force, receive a high quality, professional service. We think that is very important.

We have done work ourselves to develop initial training programs that support volunteers. We have very recently been running a series of workshops, not delivering them ourselves but bringing in qualified trainers to work with people who are volunteering in the delivery of emergency financial assistance. It has enabled those volunteers to have a broader understanding, often of the circumstances in which they work, and to develop peer relationships so that their supervision and their service delivery is enhanced. We think it is very important that people coming to an agency get a high-quality, well-supervised service.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Do they get some sort of recognition for having done this course, so that when somebody like myself comes for assistance we have got proof in front of us that those people have got some qualifications? In a lot of cases, they probably would not ask, but if they wanted to know, would there be some way?

Ms Hodgson—In some circumstances, yes. It depends on the level and the type of training. Accredited training obviously is a pathway that leads to a certificate or whatever it is. The sort of in-house volunteer training that is offered in some organisations does not lead to that, but is often the opening for a volunteer to understand that to take on some training is an important thing. We certainly believe that the training of volunteers is a responsibility of the organisation in which they work and they should pay for it. It should not be something that the volunteer is expected to do in their own time, at their own cost. It is actually part of the volunteer being able to deliver an appropriate service.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—We have had a lot of comment on financing training, whether it be professional training or voluntary training. Have you got an opinion on having a central training program that is funded by the government and put out there into the community?

Ms Hodgson—It is not something that I have given thought to. Certainly from our perspective, the interest in gaining professional knowledge and high-quality training is there amongst volunteers and it is always a tension, particularly at a community level, to find the way of paying for that. Finding a way of supporting what is already a very strong commitment at a local level for training would, I believe, be an improvement. But it is not something that our organisation has given thought to in this context.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Would you be in a position to implement training programs in your area, if this became available?

Ms Hodgson—No, we would not. We are not a registered training body, but we certainly could work with those who were to ensure it happened. We have been very clear that training in that formal accredited sense is not the business that our family resource centre is in. One of the reasons that we have been able to be effective in our community is that we are very clear about which part of the business is ours. But we work very closely with the local TAFE colleges in our community, with the adult education schools, within that sort of secondary school and also with people who deliver training as private accredited trainers. We certainly would be in a position to help organise to have that happen.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Thank you.

CHAIR—I presume all the family resource centres have been established for only three or four years. Has there been any evaluation of them by the Department of Health and Family Services?

Ms Hodgson—The family resource centres came on line over a bit of a stagger and after the last one on had been open a year, the Commonwealth undertook what they called a post-implementation review, which was to look at the way in which each of the 11 had been established within its local community, to look at the ways in which they could work together in a national way and to look at the effectiveness so far of that establishment phase. That work was completed about 18 months ago. We were amongst the last ones

on. What that research led to was a shift in the research base in the family resource centres in the way in which they reported.

We have now established a set of national benchmarks against which the family resource centres report to each other nationally and also to the Commonwealth. So we have used that process to establish a continuing evaluation process which is part of our contract with the government. That report is publicly available if you are interested in the material.

CHAIR—My final point is really just a comment. When you made your point about not being part of the political rhetoric, I have always taken the opposite view, that is unless things become part of the political rhetoric they get ignored.

Ms Hodgson—The reason I made that point is because we have had people coming to us now consistently over the last 18 months, pretty well as a trend, saying how difficult it is to plan and how difficult it is to make choices when the eligibility for programs, the availability of services and the targeting of particular programs shifts constantly. I am talking about not only individual families but those people who work with them who have great difficulty feeling that they can provide help to develop some long-term strategies for people when the climate shifts so often. People find it not only unprofessional but debilitating to give advice one week and then to have to give it again another week where it is different.

Our problem with the political rhetoric is that family services have become part of what is talked about in a way that is removed from the reality of most people's daily lives. People want to have a sense that they can plan and live their lives on a day-to-day basis with some sense of surety about what is going to be there. We know that not all families want to seek professional help. We know that families often have situations where they want to seek advice and simply get information, not necessarily counselling or one of those more formal services. To actually be able to do that is increasingly more difficult as that information varies over time. It has been of great disadvantage to people who have planned and developed changes in their lives to find that the rules have changed by the time they have reached their next point.

CHAIR—So it is a call for more long-term certainty.

Ms Hodgson—Not only long-term, but also a sense of across the spectrum. 'Bipartisan' is not the right word any more, but that sense of there being an agreement amongst decision makers that there is a set of priorities that people are actually going to stick to because they are the right sorts of supports which value families and relationships in this nation. People who are in difficulty feel that their circumstance is not valued because the environment in which it is occurring is changing so rapidly.

CHAIR—Thank you for your submission and also for coming along today and discussing it with us.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Mutch):

That this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.31 p.m.