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BRIEFING PAPER ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS SERVICES PROGRAM

The Australian Government has been funding the FRSP since the early 1960s. The Program has grown over recent years with Government reforms to Family Law and in recognition of the need for family skills training and the specific needs of individuals involved with family separation. The Program has grown from \$28 million in 1996-97 to \$56 million in 2003-04. Originally funded and administered by the Attorney General's Department, the FRSP is now jointly funded by the Attorney General's Department (around \$29 million in 2003-04) and the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) (around \$27 million in 2003-2004). FaCS has administered the Program since 1998.

Aims of FRSP

The Family Relationship Services Program's current aims are to:

- Enable children, young people and adults in all their diversity to develop and sustain safe supportive and nurturing family relationships; and
- Minimise the emotional, social and economic costs associated with disruption of family relationships.

Goal of FRSP

The goal of the FRSP is that children, young people and adults, regardless of income, location and linguistic and cultural diversity, in all parts of the relationship cycle (being formation, maintenance, disruption and reformation) and all stages of family life (being formation, child rearing, departure of children and retirement), achieve the intended benefit tailored to their needs.

The intended benefits of the Program are that:

- people's capacity for achieving and sustaining valued family relationships is enhanced; and/or
- people's relationships are enhanced; and/or
- people's management of relationship difficulties is improved.

The Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) funds a number of programs designed to support families, at all parts of family relationships life stages, including pre-marriage; partnered; married; separated; and re-partnered.

The FRSP comprises a number of sub-programs and types of services:

- Family Relationships Counselling (FRC)
- Family Relationships Mediation (FRM)
- Conciliation Services (CON)
- Children's Contact Services (CCS)
- Family Relationships Education (FRE)
- Family Relationships Skills Training (FRST)
- Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy (AMFT)

- Specialised Domestic Violence Initiatives
- Regional Primary Dispute Resolution (Regional PDR)
- Contact Orders Program (COP)
- Men and Family Relationships (MFR)

Approximately 100 community organisations are currently funded under the FRSP to provide family and children's services in around 400 locations across Australia to more than 135,000 clients a year involving an average of 2 sessions each. Although FRSP services are intended to be provided on a fee for service basis, organisations must ensure that people who are not able to pay are not turned away or refused access to a service.

Of particular interest to the Inquiry are the following sub-programs which are detailed further below:

- Children's Contact Services (CCS);
- Men and Family Relationships (MFR);
- Contact Orders Program (COP); and
- Family Relationships Counselling (FRC).

Children's Contact Services (CCS)

Children's Contact Services (CCS) offer additional support to families where contact post separation poses potential risks or where ongoing contact between parents and children is at risk. The services provide a safe venue for supervised contact between non-resident parents and their children and changeover of contact between resident and non-resident parents. This enables children and non-resident parents to continue or renew their relationships previously affected by family conflict or violence. Without such services, children and non-resident parents from such families would not be able to have face-to-face contact. CCS also provide the opportunity for parents and children to progress from supervised contact, through changeover, to self-management of their contact. Since 1996, the Australian Government has funded a total of 35 Children's Contact Services.

The CCS received \$5m in Commonwealth funding in 2001-02. During this period approximately:

- 6,000 clients used the services; and
- 30,000 sessions were conducted with clients.

The sub-program includes 27 organisations with a total of 43 outlets across Australia. A map of the distribution of service delivery is at [Attachment A](#). In recent years the demand for the CCS has been increasing with anecdotal evidence of extensive waiting lists, particularly in metropolitan areas. There are also unfunded CCS in operation.

In reviewing the overall FRSP, the Department will be examining a number of issues relating to the CCS including demand and linkages to other networks of services such as the Contact Orders Program (COP), Men and Family Relationships (MFR) and Regional Primary Dispute Resolution (PDR) services.

In recent times the CCS network has been at the forefront of the developing closer relationships between community based providers of services for people, post separation and the Family Court, solicitors and the broader family law system. The Family Court and the CCS network are

presently developing clearer guidelines on referral of families to the CCS and reporting about these clients, by the CCS, back to the Court.

Men and Family Relationships (MFR)

In November 1997, the Prime Minister announced funding of \$6m over four years to develop pilot services which aim to achieve more effective outcomes for men and families seeking assistance with building and maintaining healthy relationships including appropriately managing separation. Since then funding has been increased to a total of \$41.6m, with \$19.6m provided in the 2003-04 Budget to extend the program to June 2007.

The Men and Family Relationships program was established in response to a perception in the community that there was a lack of services for men. The aim of the program was to develop constructive approaches to working alongside men to improve individual and family outcomes and to assist the relationships sector to become more effective in delivering services to men.

In the 2001-02 year \$2.2m in funding was allocated to the Men and Family Relationships program. During this period approximately:

- 7,500 clients used the services;
- 13,500 sessions were conducted with clients;
- 4,000 cases (counselling or mediation activities) or courses (such as relationship education or parenting training activities) were delivered to clients.

Clients attend the services to seek support and advice in regard to family relationship issues. More than 48% of the clients attending Men and Family Relationships services in 2001-02 reported they attended in order to maintain or enhance family relationships. A further 23% attended because of relationship dissolution and separation issues and more than 5% were concerned with family formation issues.

Seventy seven per cent of clients who completed activities at Men and Family Relationships services in 2001-02 reported achieving progress with the issues that brought them to the service of the total number.

The independent evaluation of the Men and Family Relationships program, finalised in November 2002, demonstrated that the program has been a highly effective response by the Government to the needs of men in the community.

Contact Orders Program (COP)

The Contact Orders Program was initially funded as a pilot program following a 1998 Family Law Council report which stated that people were experiencing problems in relation to breaches of Court orders pertaining to contact with their children.

Some of the outcomes of the COP include that:

- Agreements about parenting and/or contact are made out of the Court environment;
- Parents awareness (with consequent changes in behaviour) of their children's needs around separation and contact issues is increased;

- There is less utilisation of Family Court and/or Federal Magistrates Service for contesting orders about contact; and
- There is a decrease in the number of Court orders about contact being breached.

The COP targets families where there have been high levels of entrenched conflict about contact, post separation. During 2002-03, approximately:

- 860 clients used the 3 existing services;
- 1,950 sessions were conducted with clients.

Demand for COP is increasing with significant waiting lists being reported by existing services. Additional funding for a possible 2 new services, in South East Queensland and Melbourne, was announced in the 2003-04 Budget. A map of the current distribution of service delivery is at Attachment A.

Through a range of interventions, COP provides intensive case managed support for similar clients to those who use the CCS. All 3 COP have close ties with CCS located in their area, with a significant interchange of clients between the 2 sub-programs. The core element of the COP is the educative group component, which is usually run over 6-7 sessions. This core element also exists within many of the new Regional PDR services. The Regional PDR program commenced operations in the early part of 2003. In 2003-04 funding of \$2.2m will be provided to 24 organisations, offering services through 77 outlets. They provide a range of interventions for families post separation, namely counselling, mediation, conciliation, educative groups, and information sessions. The core element of the COP is also evident in post separation interventions provided by other FRSP organisations, either under the Men and Family Relationships (MFR) or the Family Relationships Education sub-programs.

Family Relationships Counselling (FRC)

Family Relationships Counselling (FRC) is the oldest FRSP service type and has received Commonwealth funding since 1960s. FRC assists with resolving relationship problems in the most appropriate way and with resolution of couples' disputes. This service is available at the pre-marriage, marriage, separated, divorced and re-partnering stages. It also offers counselling to meet the needs of the children of the relationship.

This service type includes family and child counselling under the *Family Law Act 1975*.

The Attorney-General's Department (AGD) contributes approximately half the funding of FRC. In 2001-02 FRC received funding of \$18m to 41 organisations through more than 200 outlets across Australia. A map of distribution of service delivery is at Attachment A. During this period, approximately:

- 83,000 clients were seen. This represents 60% of the total number of FRSP clients; and
- 157,000 sessions were conducted with clients.

About 60% of clients sought FRC services for family or relationship maintenance or enhancement, while nearly 20% sought these services for family or relationship separation issues. Over 70% of FRC clients report making progress on their issues.