

SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL LEGISLATION COMMITTEE
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Output 1.1

Question No. 9

Senator Stott Despoja asked the following question at the hearing on 14 February 2006:

- (a) What organisations and individuals are being consulted in relation to mechanisms for 'screening' for family violence and abuse in FRC's and for conducting dispute resolution in FRC's where there may have been violence but it may or may not have been disclosed?
- (b) How are the needs of Indigenous and CALD communities going to be met by FRC's?
- (c) How are the needs of rural and remote families going to be met by FRC's? In particular, is it intended that dispute resolution sessions will be conducted by telephone?

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

- (a) The Department has engaged the Australian Catholic University to develop a framework and tools for screening for family violence and abuse, as well as a range of other relevant issues within the Family Relationship Centres.

As part of its consultations, the Australian Catholic University has worked with expert family practitioners, selected on the basis of their individual expertise in the area of screening and assessment. These practitioners are:

Andrew Bickerdike (Relationships Australia Victoria)
Megan Solomon (UnitingCare Unifam Counselling and Mediation)
Dennise Simpson (Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Canberra)
Carolyn Harris Johnson (University of Western Australia)
Colleen Brown (Legal Aid, Western Australia)
Allie Bailey (Domestic Violence Incest Resource Centre)
Terry Melvin (Mensline Australia)
Peter Humphries (Centrelink)
Dianne Gibson (Family Court of Australia)
Paula Westhead (Family Life)
Sr Margaret Flynn (Centacare Wilcannia Forbes)
Michael Bishop (Relate Human Services)
Associate Professor Lawrie Moloney (La Trobe University)
Sue Foley (Westmead Children's Hospital)
Dr Jenn McIntosh (Family Transitions)

Once a draft screening framework and tools have been developed, further consultations will take place with peak bodies and relevant organisations.

The Department will also consult a range of service providers and practitioners in relation to mechanisms for conducting dispute resolution in Family Relationship Centres where there may have been violence but it may or may not have been disclosed.

(b) Family Relationship Centres must work to ensure sensitivity and accessibility to all client groups, including those who face real or perceived barriers to receiving assistance. They must provide services to all families in their catchment areas equally, without bias or prejudice. These families will include Indigenous people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

In designing and delivering services, Centres should take account of the specific needs of these diverse groups. They will be required to consider how best to engage and communicate with ethno-specific groups in their area and to develop and maintain cooperative arrangements with local services. Centres will consider how to make optimum use of interpreters and other means to overcome language and cultural barriers. Strategies to accommodate specific cultural needs and to provide access for clients outside business hours will need to be developed in addition to a workplace diversity strategy. The Centres must also consider how best to address client diversity when developing organisational plans.

Family Relationship Centres will be required to have specific strategies in place to enable effective delivery of services to Indigenous clients. Strategies might include providing environments that are welcoming for Indigenous families, the recruitment of Indigenous staff in the Centre, forming linkages with Indigenous communities and agencies servicing those communities, providing Indigenous interpreter services where needed, and networking with other providers of family services to the Indigenous community.

Additional funding has also been made available for Indigenous advisers in areas with significant Indigenous populations and needs. These Indigenous advisers will assist Indigenous people in each region to access Family Relationship Centres and other services, and to develop the capacity of the network of Family Relationship Centres to provide effective services to Indigenous families.

(c) Family Relationship Centres will be required to provide outreach services to regional population centres and larger towns within their area, and, wherever possible, to other communities where the Centre has capacity and sufficient demand exists. Each Centre will be required to assess local needs and develop flexible service delivery strategies to best address those needs. Outreach to regional and rural communities may include regular face-to-face visits to selected population centres, brokerage or sub-contracting arrangements with organisations located in other centres, and the provision of appropriate training and resources to enable organisations or individuals in rural areas to act as agents for the Centre. In addition, the use of alternative means of communication, such as telephone, video-conferencing and the Internet, may be employed to complement face-to-face services.

The Family Relationship Advice Line will provide a free national 1800 number for people who cannot access a Family Relationship Centre or who prefer to use the telephone. The Advice Line services will comprise the assessment of a caller's needs, provision of information and referral to appropriate services, advice on parenting arrangements after separation and simple legal advice on family law issues. Parenting advisers on the Advice Line will be able to help organise telephone dispute resolution services for callers who have difficulties accessing a Family Relationship Centre or other face to face dispute resolution service.