

Good and innovative practice in service delivery to vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children

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This paper is an overview of an analysis of the Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategies (Access Strategies), a requirement of service providers funded by the Family Support Program (FSP). Organisations were asked to document and implement the steps they would take to improve service accessibility and responsiveness for vulnerable and disadvantaged families, including Indigenous families. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned by Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to undertake a desktop analysis of available Access Strategy documents, in order to collate information on existing/current good or innovative practice utilised by organisations to support vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

KEY MESSAGES

- Strategies clearly demonstrated that organisations funded by the FSP were striving to meet the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Variations between strategies existed largely in the degree to which organisations were able to be flexible and/or collaborative in their service delivery.
- Offering existing programs/services to new client groups, new programs/services to existing client groups, or new programs/services to new groups was one way in which services were tailored to meet vulnerable families' needs. Several organisations also actively worked with other providers in their local area to prevent service duplication.
- Thoughtful responses to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families were evident in the majority of documents. Warm (and/or facilitated) referral was a common strategy within the documents to link families to helpful services, as was "no wrong door" policies and the use of soft entry points.
- There was a great deal of willingness among providers to meet families where they were most comfortable via outreach services. These services took many forms, including actively attending places where vulnerable families and children would be, such as home visits, government services, public housing estates, parks and shopping centres.

KEY MESSAGES (continued)

- Promotional strategies often considered factors, such as literacy issues, that were likely to either inhibit or increase the knowledge of vulnerable families about the service.
- The use of technology to more effectively support vulnerable families and children is a growing area, particularly for those in rural and remote locations. This ranged from the use of social media and/or websites to provide general information to clients or to share information with other staff members, through to the proposed use of technology to conduct service delivery.
- Organisations often needed to make an assessment about how to effectively balance service delivery options to address transport challenges, within the resources available.
- Accessibility issues for vulnerable families were being regularly addressed by providers, including affordability (via reduced or waived fees), physical accessibility (e.g., proximity to public transport, easy access for wheelchairs) and flexible hours.
- Professional development of staff members was a considerable factor in future plans, particularly in the area of cultural sensitivity.
- Organisations almost universally indicated that they had relationships with other organisations in their region, with the rare exceptions being the most isolated or remote services. Many of these relationships are long-standing and embedded in the service provision of the respective organisations.
- Good practice in terms of strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations was most apparent when actions related to the Closing the Gap criteria were embedded in organisational thinking, rather than imposed or program specific.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, there have been gradual but significant changes in the ways services are delivered to families. Social policy in Australia, Britain and the USA has recognised the importance of early intervention and the need for programs to engage with children, parents and communities to build individual and community capacity. The problems faced by children and families are often multiple and inter-connected, requiring more than a single service response (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker, & Horsfall, 2010). Collaboration between service providers and the delivery of “wrap-around” or “joined-up” services are increasingly seen as being more successful in engaging with vulnerable families and providing the multi-layered support that delivers better outcomes for children and their families (Katz & valentine, 2009; McArthur & Thomson, 2011).

Joined-up, wrap-around service delivery has been particularly successful in disadvantaged communities. As a result of broader economic, social and structural factors, some communities are disadvantaged due to deficits in several resource domains. It is the lack of resources, rather than the family or community type, which increases families’ vulnerability to poor outcomes. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods and communities—which may be characterised by high unemployment, high crime rates, lack of services and social supports, or poor community and social infrastructure—can compound vulnerability for individuals and families, in particular children. Conversely, strong, cohesive communities can provide important social supports and informal networks which play an important protective role for individuals, families and children and decrease the risk of negative outcomes.

Family Support Program

The Family Support Program (FSP) is an Australian Government initiative that seeks to provide services to support the wellbeing and nurturing of children and families, to enable them to manage life's transitions, ensure children are protected and contribute to building stronger, more resilient communities. The program is administered by FaHCSIA.¹ Through the FSP, the government funds community organisations to provide a range of preventative and early intervention family support services, targeted support, and specialist services in around 2,200 outlets across Australia. These organisations deliver programs such as parenting skills development, information, advice, counselling and referral on parenting and family relationships, playgroups, and provide alternatives for families who are separated, separating or in dispute to improve their relationships in the best interests of their children. The program is also a vital part of the Council of Australian Government's National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (2009–2020) (COAG, 2009).

In recognition of the evidence outlined in the introductory paragraphs, changes implemented to the FSP in 2011 were targeted at better orienting the program to improve accessibility for, and to actively support, vulnerable and disadvantaged families. It is intended that this will be achieved through more effective collaboration between government and the community sector, more effectively coordinated services, and greater flexibility and responsiveness in service design and delivery to meet the needs of families and communities.

Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategy

While the new FSP seeks to ensure access and availability of services to all families, vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children are a specifically targeted group. In 2011, all FSP providers (with a few exceptions) were asked to document and implement the steps they would take to improve service accessibility and responsiveness for vulnerable and disadvantaged families, including Indigenous families, who may experience barriers in accessing their services.

Family Support Program providers were also asked to demonstrate they are adequately providing services to Indigenous people, in line with COAG's Closing the Gap Service Delivery Principles (See Box 1).

Box 1: Closing the Gap

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (Australian National Audit Office, 2012) is an agreement by all governments to a number of principles to guide the design and delivery of Indigenous specific and mainstream government programs and services provided to Indigenous people

The Closing the Gap Service Delivery Principles set expectations about how government agencies and their contracted services providers should behave. The principles below are relevant to the way FSP providers play their part in closing the gap, and are reflected in the Access Strategy documents:

- *Indigenous engagement principle*: Engagement with Indigenous men, women and children and communities should be central to the design and delivery of programs and services.
- *Access principle*: Programs and services should be physically and culturally accessible to Indigenous people, recognising the diversity of urban, regional, and remote needs.
- *Integration principle*: There should be collaboration between and within government at all levels and their agencies to effectively coordinate programs and services.
- *Accountability principle*: Programs and services should have regular and transparent performance monitoring, review, and evaluation.

¹ For more information see Family Support Program <www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/family-support-program>

Families and children are defined as vulnerable to poor outcomes for the purposes of the FSP due to:

- multiple and complex needs or a lack of resources (financial, physical personal or social) to support wellbeing and positive family functioning; and/or
- current circumstances (e.g., high-conflict separation or divorce).

Some family types, however, have greater difficulty in accessing resources or services that may support family functioning and better outcomes, including Indigenous families, sole parent or blended families, young parent families, families living in locational disadvantage, or families where issues such as housing instability, domestic violence, disability, mental health, or substance abuse issues are present.

Each organisation was asked to record their strategies in a Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Client Access Strategy,² including an Indigenous Access Plan, which was submitted to FaHCSIA in December 2011. FaHCSIA state and territory departmental representatives subsequently assessed the Access Strategies as either:

- agreed, no further information required;
- agreed, more information required; or
- not agreed, resubmit required.

Access Strategy analysis

Evidence suggests that vulnerable families and their children often “fall through the gaps” in the service sector (Blakemore & Shipley, 2009; McArthur, Thomson, Winkworth, & Butler, 2010). A law of “inverse care” is observed, where those that are in most need of services are sometimes the least likely to receive them. In response, governments are increasingly looking to wrap-around or joined-up services to support vulnerable families and create positive outcomes for young children.

For this reason, FSP providers were asked to prepare and submit their strategies for improving access to their services, including through collaboration with other services, and FaHCSIA undertook to share with the sector examples of promising practice in this area.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned by FaHCSIA, in May 2012, to undertake a desktop analysis of available Access Strategy documents, in order to collate information on existing/current good or innovative practice utilised by organisations to support vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

FaHCSIA provided electronic copies of 277 Access Strategy documents, as completed by provider organisations. FaHCSIA also provided a database (subsequently adapted by AIFS) and additional data items as required for analysis by AIFS. This included items to capture:

- the transferability of methods to other regions or programs;
- methods of strengthening relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations;
- methods of increasing effective collaborative practice across service delivery areas; and
- evidence of practices/programs that improve accessibility, responsiveness and outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children.

A number of criteria were developed to consider the extent of good and innovative practice in:

- effective collaboration; and
- strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations.

These criteria are provided in Box 2.

² Some organisations completed an abridged version of the strategy document.

Box 2: Criteria for analysis of the Access Strategy documents

Collaborative service delivery

In the new FSP, collaboration between governments, relationship services, and community sectors such as health, mental health, child welfare, family law, or local community networks is accepted as essential for meeting the needs of families and children more effectively. The need for collaborative practice arises as support needs of vulnerable families and children are diverse and require the services of a range of agencies. Therefore collaboration as an integral component in the new FSP model will aim to:

- provide all families with information about services in other sectors and jurisdictions that they may need;
- connect vulnerable families to services and support systems as early as possible; and
- provide timely and well coordinated response to children and families at risk (FaHCSIA, 2011a).

The emphasis on collaboration is based on evidence that siloed and single disciplinary approaches fail to address the multiple and interlinked issues faces by families. Collaborative practice is seen as a way around the complexities and inefficiencies arising from the diversity of policy and practice across the various service sectors and organisations (White & Winkworth, 2012).

To establish the extent to which organisations funded by the FSP provided evidence of collaborative practice in their Access Strategy, the following levels of collaboration were considered (White & Winkworth, 2012):

- **Networking:** establish an understanding of the service systems and issues involved and develop a trusting collaborative foundation;
- **Coordination:** strong relationships between players, with “champions” leading the action to make information and services more accessible for vulnerable children and families; and
- **Service integration:** the ultimate form of high-level collaboration, bringing together service systems and involving families and community leaders in system design.

The following criteria were also considered:

- Evidence that children and families are at the centre of collaboration.
- Collaboration is authorised at all levels and governance actively supports this through communication and shared planning mechanisms and protocols.
- Shared practices that outreach to vulnerable children and families and actively link them to services, including:
 - addressing local barriers to information sharing;
 - providing early intervention services through local services such as clinics, schools, and childcare;
 - using core services such as Centrelink, state housing departments, and schools as venues of information sharing and connecting to services;
 - warm referrals, where a three-way conversation happens in which the family member is introduced and given relevant information; and
 - working with local community organisations and the business sector to increase social inclusion by providing social support, resources and opportunities to network.

Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations

To establish the extent to which organisations funded by the FSP provided evidence of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations in their Access Strategy,³ the following criteria were used:

- Recognise the resilience and diversity of Indigenous communities, the importance of connections to country, spirituality, family and community, and the continuing impact of the history and legacies of colonisation on Indigenous communities today.
- Strength-based approaches and acknowledgement of Indigenous culture as a source of strength to people, families and communities.

3 Based on FaHCSIA (2011b); Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2010); Stewart, Lohar & Higgins (2011).

- A holistic approach that doesn't simply focus on symptoms of the problem (i.e., alcohol or substance abuse).
- Supports family and kinship structure in building parenting capacity and strengthening family and other relationships. The importance of the wider family network in parenting children in Indigenous communities and other related cultural differences in child rearing practices, compared to non-Indigenous communities, is recognised.
- It is acknowledged that Indigenous people and organisations may be in unequal situations in forming partnerships with non-Indigenous organisations, and that the two should work together to meet the needs of Indigenous children and families, with Indigenous-specific services having a recognised leadership role.
- Commitment to informed and meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement in the design, development and delivery of services and recognition that communities should have a sense of ownership and leadership in the design, development, delivery, and evaluation of programs targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Programs are outcome focused, sustainable and responsive (to and from feedback).

Therefore good practice between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations will:

- build relationships of trust;
- provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to be informed and understand available options for proposals/directions and risks before deciding how to contribute;
- promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personal development;
- provide a source for government to access broader perspective, information and solutions to inform decisions and services; and
- be mutually beneficial to government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Limitations

It is important to outline the limitations to the analysis and findings. These analyses are reliant on documentation provided by the organisations delivering the programs. There is no capacity to verify the documentation provided against organisational practice or proposed practice. Further, the assessment of good or innovative practice is assessed solely on the documentation provided to AIFS by FaHCSIA. An organisation may in fact be engaging in good and/or innovative practice, but did not include documentation to identify that this is the case.

This analysis is based on documentation received by the department by the due date of 9 December 2011. Since January 2012, FaHCSIA has been providing feedback to organisations regarding the coverage of their Access Strategy and advising whether further work is required in order to meet the department's expectations. As at 31 May 2012, 229 organisations' Access Strategies were not yet agreed with the department and as such this analysis does not fully reflect the final agreed outcomes of the negotiations between the department and providers on their strategies. This has meant that a proportion of the documents analysed may have incomplete or insufficiently described actions to appropriately represent the actual strategies the organisation is pursuing or planning to pursue.

Analysis findings

Strategies to improve the accessibility of services for vulnerable families and children

Service delivery to vulnerable and disadvantaged families is evidently a driving force for the majority of organisations funded by the FSP. In current service delivery, considerable effort is made by services to carefully appraise the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families and offer service provision closely in accord with these needs.

Variations between strategies existed largely as a matter of the degree to which organisations were able to be flexible and/or collaborative in their service delivery in order to meet the needs of vulnerable families in a respectful and meaningful way. These variations were often a function of the size, location, and capacity of the organisation. The nature of vulnerability also varied among primary target groups for organisations, which then dictated the appropriateness of responses to their needs.

To further examine some of the methods by which services improved (or proposed to improve) accessibility, responsiveness, and outcomes for vulnerable families, the findings of the *Engaging Hard-to-Reach Families and Children* study⁴ (Cortis, Katz, & Patulney, 2009), were considered as guiding principles. Cortis et al. (2009) pointed out that those who are hard-to-reach are likely to be under-represented, marginalised, disadvantaged, and socially excluded families. These families typically fall into three categories: disengaged from opportunity; invisible or overlooked; or service resistant. For each of these groups, but particularly so for the invisible or overlooked group, the responsibility to identify, engage with, and provide services is fundamentally a service provider issue. The authors even go so far as to suggest that it is less about the families being hard-to-reach than it is about services being difficult to access.

Cortis et al. (2009) noted that engagement is broader than simply referral pathways, program information and access, but that continued participation in programs must be considered and fostered. Previous research identified that listening to and connecting with families, and delivering programs in flexible, informal and (especially) non-stigmatising manners are paramount in successful engagement with families. They noted that relationships and networks play a critical role in providing for families by identifying community and family needs, finding and reaching clients, and for building capacity and ensuring service continuity.

In terms of staffing, work-style and skill can play a more important role than specific qualifications. Employing local community members is important to limit the perception of distance between service providers and families who access services. Where there is less of a perception of distance and difference—although it should be expected to take time—trust is established more easily and relationship building progresses with fewer hurdles. Ensuring that staff loads are such that time can be taken to establish an individual relationship, that families are able to set their own goals, and that service delivery can be conducted in a flexible manner is also important to ensure engagement—and also to build a trust-based relationship.

Overall, there were three categories of strategies to engage hard-to-reach families identified in the study:

- intervention design;
- networks and partnerships; and
- staffing issues.

Both intervention design and staffing issues are considered below—issues related to networks and partnerships are considered in a later section on collaboration. Good practice examples are provided, however, it is recognised that many more examples of good practice in these areas were exhibited in the Access Strategy documents analysed.

Intervention design

Tailoring activities to fulfil needs of target group/s, in particular via the provision of services not otherwise available from existing services

Offering (or planning to offer) existing programs/services to new client groups, new programs/services to existing client groups, or new programs/services to new groups was one way in which this strategy was enacted. Several organisations also actively worked with other organisations and services in their local area to prevent service duplication.

⁴ The study explored how a number of FaHCSIA projects and activities engaged “hard-to-reach” clients. Projects were part of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (2004–2009) and included Communities for Children, Invest to Grow and Local Answers.

Gosnells Women's Health Services (WA)

The community identified a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to engage in regular physical activity, and in response Gosnells Women's Health Services established a regular walking group and morning tea/information session. Low numbers resulted in a review of the program and it was found that the women thought walking was "boring". In response a partnership was formed with two local primary schools to offer dance classes to parents, resulting in increased attendance. Physical activity sessions followed by parenting education sessions have followed.

The Benevolent Society (NSW)

Relationships have been built with 18 primary schools in the Macleay Valley and a consultation is being undertaken with all principals to identify issues related to school readiness and progression through the early school years. These issues are linked to local information related to the five Australian Early Development Index⁵ domains.

Dunalley Tasman Neighbourhood House (TAS)

Dunalley Tasman Neighbourhood House operates under a shared strategic plan with two other community houses, resulting in shared outcomes, networks, resources, joint funding submissions and strong collegial support. A collaborative relationship with two key schools in the region has also been forged, improving outcomes for children in both schools.

Setup of service delivery environments, such as providing soft entry points, non-threatening, indirect and informal services

Thoughtful responses to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families were evident in the majority of documents. Warm (and/or facilitated) referral was a common strategy within the documents to link families to helpful services, as were "no wrong door" policies and the use of soft entry points, particularly in the realm of active program provision such as playgroups. Another strategy was to co-locate services with other internal or external services, or invite other services into the program to meet clients and provide information and education.

Gundagai Neighbourhood Centre (NSW)

The Gundagai town-based playgroup is held at the Neighbourhood Centre, which is co-located with the Centrelink agency, library and Child and Family Health Nurse. The Neighbourhood Centre also offers emergency relief, information, and referrals to other community services, and playgroups are offered in schools in outlying towns where possible.

Mallee Family Care (VIC)

Mallee Family Care has an open door approach to service delivery where community members feel free to drop in for a chat, to use the Internet or phone. The service feels that this helps individuals establish the "lie of the land" before committing to programs or services. The service also collaborates with schools in a soft entry approach to services.

Pine Rivers Neighbourhood Centre (QLD)

Pine Rivers Neighbourhood Centre (PRNC) is a central point of entry for intake for family and relationship services in the local area, providing a coordinated "no wrong door" approach. It is the lead agency for the Moreton Bay Community Consortium, which consists of five partner organisations whose core business is supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged families. The Centre also facilitates the Pine Rivers Care Network, a collaborative network that provides a coordinated approach to access and service delivery to vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

5 <www.rch.org.au/aedi/index.cfm?doc_id=13051>

CatholicCare Sydney (NSW)

CatholicCare Sydney services are delivered as part of a consortium of CatholicCare agencies across Greater Sydney, so that there is “no wrong door” for families. An internal structural realignment has been undertaken to achieve better integration of services for families in need, and researchers evaluate programs and develop action research projects. Time is specifically allocated for interagency work, creating a supportive environment for collaboration and networking.

Outreach activities

There was a great deal of willingness among services to meet families where they were most comfortable, via outreach services. These services took many forms, including actively attending places where vulnerable families and children would be, such as home visits, government services, public housing estates, parks and shopping centres.

Playgroup Victoria (VIC)

The PlaySpot playgroups are held in five different locations within the City of Greater Dandenong and Doveton. Venues include:

- a Maternal and Child Health Centre;
- a local kindergarten;
- a day stay parenting centre;
- a local shopping plaza; and
- a local caravan park.

Positive relationships have developed with staff from these services and other involved groups such as the City of Greater Dandenong Library Outreach Service.

Ngala Community Services (WA)

The Indigenous Parenting Services team work within the local Centrelink office weekly in an effort to actively engage families.

Relationships Australia (NSW)

In an effort to facilitate easier service access, the Family Relationship Centre—based in the Sydney CBD—provides the initial part of its family dispute resolution service via four different organisations that work within the area of family and domestic violence.

Anglicare (NT)

Anglicare NT ensures that services are provided within 50 metres of public transport. Outreach services are provided in settings that are familiar and comfortable for families, including other agency venues, community settings, and families’ homes. They are the coordinators of a range of services who contribute time and resources to provide Play in the Park, a playgroup experience that is held in highly frequented public parks in Alice Springs.

Promotion strategies

Promotional strategies were often based on a consideration of factors that were likely to either inhibit or increase the knowledge of vulnerable families about the service, for example, by considering literacy issues. There was often an emphasis in both current and future proposals on a “quantity” approach, for example, sending more flyers to more services, without a consideration of whether this was an effective means of promotion. Other documents indicated a more thoughtful approach to what may work to specifically target vulnerable families.

Break O'Day Health Resource Association (TAS)

Promotion of the services at Break O'Day has occurred through carefully worded advertisements that use inclusive language and non-threatening descriptions of the services. This has increased access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families. Visual promotion is also widely employed due to literacy issues for many families in the area. The Building Blocks parenting program is promoted to new parents in the region by the Child Health and Parenting Nurse, local council, playgroups and the local neighbourhood houses.

Break O'Day has also been able to successfully promote their services to particularly isolated vulnerable and disadvantaged families through their mobile service, which has given them the versatility to run activities in isolated locations and private homes. This has had a positive effect, with isolated families that would not normally participate wanting to come into the Break O'Day centre for other services.

Incentives to attend such as transport and food

There was much consideration of transport issues that prevented families from accessing services, and these were dealt with in a number of ways:

- via access to the organisation's own, or shared use of a bus;
- by distributing public transport tickets;
- via outreach to family homes; and
- use of Skype or teleconference to undertake all or part (e.g., intake) of the service.

This indicates that organisations often needed to make an assessment about how to effectively balance service delivery options to address transport challenges, within the resources available. These options included families attending the service (onsite service delivery), the service attending the family (outreach) and the use of technology and communications tools to deliver services, with both parties remaining at their "base" (e.g., online counselling, phone intake).

Nepean Community and Neighbourhood Services Centre (NSW)

The centre is located on a housing estate and encourages "drop-ins" to use free telephone, fax, computer, and Wi-Fi services. Children are encouraged to drop in for water or ice-blocks on the way home from school and on school days the centre offers a breakfast club. For those unable to drop in, the centre has an 8-seater bus and provides outreach services.

Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Incorporation (VIC)

Meals and transport is provided for attendees of the parenting program, giving families the opportunity to experience less stress in accessing the program. There is also a food bank on the premises.

Orange City Council (NSW)

A local taxi service provides a scheme for the provision of taxi vouchers, to help parents and children access playgroups.

Use of technology, including to engage rural/remote families

As mentioned above, there were examples where organisations had facilitated the use of technology to more effectively service vulnerable families and children, particularly those in rural and remote areas. This ranged from the use of social media and/or websites to provide general information to clients or to share information with other staff members, through to the proposed use of technology to conduct service delivery.

Mind Australia (formerly Lantern/Southern Mental Health Association) (VIC)

Mind Australia actively uses social media and encourages young people to connect to the service via SMS, email, Facebook and the service's website, *Lantern* <www.lantern.org.au>.

Ballarat Community Health (VIC)

Services offered to young parents use youth-friendly engagement strategies, including the use of social media, particularly as it reduces the cost of communication for the young people involved.

Bushmob FSP Media (NT)

Bushmob have built relationships with ABC, SBS, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association and Imparja Television. Plans exist to update the Bushmob website so that young people can easily present their own views and material.

Sunshine Coast Family Contact Centre (QLD)

This Family Contact Centre has developed a plan to use Skype for supervised contact sessions, in order to address transport-related barriers to attendance at the centre. The successful implementation of this project is dependent upon a cost analysis and access to dedicated computer equipment.

Multicultural Council of NT (NT)

MyNT is a website that provides a means for young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds to articulate their concerns and inform Darwin's service providers and policy-makers about their social, recreational and educational needs.

Client-centred practice and strengths-based approaches

Service provision that was driven by the needs of families themselves was evident in many documents.

UCA Gateway Family Services (NSW)

UCA Gateway Family Services was the founding member of the Stronger Families Alliance, with 28 organisations working together to devise, implement, and review a local area child and family plan. The service is engaging with other providers to identify barriers to service access for hard-to-reach families, with a philosophy that it is up to services to be easier to reach, not the reverse.

Youth and Family Services (Logan City) Inc. (QLD)

Youth and Family Services aim for service integration across family support program activities, housing, mental health, legal and financial counselling, disability, and family violence in a variety of settings across local schools, multicultural and Indigenous agencies, and women's health services. A continuum of services is provided—from group to case management and counselling—and services are also taken to the client and/or transport is provided as needed. Youth and Family Services have reoriented their service model to better fit the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families by offering outreach services, simplified information and referral processes, and the use of non-stigmatising services as a point of referral (e.g., Qld Health).

Goulburn Valley Family Care Inc. (VIC)

Goulburn Valley Family Care funds a community access worker position to address access, equity, and social inclusion issues and to engage people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They have formal partnerships with a number of organisations that also provide services to hard-to-reach families, such as Centrelink, Early Childhood Services, kindergartens and schools and, where possible, use joint care plans for children and families. Staff members make

a point of volunteering at the local English Language Centre to support new arrivals, which helps gain insight into client need, cultural sensitivity, and cross cultural communication.

Flexibility, sensitivity and service user empowerment

Accessibility issues for vulnerable families were being regularly addressed by services, including affordability (via reduced or waived fees), physical accessibility (e.g., proximity to public transport, easy access for wheelchairs), and flexible hours. Some organisations found ways to adapt the delivery of programs to suit the often chaotic lives of families who were largely driven by basic survival needs and unable to commit to a “timetable” of service delivery.

Ngangganawili Aboriginal Inc. (WA)

Police provide driver training to young people in a car that belongs to the program, which is sponsored by BHP. This helps to break down barriers between young people and the police, and as young people gain their licence it is less likely that they will engage in the offence of driving without a licence.

Migrant Information Centre (VIC)

Children engaged in programs at the Migrant Information Centre are collected from school and dropped home after the program. Warm referrals are made for families to mainstream family services, as a way to support the family but also to ensure that the service understands the family's needs and provide a culturally appropriate service.

Relationships Australia (WA)

Relationships Australia offers reduced or fee free services, interpreters for non-English speaking clients, telephone counselling for remotely located families or individuals with a disability. Clinical staff are trained to respond to a wide variety of issues relevant to vulnerable families, such as suicidal behaviours, domestic violence, and complex needs. The organisation works with other services to provide occasional care for children when parents are engaged in programs.

Staffing

Employing staff from hard-to-reach groups

Employing staff members from hard-to-reach groups was not often apparent in the documents, and this may be reflective of the challenges involved in such an approach, in terms of resource allocation and appropriate training or professional development. There was, however, a sense that staff members such as interpreters were often from the same communities as vulnerable families and helped to bridge the gaps.

Port Douglas Community Services Network (QLD)

The volunteer program at Port Douglas Community Services Network has resulted in service users often becoming workers. One parent participant who volunteered at the Family Support Program has gone on to a 3-month position as a community development worker. All reception staff are volunteers, meaning that the first point of contact for families is a community person.

Staff quality and ratios—including training, development and supervision

Strategies were largely focused on providing skills for staff to increase effectiveness in addressing the needs of vulnerable families and children. Professional development of staff members was a considerable factor in future plans, particularly in the area of cultural sensitivity. This raises the question of the extent to which the workforce is expected to be multi-skilled, and whether options such as sharing staff with specialist services is a more effective way forward where possible.

Relationships Australia (QLD)

Staff members at Relationships Australia have a specific focus on aligning practice with an evidence base and best practice principles. Ongoing research is conducted to assess the effectiveness of the service and trialling new ideas, for example, online service delivery. A supportive environment for networking and collaboration is evident.

Uniting Care Wesley Country SA (Port Pirie) (SA)

Uniting Care offers mentor support to Aboriginal workers, particularly those who are isolated from other Aboriginal workers. Mentors may be from other organisations, or community elders where appropriate.

Catholic Marriage Education Services (WA)

Staff members are encouraged to seek casual work at larger FSP providers, such as Anglicare and Relationships Australia, to gain insights into provided services, reduce duplication and to foster collaboration.

Centacare Brisbane (QLD)

Management have acknowledged staff members' anxieties about working effectively with vulnerable families and have responded with training opportunities. The organisation is aiming to provide staff who work with Indigenous families and children with an Indigenous mentor, to maximise cultural understanding.

South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre (VIC)

Staff members are offered opportunities to access training on how to work effectively with interpreters. Multicultural lunches are held, and presentations at staff meetings assist in understanding different cultures and cultural needs for families and children.

A more comprehensive description of how some organisations are addressing the needs of vulnerable families is provided in Box 3 (page 14).

Collaboration

Organisations almost universally indicated that they had relationships with other organisations in their region, with the rare exceptions being the most isolated or remote services. Many of these relationships are long standing and embedded in the service provision of the respective organisations. The degree to which these interagency relationships were described in terms of whether they deliver tangible benefits to vulnerable families varied, but avoiding service duplication or collaborating to address gaps in service delivery was evident.

In some Access Strategies, organisations identified the mechanisms for those relationships being established, such as formal partnerships with Memorandums of Understanding in place. Such partnerships are occurring or are planned with a range of organisations, not only within the family support sector but also with other services, such as neighbourhood or community houses.

Regular networking as a form of collaboration was very common, for example, Family Law Pathways Networks and interagency meetings featured prominently. There was also considerable involvement in specialist network meetings relating to issues such as domestic violence (e.g., Hume Domestic Violence Network in Victoria). Co-ordination of services was also common, and a number of examples of integrated service provision existed (see, for example, Northern Bay Family Centre in the following section). There was also a considerable degree of service co-ordination and integration, including the sharing of staff across and within organisations, a shared responsibility for the welfare of local families, and co-location with non-stigmatising services.

Examples of good and innovative practices—collaboration

Examples of good and innovative practices related to collaboration that are being undertaken or proposed in a selection of Access Strategies are provided below. It is important to note that these are provided as examples only, and the authors recognise the exceptional work being undertaken and planned in this area by many other FSP-funded organisations across Australia.

Northern Bay Family Centre (VIC)

The Northern Bay Family Centre offers Communities for Children services in Geelong and is part of a family “hub” model of “one-stop shop” service provision that also includes a child care centre, Young Parents’ Access Program and the Northern Bay College. The services work collaboratively to provide access to early learning and care environments for young children, pathways to re-engage young parents with training and education, and services to decrease social isolation. Key service providers offer programs and special activities at the centre, including Glastonbury Child and Family Services, Catholic Care, Best Start/Linking Schools and Early Year Partnerships, Smith Family, and the City of Greater Geelong.

A small community group contributed to the development of the Access Strategy, and are committed in an ongoing manner to implementing and monitoring the recommendations made within the strategy. Parents are consulted in an ongoing fashion to determine needs and how they are met via service provision.

Further plans include working towards an integrated service model, which will incorporate an on-site kindergarten and health and welfare support services.

Box 3: General examples of addressing the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children

Grand Pacific Health (NSW)

Grand Pacific Health is engaged in a number of strategies that help to focus service provision on vulnerable and disadvantaged families. A project network group, with over 70 service delivery professionals from 31 separate services, is utilised to assist with targeting vulnerable families by providing information and referral forms for distribution to potential clients. Internal monthly meetings are used to share information about new services that may be operating, identify opportunities for internal collaboration between services, and peer-discussion of strategies that worked and didn’t work.

The service referral forms and correspondence with referring agencies explicitly indicate that the primary target group is vulnerable and disadvantaged parents, and the service offers a contact point to discuss whether clients from the referring service meet this criterion. Grand Pacific also run educational workshops for vulnerable families in the community in partnership with other agencies/services.

The positive relationships that workers from other services may have with families are leveraged to increase the family’s willingness to attend and see the value in the new service the organisation is offering. In turn, relationships are fostered between clients and workers from other services to assist with promoting services operated by others (e.g., by holding workshops in others’ venues, and using co-facilitators from those other services).

Relationships Australia (SA)

Relationships Australia (SA) provide services that consider issues from both an individual and a population health perspective. Issues like economic pressure, poverty, cultural conflict, migration, environmental changes, isolation, domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse are all considered in service delivery and staff development.

A foundation of outreach, co-location, a range of referral types, linkages, and case management are used across their delivery of FSP services. This provides for relevance and accessibility for vulnerable and disadvantaged families. In order to minimise stigmatising of families, referrals now focus more on “chatting with someone who can help” as opposed to counselling or education services. To supplement this less formal approach to service delivery, families

no longer have to complete referral forms, but can simply attend the service. Staff members are committed to attending community activities to provide a basis of trust, as they become known as real people outside of their professional context. Staff members are also encouraged to work across FSP programs so families with multiple needs don't always have to engage with multiple workers.

Regional staff members are aware of travel plans and of the program delivery schedule and staff who deliver services have a family or previous work connection to those communities. Programs are culturally appropriate and can be delivered in a range of settings from formal community centres to bush picnics as required.

Service provision to Indigenous people is informed by an understanding and recognition of historical and current contexts and underpinned by recognition that building relationships with individuals and communities and partnering with those who have a specialised knowledge and experience is core work. That context includes working from a perspective of cultural respect and safety and the recognition of the diversity between and within population groups. A recognition of and respect for different perceptions of family informs holistic approaches to family support. Program delivery is from a strength based approach and supports communities to become strong, and the organisational culture ensures reflexive practice and collaborative action learning.

Anglicare (WA)

Anglicare WA maintains collaborative relationships with many local government and non-government organisations to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families are met.

In the Kimberley region of WA, for example, Anglicare WA has a Memorandum of Understanding in place to support referrals and collaborative case management with Legal Aid, the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service Council, Men's Outreach Service (incorporating Alive and Kicking Goals!), the Disability Services Commission, the Department of Child Protection and the Family Court of Western Australia.

To ensure that services are culturally appropriate and meet the needs of Indigenous families, Anglicare WA:

- engages an Aboriginal Reference group, which meets regularly with the CEO and Board;
- engages an Aboriginal consultant on an ad hoc basis and Aboriginal Service Manager on an ongoing basis to oversee specific programs and provide advice on culturally appropriate service provision;
- conducts Welcome to Country at all staff meetings, all Board and Executive members are required to attend training in working with Aboriginal people, cultural awareness training is mandatory for all staff, and the organisation participates in local reconciliation events; and
- offers flexible work hours for its Aboriginal staff to allow for cultural commitments. Policies and procedures affecting Aboriginal staff have been developed in consultation with local Aboriginal elders and Aboriginal staff.

Anglicare WA has developed culturally appropriate resources for Aboriginal clients, offers flexible service delivery including outreach and home visits, and its practitioners have access to culturally appropriate community awareness and education resources developed by Aboriginal groups in their respective regions.

To build and maintain strong relationships with Aboriginal clients, Anglicare WA has established firm worker/client boundaries, provides a service to communities on particular days and times as requested by the community and puts additional effort into demonstrating confidentiality.

As part of the Mums and Dads Forever Program, Anglicare WA has developed an education program specifically for use with the Noongar people in WA. The program is called Koolangka Keyen and offers a one-day group for parents/family members who are separated from their children and are experiencing conflict. In their 2011–14 Indigenous Access Plan, Anglicare WA has committed to collaborate with Aboriginal services to modify and deliver the Koolangka Keyen program in the Kimberly and Broome region by July 2012.

Similarly, Anglicare WA has committed to developing a relationship with Yorgum to deliver group programs and counselling. In consultation with the Aboriginal Service Manager, they also expect develop appropriate home visit and outreach to Aboriginal families living in metropolitan areas.

Jacaranda Community Centre (WA)

The primary target group for the Jacaranda Community Centre is at-risk Indigenous families, who make up 80% of clients with intense support needs. The centre currently offers outreach services and has a number of cross-referral and networking relationships with other non-government organisations, WA Government departments, health services, and schools. The centre was established with the assistance of local Aboriginal people, who remain involved on committees, sub-committees, and as employees.

The centre examines family dynamics and strengths through the use of family trees, but also “medical trees” to help collate medical information, identify organisations that can assist with medical needs, and to work out whether medical issues are impacting on issues related to parenting, housing, education and children’s behaviour. A strengths-based approach to programs allows families to nominate agencies they wish to be involved in case management.

The Jacaranda Community Centre is in conversation with the Department of Housing (WA) around their “three strikes and eviction” policy, as overcrowding, noise, rent arrears and other issues are often a result of transient relatives or inaccurate reporting by neighbours. The aim for the centre is to encourage early referrals through either the Department of Housing, other organisations or via word of mouth so that intensive family support can be introduced at a much earlier level to try to prevent eviction.

CatholicCare (NT)

CatholicCare delivers a number of FSP services throughout the Northern Territory, including family and relationships services, specialist family violence services, and Kids in Focus. There is an expectation that staff members will actively work with the community to ensure that families needs are addressed by available services, including resource sharing, co-facilitation of groups, warm referrals and participation in networks and community events. Outreach services are also offered, including fly-in staff members who regularly attend remote communities.

CatholicCare has invested in local infrastructure (purpose built offices) in key locations to demonstrate commitment and a willingness to engage long term with communities such as Nguiu, Tennant Creek, Palmerston and Daly River. Local staff work alongside professionally trained staff to help embed the services within the community and build the critical trust needed to provide effective services.

Plans for the future include the development of an Elders group to provide input into service provision in the Darwin region.

Mackillop Family Services (VIC)

Mackillop Family Services operate a Family Relationship Centre (FRC), Communities for Children funded playgroups, and parenting education in Melbourne and surrounding regions. A number of examples of involvement in alliances, relationships and partnerships are provided in their Access Strategy. This includes involvement in local area planning in conjunction with a range of other organisations. One example is involvement in the Maribyrnong Early Years Alliance, a partnership group of many organisations who guide strategic planning for early years services across the municipality and the development of the Maribyrnong Early Years Plan.

The FRC (based in Broadmeadows) has staff members who represent the Centre on a number of different cultural networks, and their close relationship with Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre has resulted in a Senior Cultural Leader who supports culturally appropriate service delivery. The FRC also has a Cultural Consultative Advisory Group that informs and guides cultural connections, and the centre is a leader in responding to intergenerational conflict in culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Playgroups are run in a range of venues in low socioeconomic areas, such as local community centres, which also serve as a source of referrals.

Strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations

Family Support Program service providers, with only a few exceptions, were required under their funding agreement to document and implement actions in an Indigenous Access Plan.

Good practice in strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations was most apparent when actions related to the Closing the Gap criteria (see Box 1 on page 3) were embedded in organisational thinking, rather than imposed, or program specific. In particular, programs that were delivered in places where participants were most comfortable, and locals were involved in the design and delivery of the program at more than a superficial level (i.e., employed to deliver programs), offered the most in relation to best practice.

Most services aim for culturally appropriate service provision or have plans to implement training in the future in this area, including engagement with local Indigenous stakeholders for consultation regarding program design and delivery. The use of Indigenous artwork featured prominently in promotional materials and as decoration in office spaces and service delivery areas.

The size of the organisation (as measured by the amount of FSP funding) appeared to influence the likelihood of evidence of good or innovative practice in strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations. Larger organisations were more likely than small organisations to have documented evidence indicating this was the case. Documentation indicated that many small organisations felt they were already working at the capacity of their resources. As indicated earlier, a lack of documentation by smaller non-Indigenous agencies does not necessarily mean that they do not have good relationships with Indigenous agencies, and vice versa.

Service providers were asked to nominate an Indigenous Access Improvement Target. The target indicates the percentage increase of Indigenous client numbers that organisations will aim to work with under their current FSP funding agreement schedule. There was considerable variation between organisations, reflecting the size of the organisation, their overall client numbers, the type of services they offer—including whether Indigenous Families were already a primary target group for a service type—and where they operate their services from.

Examples of good and innovative practices—strengthening relationships

Examples of good and innovative practices in strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations that are being undertaken or proposed in a selection of Access Strategies are provided below. It is important to note that these are provided as examples only, and the authors recognise the exceptional work being undertaken and planned in this area by many other FSP-funded organisations across Australia.

Interrelate Family Centres (Central Coast NSW)

Interrelate Family Centres service a population where there are high rates of housing stress, lower than average weekly earning, high divorce rates, and a low proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up a significant proportion of the population (higher than the state average) and are largely concentrated in one area. The Darkinjung Land Council is the local land council, which works to improve understanding, cultural respect, accessibility of services and programs, and lobbying and advocating on behalf of the Indigenous community.

A strong working relationship between Interrelate and the Mingaletta Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation has resulted in numerous positive initiatives including family fun days, co-

facilitation of positive parenting programs, a young boys didgeridoo group, and sponsorship of the family and community connection Wollotuka art prize.

Interrelate uses a case management model for all families and, through use of a sliding scale for fees, endeavours to make services accessible to all families, particularly the most vulnerable. Programs are offered from a range of facilities and Interrelate collaborates with other service providers to increase accessibility.

Prior to employing an Indigenous Community Liaison Officer, Interrelate conducted widespread consultation to develop the position description and employment strategy. The Liaison Officer is connected to existing Indigenous worker support services and provided with professional development opportunities. This model will be employed and used to ensure all vacant positions are advertised among Aboriginal networks to facilitate a larger Indigenous workforce within Interrelate.

In the future, managers and key staff will attend the Central Coast Aboriginal Interagency Network meetings to facilitate understanding of local issues and embed those learnings into service delivery. Aboriginal stakeholders will be consulted to ensure culturally relevant adaptation of programs and to change program delivery methods to make them Aboriginal specific. In addition, a better understanding and respect for Indigenous culture will be fostered via cultural awareness training, and staff will be encouraged to visit local significant sites and attend community days of significance, such as the National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Commemoration (NAIDOC) or Sorry Day.

Kirton Point Children's Centre (SA)

Kirton Point Children's Centre estimates that they are currently servicing just under half of the Aboriginal children under the age of 4 years in their service delivery area. The area is characterised by large variations in disadvantage, highlighting the complex community needs. Many local families are affected by periods of separation while a family member works away for up to 3 months at a time in industries such as mining, fishing and agriculture. Housing is increasingly unaffordable and many children are developmentally vulnerable. Kirton Point Children's Centre focuses on improving access to services by addressing transport needs, supporting low-income families and reducing developmental vulnerability in children and families.

Currently, quality relationships with key workers in Indigenous Parenting Support Services, Aboriginal Health Services, the Aboriginal Community Council and the Port Lincoln Children's Centre have developed through co-working, service visits, and network meetings. The centre uses a variety of Aboriginal artwork, photographs, and posters throughout the centre to help grandparents, fathers and other family members feel welcome to attend programs. For those families who are unable to access the centre, home visits are employed to provide support.

Thirteen per cent of the workforce at Kirton Point Children's Centre is Aboriginal and plans are in place to ensure Aboriginal community members are supported to attain employment and/or necessary training in education and care of children. Priorities for improving services to Indigenous families include program coordination with other agencies to reduce duplication and pressure on families, ensuring that Indigenous family voices form a part of the parent advisory group and ensuring that Aboriginal community representatives participate in all levels of governance.

Save the Children Australia (NT)

Save the Children provide Intensive Supported Playgroups across a number of different communities in the Northern Territory. The cultural groups within these communities are diverse and comprised of a range of Aboriginal Nations—English is the second language for most residents. Despite this diversity, each community faces similar social and economic disadvantage. The communities are characterised by significant poverty, insufficient and poor quality housing, alcohol and substance abuse, and frequent family and community violence. In one community, almost all of the 500 children have been identified as having Failure to Thrive.

Save the Children works in partnership with traditional owners, Elders, Aboriginal Health Services, Menzies University, and local schools—all of which support community work. Programs are developed in response to community needs. The playgroups are culturally sensitive and delivered in safe settings on community land, by trusted support workers, to increase the inclusive nature of the work. All the field staff involved in program delivery identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

While program delivery occurs at a local level there is national level support via the Save the Children's Reconciliation Action Plan, overseen by the Australian Programs Manager and Reconciliation Advisory Committee. There are plans to develop cultural protocols and engagement guidelines informed by SNAICC and FaHCSIA frameworks. The organisation aims to increase the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and to engage more effectively with Indigenous communities and organisations so that feedback on programs can be directed into program delivery and development.

Good Beginnings (Townsville) (QLD)

A key relationship has been developed between the Midtha Goothalins Women (meaning many black sisters) and Good Beginnings. This group of Indigenous volunteers take an interest in their community, drive program development and delivery, and provide local knowledge and cultural expertise. The relationship is significant as the women are well known locally and are visibly present within Good Beginnings' programs as Elders and advisors. This is the most significant factor in Good Beginnings being accepted by the local Indigenous community, and has had a flow on effect to other FSP program areas.

Summary

The analysis of the Access Strategy documents has provided a comprehensive insight into the strategies by which FSP services reach, engage, and maintain engagement with vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children. It is clearly evident that organisations have these families as the foremost consideration for their service provision, and that there are numerous examples of both good and innovative practices that aim to meet families' needs. The challenge for some organisations will be to enact the strategies proposed within the document in ways that will maximise service provision while minimising any unintended consequences, such as partnership fatigue.

Box 4: Regional development of the Indigenous Access Plan

Family Support Program providers in the Geelong region of Victoria (Geelong Family Relationship Centre [Catholic Care VIC/TAS], Northern Bay Family Centre, Glastonbury Community Services, City of Greater Geelong, Bethany Community Support, Lifeworks) undertook a coordinated approach to the Indigenous Action Plan. The agencies are collaboratively engaged in activities that enhance the accessibility and suitability of services for Indigenous families and children. The following key themes were outlined in the relevant Access Strategy documents:

- positive initiatives to provide a welcoming space;
- staff cultural awareness training;
- proactive engagement with Indigenous community workers;
- recognition and inclusion of Indigenous culture in program design;
- initial connections/relationship development with Indigenous organisations; and
- acknowledgement of and commitment to furthering accessibility and appropriateness of services.

Each organisation has actions that are unique to their needs and service delivery focus, alongside actions that apply to all organisations involved or actions for which one organisation is taking the lead. In this way, the providers are maximising their resources, sharing knowledge and support, and are taking a strategic approach to establishing and building on existing relationships with Indigenous organisations in the region.

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