

Intercountry Adoption
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Consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service

We are very grateful to the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service and to respond to the Discussion Paper released during February 2020.

Relationship Matters Counselling and Mediation (formally LifeWorks Relationship Counselling and Education Services) is a not-for-profit public benevolent institution (charity) that aims to promote healthy, respectful and fulfilling relationships within the Victorian community. Established in 1947 as the Church of England Marriage Guidance Council, LifeWorks Relationships Counselling and Education services rebranded to Relationship Matters in November 2019.

Relationship Matters is approved by the Federal Attorney-General's Department, as both a family mediation and family counselling organisation, under the provision of the Family Law Act 1975. In addition, we are a provider of mental health counselling services under the Accessible Psychological Interventions (API) program and hold accreditation for the National Mental Health Service Standards.

We recognise relationships in all their diversity and our services are offered to individuals, couples, and families regardless of gender, religious affiliation, race, cultural heritage, sexual orientation or economic circumstance. We work towards building positive, safe and respectful relationships, and the prevention of violence.

Relationship Matters provides a range of services, including individual counselling, relationship counselling, family therapy, relationship, parenting, and family education programs, communication skills and personal development, family dispute resolution and mediation, and behaviour change programs to address family violence or abuse. At Relationship Matters, we recognise that work and life are intimately connected, and offer workplace services for employers and employees, through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) and our Workplace Services division.

In 2016, Relationship Matters launched the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service, funded under the Family and Relationship Services stream of The Department of Social Services which is the subject to this review.

The Intercountry Adoption Family Support (ICAFS) service aims to provide counselling, case management, relationship education and support that will assist with trauma, family functioning, relationship strengthening, attachment support, parenting skills, and individual and child wellbeing. Relationship Matters delivers counselling and psycho-social group work (education programs) and case management. This is a national service.

ICAFS provides services to:

- individuals, couples and families formally engaged in the Intercountry adoption process
- individuals, couples and families who have completed an intercountry adoption where there are family and relationship issues present or where adult adoptees find it difficult to form and maintain relationships
- individuals, couples and families who have adopted a child from overseas (expatriates, etc.) where there are family and relationship issues present relating to the adoption
- adult adoptees requiring support who find it difficult to form and maintain relationships

The program originally consisted of a three-year contract, split equally between lead agency (LifeWorks) and International Social Service of Australia (ISS) through subcontracting arrangements. The original contract commenced on 1 June 2016 to finish on 30 June 2019. Relationship Matters managed and delivered intake and all counselling, community development, training and education components of the service while ISS managed and delivered the casework component (more generally known as information and referral support).

A review of the program was part of the original service design and work-plan to be undertaken by an independent contractor. Changemith Consulting was contracted to review ICAFSS in November 2018.

The consultant brief included a review of:

- attributes of people accessing the program (data on intake and referrals, including between ISS and LifeWorks);
- people who appear to be under-represented in accessing the program;
- views of different stakeholders on the model and what should change - including key state/territory government departmental contacts and other stakeholders; associates, adult adoptees and relevant (adoptee and adoptee family) support groups.
- effectiveness of the counselling and case management activity itself, including targets and utilisation of staff/associates working in the program.

The scope of the review was limited to the funded ICAFSS program, as it was delivered at the time and included:

- a review of program documents including documents relating to service development, model, contract arrangement and partnership, together with documents outlining the policy context and history of Intercountry Adoption in Australia;
- service data were analysed including referrals and demand overall the program streams from various sources including data provided by the subcontractor;
- stakeholder interviews – 12-15 including partners, practitioners, state and commonwealth government reps, consumers, and advocates;
- advocate networks provided comments from numerous adult adoptees for inclusion as relevant;
- notes from interviews were returned to interviewees for fact and context checking;
- there was interest in viewing the completed report by numerous interviewees which were granted;
- there was a wide-ranging discussion with stakeholders by the consultant that reflected the breadth and complexity of the intercountry adoption issue, and related services and supports to adoptive families and adult adoptees;
- a detailed analysis was also undertaken of intake and referrals, demand and staff/associate allocation across adoptee countries of origin, family state of residence and the categories of clients i.e. families, parents, and adult adoptees; pre- and post-adoption;
- also, client records on Penelope, the client record management system, were analysed as well as ISS intake activity records.

Changesmith Consulting's evaluations identified key findings and future success factors as well as provided recommendations for program improvement. Specifically, the Changesmith evaluation found that the program was a highly valued service delivering high-quality services that met a clear need. It found that demand in some program components exceeded available resources and as a result noted that the objectives of the program were not being met in as cost-effective a way as is necessary, given the demand. Specifically, the information and referral/casework component had falling demand in line with falling numbers of ICA finalised adoptions, so changes were recommended as necessary to create a viable cost-effective model of service for the components experiencing an escalation in demand.

The key findings and future success factors identified by the Changesmith evaluation were:

- demand for counselling exceeds funding whereas demand for case management has never met targets and demand is declining;
- most information and support service delivery was not face to face;
- the need to recalibrate expectations with the disconsolation of DSS funding for intercountry adoption tracing services;
- the ICAFSS was a highly valued service with high-quality services that meet a clear need and/or filled an identified gap;
- consumer engagement is essential for both families and adult adoptees;
- there is a need to keep building and deepening the practice of the professional staff through a community of practice (within ICAFS) and beyond the program (mental health practitioners) and to develop if possible sector standards;
- sector relationships are complex and require continued attention and resourcing;
- there was a need to respond to client demand and analysis of client education and support needs;
- there is a need to market and promote a refreshed model;
- there is a desire to develop education and online resources.

As a result of these key findings the Changesmith evaluation recommended the following program changes:

- dial-up: more resources to provide more counselling appointments;
- dial-up: travel, and networking and promotions budget for the national Coordinator need to be bigger;
- dial-up: resources for administration and communications support at HQ;
- dial-up: create a national case management role to back up the national Coordinator to offer phone-and email-based support and case management. Not critical for this role to be in Melbourne but will work closely with overall Coordinator and be client / external facing to the field, to build and maintain knowledge of local referral networks and require high-level intercountry adoption competency;
- re-calibrate: option to contract out production of educational material; development of state-by-state local referral guides to accompany generic online resources; delivery of educational and engagement programs by 'national' staff;
- re-calibrate data collection and analysis to deepen understanding of issues associated with intercountry adoption; enable contribution to policy debates; deliver KPI's for community development, sector / professional development of the national community of practice; data and overhead supports;
- drop: funding of a part-time devolved staff cohort in 5 capital cities with a 'state' focus. Manage the transition of clients from ISS to other sources of support, including the new ICAFS national case management model;
- dial-up: Community of Practice – annual Thought Leadership and Practice Forum with invitations to associates (free registration), private practitioners in the field (paid registration) local adoption

services, family and adoptee support networks, mentors and young / emerging practitioners, and international researchers.

These program recommendations were accepted in their entirety and implemented by Relationship Matters following endorsement by the Department of Social Services Children's Policy Branch and DSS funding contract managers, and now reflect the new service model design which commenced operation 1 July 2019.

NEW MODEL (from JULY 2019)

Increased resources for more counselling appointments

In the third year of the service, the demand for counselling exceeded the funding and for the first time, a waiting list was necessary. The previous number of 1250 funded sessions was increased to 2200 sessions.

National Case Management Role

A national information and support worker role was established in the new model to provide casework services and to support the national Coordinator in the running of the ICAFS service. The information and support worker manages all enquiries to the service, undertaking an in-depth intake process that facilitates an assessment of the client's support needs and an allocation of resources to meet those needs within the scope of the program. This may involve liaising with other services to coordinate support to a client with complex needs, referring the client to programs for requirements that cannot be met within the scope of the ICAFS program and providing ongoing practical and emotional support to the client throughout the establishment phase of their relationship with their ICAFSS counsellor and beyond. The information and support worker provides support via phone, video link or email, depending on the preference of the client.

Case Coordination and Secondary Consultations

An area of increasing service delivery has been the provision of secondary consultations to other services working with adoptees and their families. As part of the in-depth intake process, the information and support worker has been liaising with other services already working with clients. Together with the national Coordinator, the service has been providing specialised education and consultation to staff in other services to increase their awareness and knowledge of intercountry adoption and implications it may have in working with the unique needs of this client group. This has included staff from child protection, out-of-home care, justice, education, adolescent mental health, and psychiatric services, resulting in increased adoption-competence to inform their direct work practice with adoptees and their families.

Focus on the production of educational material through webinars and community events

Increased resources channelled into the education component would allow the service to expand its focus into this area. Ongoing consultation with, and feedback from, the intercountry adoption community has assisted us in shaping the content of these resources which ensure a wide reach. Unfortunately, our 12-month plan has now been placed on hold as we look for other ways to deliver this part of the service.

Ongoing professional development for all associate and Relationship Matters counsellors in adoption competence

Our associate counsellors and RM staff are highly skilled professionals with extensive experience in trauma-informed practices. The national Coordinator provides monthly supervision sessions with all associate counsellors to ensure a high quality of service and to maintain adoption-competence amongst newer associates. Each year we host a 2-day conference where all our associate counsellors travel to Melbourne for ongoing professional development in adoption-competent practices.

Community of Practice

The development of an annual Community of Practice forum to include invitations to associates, private practitioners in the field, local adoption services, family and adoptee support networks, mentors and young / emerging practitioners, and international researchers. An advisory group was formed consisting of a range of experts in the field, including a prominent adult adoptee advocate with lived experience. Unfortunately, it has been necessary to postpone this event due to the impact of COVID-19, however, we anticipate that this event can be delivered and a community of practice formally launched in late 2020.

Adult Adoptees

The original tender program specs limited the engagement of clients to families who were contemplating or who had recently completed intercountry adoption. Following the awarding of the service to Relationship Matters and ISS, the service scope was expanded to adult adoptees. Because the scope of the services changed several times during the program development phase and during the first year of implementation, there was and continues to remain confusion amongst adult adoptees about the scope of the program. This confusion is sometimes exacerbated because the program is very clear that we do not support people experiencing acute mental illness, except to support secondary consultation to GP's and mental health acute care services as required.

Tracing

The provision of tracing services has always been out of the scope of this program. However, we strongly support the funding and delivery of these services. Having said that we have always provided significant levels of support through our counselling service to a large number of families and individuals who are about to embark, are engaged in, or who have completed their tracing journey.

Our associate counsellors have extensive experience in preparing families and individuals as they embark on tracing birth families and are there to provide post-tracing support, at which point the next level of trauma may need to be processed. This is a complex and intensive process that is not easily achieved in a small number of counselling sessions, so extended sessions are necessary. We have also provided ongoing support while the client is in their birth country via video link.

Trauma

The journey to intercountry adoption is not an easy one for either the adoptee or the adoptive family. In almost all cases, trauma including deep and complex childhood trauma is a key feature of our work. It is essential that all staff involved in the service delivery to this client group are skilled and experienced in providing therapeutic interventions for trauma within trauma-informed care and practice.

Trauma-informed care and practice is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

ICAFS service provision is designed and continuously audited as part of our clinical governance and quality system to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation. ICAFS staff and associates can recognise the many trauma-related conditions, are aware of the impacts of trauma, and have a do no harm approach. This has sometimes meant that we have to take a difficult decision to refer clients with mental illnesses associated with their trauma to more intensive state-based mental health services.

Activity Planning

Consumer participation in activity planning and program development is a core component of our work, and participant consultation and advisory structures are convened in various forms for each program component.

Internal processes include a preliminary Program Logic which provides a business case for the project which outlines short-term and long-term outcomes and a review process after the project is completed and reviewed annually and includes the important feedback from members of the intercountry adoption community.

Our current Activity Work Plan, negotiated with DSS annually, outlines all the activities the service will provide, and on which we provide regular progress reports to DSS with data and performance indicators to measure the success of these activities. Throughout delivering the program, we have found significant active engagement in the design and negotiation of service components by both the policy branch as well as the contract managers within DSS.

Marketing

In recognition of a continuing need to promote this program to a targeted audience, particularly in Victoria and NSW, Relationship Matters negotiated a digital marketing agreement with an integrated digital marketing company providing advice and support with strategy, creative design, media, and analytics.

A marketing campaign that included two phases has been implemented throughout the program and has included two phases:

Strategy & Development Phase:

- develop communications strategy/key messaging (general & targeted) – define audiences/demographics in collaboration with the agency (Up to 10 hours of work);
- website - create targeted campaign landing pages to link to display/paid & AdWords advertising;
- Facebook & display advertising - creative – develop 10 Ads in 5 sizes for placement/display;
- email outreach (eDM) – the establishment of a Mailchimp Account; eDM template designs; mail transition from existing eDM platform to Mailchimp (tech services);
- image selection and purchase (outside current iStock account).

Implementation Phase:

- upfront strategy and technical set-up including the development of web landing pages, Facebook display – banner ad production and email outreach set-up and database transfer;
- google grants – review key AdWords campaigns under LifeWorks google grants - includes google grants;
- paid search - set up additional AdWords account to bid for key words outside of current grants bid limit;
- Facebook (paid) - targeted Facebook ads and sponsored posts targeting key audiences;
- remarketing & audience building (display ads) - identify users engaging with multiple campaign-related pages and retarget to submit an inquiry or call the service;
- email outreach (eDM);
- sponsored placement & content amplification networks – partner with relevant media/groups for paid/sponsored posts cover key campaign messages.

Demand and Marketing:

There is a very fine balance to be found concerning the marketing strategy given the finite level of service and funding available, particularly for client-facing supports. There is also a need to retain service confidence and service access for this vulnerable client group. Too much marketing risks

driving service demand to levels that we are unable to meet. This was the case for the original service model in the counselling component in 2018/19 and continues to be a key consideration in marketing activity within the new model of service. We need to balance how much marketing we need to do, without over-promising and being unable to deliver the services to meet the demand.

Despite this, service recognition remains a key consideration and so considerable efforts remain important in getting to networks of families and individuals with experience of intercountry adoption.

National accessibility

Currently the service can be accessed via telephone, email and video link which enables access for people living remotely.

Building awareness and adoption-competence amongst counsellors, GP's, teachers and other professionals living in remote areas is another way of ensuring equitable access. Our annual Community of Practice Forum is designed specifically to raise awareness and educate a wider pool of practitioners who can then provide adoption-competent support to members of their community.

We already provide secondary consults to services who find themselves providing support to members of the intercountry adoption community and recognise their limited knowledge of how to work with them.

Opportunities for the Future

Longer-term therapeutic support

After four years of delivering the service, we have consistently been provided with feedback about the need for longer-term therapeutic support. Many of the service users have felt that this need has not been adequately met due to the constraints of the lack of adoption-competence amongst mental health professionals as well as limited funding to those services. We have seen an increase in the number of intercountry adopted teenagers at risk whose families are struggling to find adequate support.

Enhanced system coordination

There is an existing annual National Adoption Service Providers Meeting which is held in different states each year. Membership includes State, Territory and Federal authorities responsible for administering government post-adoption service provision as well as non-government service providers funded by state, territory or federal governments to provide post-adoption services. There could be an add-on meeting exclusively for those organisations and government representatives whose focus is intercountry adoption, which could then include representatives from the intercountry adoption community.

Support or encourage peer support and mentorship among adoptees and families

We will be rolling out a trial developmental group mentoring program later this year to benefit children, adults, and parents within the intercountry adoption community. It will promote personal growth, skill development and confidence to the mentors to provide leadership in the adoptee community. The program will also provide adopted young people with a protective factor in the form of an adult adoptee mentor and create lasting relationships with other adoptees to build a sense of community amongst intercountry adoptees of all ages. The program will also serve adoptive parents by facilitating the building of support networks amongst parents of young people participating in the program.

Encourage the development of support networks and information resources for adoptive and prospective adoptive parents

Increased funding to employ a national peer support worker who would collate, coordinate and encourage the development of support networks and information resources for parents and

prospective adoptive parents, and would work with the national Coordinator in community development projects. This was considered in the original funding model, however, because of the strictly limited funding available, the review revealed a strong preference by all interviewed to preference additional counselling support over peer support resources. We remain committed to a peer support development program, however, it is our view that additional funding would be necessary to deliver this component.

More support for people engaging in tracing activity

To ensure confidence in, and provide accurate information about, the specifics of the search process, we suggest that the Intercountry Adoption Australia website provide this information and the resources required to track the necessary steps, a kind of tip sheet e.g. - contacting the central authorities, the rules in different countries, etc, and the complex role of DNA testing.

A volunteer register could also be established that links adoptees and families who've been through the tracing process and are willing to mentor other members of the intercountry adoption community. This will, therefore, enable the sharing of resources and information whilst building community.

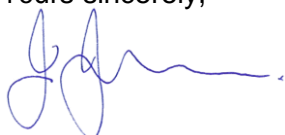
Finally

The 2019 Smithchange review together with our client feedback and evaluation demonstrates the strong support for the ICAFS program.

Specifically, the program was found to be a highly valued service with high-quality services that meet a clear need and/or filled an identified gap. As outlined above, in mid-2019, the program structure was significantly changed to be more efficient and effective in meeting significant client demand for the counselling service component. This involved a significant increase in counselling appointments available, as well as more resources to support secondary consultation, professional development within and beyond the current ICAFS practitioner/counsellor community and more community development and education activity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission. If you require any clarification or more information on the current ICAFS model or any other services provided by Relationship Matters, please feel free to contact Gianna Mazzone or me.

Yours sincerely,



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