

A NEW APPROACH TO PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES & CHILDREN

Email Submission from Family Life

VISION & OUTCOMES

Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children.

Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

Does the new vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

Yes, the new vision reflects what we all want for children and families. The strong focus on both children and parents is positive and aligns with the shared aspiration for healthy, resilient families.

As a long-time provider of services to these cohorts, we know that the barriers to achieving these outcomes are complex and require not only effective services but also systemic responses. In particular, keeping children out of care and with their families will demand integration with state services, reforms in information sharing and a commitment to shared risk assessment.

While 'healthy' and 'resilient' are important goals, they are broad concepts. The role of the Families and Communities program in delivering these outcomes will need further refinement. Evidence shows that resilience is only sustainable when people are connected and have the capacity for relational attachment. This must be central to program design.

If the program seeks to address downstream issues such as reducing the number of children in care, it will need to define its appetite for complex work. None of this can be achieved without considering the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the resulting trauma and mental health challenges, and the need for trauma-capable approaches. Violence, particularly family violence and child abuse, is directly linked to ACEs, so new models must also be violence responsive.

Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families? Why/why not?

Yes, the two main outcomes are important and aligned with what we should be working towards for children and families. We applaud the strong focus on children and families, as this aligns closely with our own theory of change.

We prefer the language of families rather than parents and caregivers, as this better reflects the broader support system around a family and is more culturally appropriate for CALD and First Nations families.

We also believe there should be a third outcome pillar focused on communities, because optimal achievement for children and families can only occur when they are connected to broader attachment relationships with community and place. Children and families cannot be healthy and resilient if they are socially isolated and lack connective attachment relationships. Communities themselves need to be empowered and supported through capacity building to assist people who may struggle.

We believe these outcomes are most likely to be delivered through a joined-up, integrated systems model, supported by backbone infrastructure to ensure coordination and sustainability.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Will a single national program provide more flexibility for your organisation?

Flexibility is something we always value, as it allows us to prioritise client needs and adjust the intensity of our response as required. A single national program could support this, but we remain curious about how one program will respond to such a broad suite of service needs.

Flexibility works best when it is anchored to place and locally designed, otherwise it risks becoming even more complex for people to navigate. True flexibility also requires the ability to respond across a spectrum of complexity, from community strengthening and volunteering to extended community support and complex risk management for children and families with co-morbidities.

A reduction in reporting complexity would certainly be welcome.

Does the service or activity you deliver fit within one of the three funding streams?

Yes, the service or activity we deliver fits within the funding streams, specifically across Streams 2 and 3.

Do these streams reflect what children and families in your community need now – and what they might need in the future?

Yes, these streams reflect what children and families in our community need now and into the future and Family Life supports what is proposed.

The key, however, lies in how these streams are delivered. To achieve real impact, services must be designed to include all-of-family and all-of-community. Families are living systems where wellbeing is connected to all members, so streams must have the capacity to work with entire families and connect to the community systems in which they live.

Working with fathers is critical, and the streams must reflect an ability to engage men, boys and fathers specifically if they are to make a meaningful difference. Addressing complex presenting issues including use of violence, mental health challenges and AOD (alcohol and other drugs) is also vital.

Finally, connection to community is a priority. Communities need to be empowered and supported to strengthen outcomes for children and families.

Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?

One important change would be addressing the inability to share client information across State and Federal jurisdictions, which is a significant challenge and often very frustrating for clients who are forced to retell their story multiple times. This process can be re-traumatising, so a cross-jurisdictional agreement on information sharing would greatly improve client experience and service efficiency.

Additionally, the program should ensure there are no barriers to eligibility when moving through different responses, supporting a seamless flow for clients on their help-seeking journey. A family should be able to access the help they need as long as it aligns with

program intent and guidelines. For example, if someone presents with family violence as their primary issue and it becomes evident that they also need mental health support and parenting assistance, the program should respond holistically rather than referring them into multiple programs. Fragmented responses can exacerbate presenting issues, whereas integrated, flexible models deliver better outcomes.

PRIORITISING INVESTMENT

The Australian Government's priorities are to:

- 1. Invest early to improve family wellbeing, break cycles of disadvantage, and reduce the need for later interventions – like child protection.**
- 2. Prioritise connected, co-located, and integrated services that work together to meet family needs.**
- 3. Ensure services are informed by, and respond to, community needs.**
- 4. Improve outcomes for First Nations children and families by increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (also called ACCOs) delivering supports in locations with high First Nations populations.**

Do you agree that the four priorities listed above are the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?

Yes, Family Life supports these four priorities, and we agree they are the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families.

Are there any other priorities or issues you think the department should be focusing on?

Yes, we believe there are additional priorities the department should consider.

Priority one should be expanded to acknowledge Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their impact on relational attachment across the lifespan, trauma (particularly childhood trauma) and the connection to violence and interventions such as Youth Justice and Child Protection.

We also strongly believe that priorities must reflect an all-of-family approach. Outcomes cannot be achieved without working with men, who represent 50% of all parents and are most often the ones using violence, which directly impacts children. Families should be understood through their own definition, including extended family where required, to maximise healing, support and visibility.

IMPROVING FAMILY WELLBEING

Do the proposed focus areas – like supporting families at risk of child protection involvement and young parents – match the needs or priorities of your service?

Yes, the proposed focus areas match the needs and priorities of our services. Family Life strongly supports working with families across their needs and in response to all tiers of risk.

To maximise impact, we believe we need to join these streams into state responses, leveraging co-location and integration. For example, we share a building with The Orange Door and connect services in Frankston through co-designed models like DSS funded Dads in Focus, which works closely with our state-funded Men's Support Services.

This work will be further enhanced when systemic issues such as information sharing across jurisdictions are resolved.

Family Life are one of the leading providers of family violence interventions in Australia, delivering Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) since 1986. In FY2024/25 alone, we supported more than 1,500 men through our dedicated Men's Support Service programs.

While traditional programs remain essential, we believe they often fail to address the full complexity of family violence or engage men effectively. To close this gap, Family Life has developed two evidence-informed innovations Talk4Change and Home in Focus.

Talk4Change (T4C) is a shame-sensitive, trauma-capable, dual-modality program combining individual and group sessions to achieve sustainable behaviour change, particularly for men with complex needs. Home in Focus is an all-of-family therapeutic intervention for fathers who have used violence but remain in the home, focusing on attachment repair and child wellbeing.

Both programs align with national priorities for earlier intervention, child safety, and reducing family violence. They represent scalable models that respond to service gaps and deliver measurable outcomes.

Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?

Yes, there are additional approaches the Department should consider to better support family wellbeing.

We strongly advocate for an all-of-family and all-of-community approach. This means working not only with parents and caregivers but also with men and extended family members, as families are living systems where wellbeing is interconnected.

Engaging men is critical. Addressing this cohort through targeted interventions and inclusive service design is essential for breaking cycles of harm and improving outcomes.

Families should be understood through their own definitions, which may include extended family and kinship networks. This approach maximises healing, support, visibility and ensures services are culturally responsive and effective.

We firmly believe connecting families to their communities is vital. Communities need to be empowered and supported to provide relational attachment and capacity-building, as resilience and wellbeing cannot be sustained in isolation.

CONNECTED, CO-LOCATED AND INTEGRATED SERVICES

What are other effective ways, beyond co-location, that you've seen work well to connect and coordinate services for families?

Beyond co-location, an effective way to connect and coordinate services for families is through a Collective Impact approach. This can be difficult to achieve but with the correct structure is critical for maximising resources across federal, state and local government and driving outcomes across streams.

Collective Impact is a network of community members, organisations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change. Success requires a strong backbone or anchor organisation and deep community alignment.

This approach ensures families experience a seamless, integrated system rather than fragmented services, while leveraging community strengths to achieve sustainable impact.

What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves?

Grant applications need to seek information that demonstrates services are connected to the community it serves, we would highlight:

- Volunteer engagement: Family Life has more than 300 active volunteers, reflecting strong community involvement and support.
- Concrete mechanisms for community listening and engagement: We regularly engage meaningfully with the community through initiatives such as Community Listening Tours and Neighbourhood Summits, ensuring services are informed by local voices and needs.
- Proof of service delivery intersecting with local supports: Our programs are designed to integrate with existing local services, creating seamless pathways for families.
- Partnerships with local government: These partnerships strengthen alignment with community priorities and enable collaborative responses to complex needs.

What should applicants be assessed on?

Applicants should be assessed on their place or local connection, but in a meaningful way. This means demonstrating clear evidence of local connection through mechanisms such as active community engagement, partnerships and integration with local supports, rather than simply stating geographic presence.

RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY NEED

Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

Beyond locational disadvantage, the department should consider factors that more accurately reflect risk. Disadvantage is often measured in socio-economic terms, but this does not always capture the complexity of vulnerability. For example, data from the Australian Childhood Maltreatment Study shows that across all Australians, 40% experience a form of adverse childhood experience (ACE), and this cuts across all communities, regardless of socio-economic status.

This means funding models should account for the prevalence and impact of ACEs, trauma and related risks, not just geographic or economic indicators, to ensure resources reach families who need them most.

What's the best way for organisations to show in grant applications, that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?

The best way for organisations to show in grant applications that their service is genuinely meeting community needs is by demonstrating a strong skill and model of community listening and co-design, rather than simply highlighting long-term presence in a community.

This approach creates a framework that not only proves genuine engagement but also positions the organisation to scale its model to other communities. Applicants should provide tangible examples of ongoing community engagement and co-design throughout the entire lifecycle of the service, showing how community voices shape design, delivery, and continuous improvement.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

How could the grant process be designed to support and increase the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families?

The grant process should be designed to support self-determination for First Nations clients, ensuring their right to access services provided by ACCOs as well as those delivered by non-Aboriginal service providers, depending on their preference. This means creating flexibility in funding models and application criteria so that First Nations families can choose the provider that best meets their needs, while actively increasing opportunities for ACCOs to deliver services in communities with high First Nations populations.

What else should be built into the program design to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

Program design should embed principles that strengthen self-determination and cultural safety. This includes ensuring First Nations families have the right to choose between services delivered by ACCOs and non-Aboriginal providers, based on their preference. Programs should also reflect an all-of-family and all-of-community approach, acknowledging extended family and kinship networks as central to healing and wellbeing.

Design should prioritise deep community engagement and co-design throughout the service lifecycle, ensuring services are informed by local voices and cultural context.

MEASURING OUTCOMES

What types of data would help your organisation better understand its impact and continuously improve its services?

In a perfect world, the most valuable data for demonstrating impact would be longitudinal data, including follow-up with clients at various points after service conclusion. However, we recognise this is unlikely to be resourced or feasible in the short term.

Currently, practitioner reflection and client feedback, both quantitative and qualitative, are key mechanisms we use to identify opportunities for continuous improvement. The most helpful data for our organisation is that which is tailored to our specific service design, rather

than externally imposed tools or metrics, as this supports monitoring of service impact and contributes meaningfully to program evaluation.

We are also becoming more attuned to the importance of collecting nuanced data at the start of a client's journey, such as measuring Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and adult attachment styles, alongside traditional demographic data. This enables more personalised service tailoring to individual needs, rather than focusing solely on outcomes post-engagement.

What kinds of data or information would be most valuable for you to share, to show how your service is positively impacting children and families?

The most valuable data and information would not only demonstrate the positive impacts of our services on children and families but also surface key learnings that can help improve how the sector works. While it is important to identify and celebrate positive outcomes, we believe it is equally critical to avoid oversimplifying or underrepresenting the complex realities faced by the children and families we support. Sharing nuanced insights alongside impact data ensures a more accurate picture and contributes to continuous improvement across the sector.

If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

Three Family Life services, SHINE, Dads in Focus and FaRS (DSS-funded), report against the following common SCORE Circumstances domains:

- Personal and family safety
- Family functioning
- Mental health, wellbeing and self-care

What kinds of templates or guidance would help you prepare strong case studies that show the impact of your service?

Simple templates that offer clarity of focus would help in preparing strong case studies, for example by outlining the different types of case studies sought such as those illustrating particularly strong outcomes, barriers to successful implementation, or 'typical' or 'complex' cases. These templates should provide structure while allowing flexibility to reflect the details of individual journeys. This would be supported by guidance explaining the purpose and function of the case studies, such as whether they are intended to celebrate program effects, capture implementation learning, or provide insights into the diversity of family or child needs.

WORKING TOGETHER

What does a relational contracting approach mean to you in practice?

In practice, a relational contracting approach means building and maintaining trust, supported by skill and time. For this to work effectively, the Department of Social Services should invest time in developing relationships with providers. And any agency contracted to deliver a relational brokering model must do the same.

What criteria would you like to see included in a relational contract?

In addition to building and maintaining trust a relational contract should include criteria that ensure both DSS and contracted agencies invest time in developing strong relationships. Relational contracts should also prioritise backbone skill, demonstrated capacity to lead, design and implement models of complex partnerships, including those that deeply engage and align with the community.

What's the best way for the department to decide which organisations should be offered a relational contract?

Priority should be given to organisations with a proven track record and evidence-based approaches that demonstrate a true understanding of their sector, community need and current practices, along with a clear commitment to staying abreast of emerging trends and needs. Those selected must also show a willingness and ability to respond to the changing needs of the community, as well as an openness to understand and respond to the needs of government.

Ultimately, organisations should demonstrate their capacity and willingness to learn and partner in the best interests of the community.

Is your organisation interested in a relational contracting approach? Why/why not?

Yes, our organisation is interested in a relational contracting approach because it aligns with our values and ensures flexibility, co-design and the ability to adjust models in real time. This approach supports collaborative problem-solving and responsiveness to changing community needs, which is central to delivering effective and sustainable outcomes.

OTHER

Is there anything else you think the department should understand or consider about this proposed approach?

The department should consider that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are universal and not confined to areas of locational or socio-economic disadvantage. Data from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study shows that risk cuts across all communities, meaning resourcing based solely on economic indicators does not guarantee community wellbeing, it simply provides better material resources such as paid support or managed housing. Families in these circumstances can still experience distress and complex needs, so a more universal approach is required.

Additionally, while place-based approaches should be prioritised, the department should avoid requiring extensive, long-term community connections as a prerequisite for funding. Place should be valued because it enables complex thought incubation and deep engagement, but program models should also be designed for scalability into new communities. Tools such as Creating Capable Communities (CCC) and Creating Capable Leaders (CCL) allow organisations to enter new communities and apply proven frameworks in a way that remains locally responsive.

The focus should be on expertise in working in place, not just physically being in place, to ensure impact and adaptability.