



Mission Australia

**Response to
*Queensland Child Protection
Commission of Inquiry***

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Contact for this submission:

Avryl Gration

A/State Director, Queensland

grationa@missionaustralia.com.au

P: 07 3394 8112

M: 0409 492 951

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a large national, not for profit organisation that has been transforming the lives of Australians in need for more than 150 years. We are motivated by a vision for a fairer Australia and believe all Australian children should experience a safe, healthy and happy childhood. The holistic nature of our work is reflected in our *Outcomes Hierarchy for Pathways to Strong Families and Healthy, Happy Children*ⁱ.

In 2010-11 Mission Australia Community Services (including MA Early Learning Services) delivered 349 services, assisted 133,807 individuals and 8,568 families and provided a total some 103,728 instances of service nationally. Of these, 136 family and children's services, and early learning services assisted 78,908 individuals and 5,331 families in 18,675 instances of service. We also worked with families in disadvantaged communities to build their skills and resilience. In addition, our 94 youth specific services also helped 24,779 individuals and provided 18,214 occasions of support to young people. A significant number of young people were assisted by our homeless, employment and training servicesⁱⁱ.

As an organisation we have developed a high level of understanding and experience in prevention and early intervention strategies to support vulnerable and at-risk families through our provision of the *Family Support Gateway* and *Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS)* – see later in this submission for more detail. Our service model reflects a general approach of addressing the immediate impacts of child abuse, neglect and family violence, its underlying issues and causes and treatment of the longer-term impacts of such experiences. When working with families, we use a strengths-based approach which recognises the resilience of individuals and focuses on their potential, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacityⁱⁱⁱ.

Mission Australia in Queensland

Mission Australia has been providing Queenslanders with a hand up, a way forward and hope for the future since 1859. In 2011, our Community Services delivered 32 services in Queensland, supporting 34,878 individuals and 2,525 families. In that period some 557 employees worked in Queensland, of these over three per cent of our permanent employees identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI). Of these, our frontline employees delivered 20,000 separate instances of service and continued to target areas of high disadvantage, provide early intervention programs and form partnerships to find long-term solutions to community issues.

Our submission

The services and programs offered by Mission Australia are frequently confronted with the long-term impacts of child abuse and neglect. Homelessness, family conflict, drug and alcohol misuse, mental health issues, poor educational attainment, contact with juvenile justice and employment issues often characterise this experience. In addition, many of the vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families we support experience multiple risk factors that, if left unaddressed, may result in contact with child protection services.

Prevention of family violence has become a central focus of community and government efforts to address violence in relationships and families^{iv}. This approach is also reflected in many of the services offered by Mission Australia (including those described within this submission) and they provide a

foundation for the prevention of family violence and effective early intervention where violence or family conflict has occurred. A common focus of these programs is to build capacity and resilience and to promote protective factors while aiming to address the underlying social and economic determinants of risk.

Mission Australia's submission to the *Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry* is therefore informed by our experience in supporting vulnerable and at-risk children and families, our direct involvement in the provision of early learning services and our research activity. Our submission is therefore limited to our direct experience rather than an attempt to respond specifically to each of the Commission of Inquiry Terms of Reference.

Our response

Key challenges for child protection policy and practice now and into the future include the growing need for child and family services; enhancing prevention and early intervention services; improving practice quality; and the development and retention of a skilled workforce^v. It is acknowledged that a key challenge of our current approach to child protection is the tendency to have a 'risk management' response that is characterised by a focus on symptoms rather than causes which is short-term and adversarial instead of being long-term and empowering. There is also a focus on providing crisis intervention rather than prevention.

As an organisation we think this focus needs redressing, not least of all because we place a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention. We know that there is significant benefit in "encouraging people to access support and help prior to problems occurring, in a preventative effort to increase strengths and offset future difficulties"^{vi}. Further there is strong evidence demonstrating that the early provision of appropriate services is effective in preventing long term disadvantage. Investment in prevention and early intervention also reduces the overall burden on the health, education, community service and justice sectors in the long-term^{vii}.

Prevention and Early Intervention

The growing focus on prevention and early intervention is reflected in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020* (the National Framework). The National Framework has a clear intent to promote child protection as everyone's responsibility, to develop a shared agenda for change and provide national leadership towards a common goal^{viii}. The National Framework also highlights the need to shift perceptions about the protection of children from being a response to abuse and neglect to one that promotes the safety and wellbeing of all children.

Principles underpinning the National Framework have a clear rights-based approach and continue to reflect Australia's obligations as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most significantly, the National Framework is based on the adoption of a public health model that focuses greater attention on prevention and early intervention. This places a priority on the provision of

universal supports for all children and families, with secondary prevention strategies to meet the additional needs of some families and tertiary child protection services where required.

While it is broadly acknowledged that investing in prevention and early intervention provides improved cost-effectiveness, the weighting of investment in the Australian context remains at the tertiary intervention level, particularly in the provision of out-of-home care - typically the most expensive component. In 2010-11, approximately \$2.8 billion was spent nationally on tertiary child protection, with out-of-home care services accounting for the majority of this expenditure at \$1.8 billion^{ix}. The long-term costs to the community of child abuse and neglect are also significant with an estimated total burden of disease at \$7.7 billion^x.

In order to improve the prevention and early intervention response in such a way as to reduce demand on tertiary services over time, improve responses to the risk or occurrence of abuse and neglect and enable longer term savings that would result from such a reduction in demand, we propose a number of programs for your consideration that offer a continuum of prevention and early intervention activity.

Prevention of child abuse and neglect

Clearly the best outcome is one where children are able to grow up free from abuse or neglect during childhood. Sadly we are a long way from that reality given the incidence of reports to child protection services but there are a number of programs offered by Mission Australia in Queensland and/or nationally that aim to prevent abuse and neglect by engaging large numbers of families and children.

The most universal approach we have available at the moment in terms of prevention rests within the sphere of health and education. Health services are well placed to identify both prior to and at the commencement of a child's life if there are any characteristics of the child, parent, family or environment that may place the child at risk. Home visiting by midwives, health nurses and lay home visitors (in some instances until the child reaches age 5) have been used internationally as a way to provide non-stigmatising support to families where risk factors may exist and/or parenting skills are minimal^{xi}.

It is therefore necessary to ensure that health, early and school education staff and those working with them are fully cognisant of the issues relating to child protection beyond their reporting requirements. Further there is a need for staff at such locations to embrace the philosophy enshrined within the National Framework that protecting children is everyone's business.

Proportionate universality

In order to achieve a sustained and long-term shift towards effective prevention and early intervention there needs to be an additional and greater investment in this area while also continuing to provide the resources necessary to respond to those who have been affected by child abuse and neglect. Implementing the concept of *proportionate universality* within funding models and service systems has the capacity to correct this imbalance to effectively prevent child abuse and neglect while also continuing to provide much-needed tertiary interventions and long-term supports.

The concept of proportionate universality is one in which "programs, services and policies are universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage"^{xii}. Proportionate universality recognises the value in both universal and targeted services, but

acknowledges that generally, there is not enough of either for children in the early years. Recognising that vulnerability exists at all levels of socioeconomic status, proportionate universality requires strategies that reach all children and also focus on addressing the barriers to access that affect families with the highest need.

Proportionate universality also recognises that the key to reducing vulnerability and disadvantage in the early years is the provision of a universal platform of supports and services available to all children, together with additional targeted services and intensive supports for those most in need.

Mission Australia therefore believes that in order to genuinely address social disadvantage, the concept of proportionate universality needs to be embedded across the system of services that support children and families, including a focus on high-quality early childhood education and care.

Recommendation:

Mission Australia recommends the concept of proportionate universality be considered as a way to increase commitment to prevention and early intervention responses to reduce the incidence of childhood abuse and neglect.

- **MA Early Learning Services (MAELS)**

MAELS was established in May of 2009 and there are currently three centres in Queensland. Through the provision of inclusive and accessible early learning services Mission Australia aims to provide high quality care and learning experiences that are child-centric, family focused and community connected.

Connections with families, the local community and local services are central to ensuring the greatest opportunities and positive outcomes. Through the provision of inclusive and accessible early learning services Mission Australia aims to provide high quality care and learning experiences that are child-centric, family focused and community connected. Connections with families, the local community and local services are central to ensuring the greatest opportunities and positive outcomes. The services also provide a place where parents can learn about supporting their child's development and also share ideas and form friendships within the community.

Early Childhood Education and Care

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a critical prevention and early intervention strategy and is one of the most powerful and cost-effective ways of addressing long-term disadvantage. High-quality ECEC services have the capacity for the early identification of children and families at risk and can provide referral and linkages with additional services and supports. Additionally, high-quality ECEC plays a significant role in providing a stable and therapeutic environment for children who have experienced, or are at risk of, child abuse and neglect, providing them with the best start in life and also providing vulnerable parents with some respite.

The National Framework recognises the important role that quality ECEC can play in providing prevention and early intervention services for vulnerable and at-risk families and that building the capacity of ECEC services to respond to children at risk is critical. As a result of trauma, abuse or neglect children in, or at risk of entering, the child protection system may require more intensive and integrated supports to allow them to access and benefit from quality ECEC services^{xiii}.

The benefits afforded to all children through high-quality ECEC are even greater for vulnerable and disadvantaged children given that ECEC has the capacity to narrow social inequality and improve a

range of outcomes for children including health, education and economic outcomes over the course of their lifetime. For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, longitudinal studies have shown the benefits of early childhood programs include higher levels of school performance and educational attainment, reduced levels of welfare dependency and greater levels of income and employment.

The best possible outcomes for children are achieved when quality education is provided alongside services that support positive family and community experiences. High quality early childhood learning includes: low staff to child ratios and group sizes consistent with relationships; university qualified early childhood teaching staff who are responsive and reflective and understand subject knowledge; teacher and child planned and initiated activities; and teaching that promotes learning orientations; and genuine, sensitive and effective centre-home links.

Mission Australia therefore supports the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care which sets compulsory, national standards to ensure high quality and consistent early childhood education. Mission Australia also supports the investment and commitment to ensuring that children are offered 15 hours per week of pre-school education in the year before school commencement. Disadvantaged and vulnerable children should, in our view, be afforded the opportunity to commence earlier given the length of time (in months) spent participating in high-quality ECEC is related to improved outcomes in intellectual development, independence, concentration and sociability at the time of school entry. Given children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, including child abuse and neglect, in these early years often commence their schooling with adverse social and cognitive profiles and, rarely catch up to their more advantaged counterparts in the absence of high-quality ECEC, we consider it vital that these children receive the best possible advantage.

Recommendation:

Mission Australia recommends that affordable high-quality ECEC for disadvantaged and vulnerable children should be provided for up to three years before school commencement in order to address long-term disadvantage and to achieve greater equity in outcomes for children.

While some prevention programs are truly universal in nature, there are those that are more focused on specific populations experiencing disadvantage and/or where risk factors for abusive or neglectful relationships may start to arise. A range of more targeted but still broad reaching services are provided below:

- **Communities for Children**

Communities for Children (CfC) is a FaHCSIA initiative that takes a collaborative approach to supporting parents and children in disadvantaged communities. Working with local organisations, CfC aims to start children on a path that will lead them away from school difficulties, welfare dependency and poor health.

The goal of CfC is to provide opportunities for children to reach their full potential by supporting children's development and enhancing families and communities' capacity to respond to children aged 0-12 years and their family's needs. A fundamental outcome for CfC is to also build capacity in organisations working in the 0-12 age group. As a Facilitating Partner, Mission Australia funds organisations to develop and facilitate a whole of community approach that builds on community strengths and the existing infrastructure of organisations, networks and resources, making use of strong evidence of what works in early intervention.

In Queensland, Mission Australia is a Facilitating Partner of the CfC initiative from Inala to Goodna, including Ipswich, and also in Cairns southern corridor (from Woree to Gordonvale) and the Aboriginal Shire of Yarrabah. In 2010-11, CfC supported 25,588 Queensland families to ensure children have the best start in life by focusing on targeted early intervention approaches that bring about positive family function.

Mission Australia is also a Community Partner delivering Corridor Links. This service is designed to identify current barriers that are preventing seamless service delivery and duplication to the target group such as inadequate service mapping; integration of new services into the system; overlapping of funding opportunities being considered in isolation; and health checks of current services working within the site.

- **Pathways to Prevention**

The Pathways to Prevention project was developed out of a partnership between Mission Australia, Griffith University and Education Queensland. It included a suite of programs aimed at improving the transition of young children from disadvantaged communities into school. The model included both universal interventions such as school-based programs and targeted interventions such as intensive family support and a range of complementary programs. It promoted positive parenting, healthy family relationships and enhanced children's experience of school. The project adopted a holistic family approach that aimed to break cycles of disadvantage and prevent or alleviate problems related to poor mental health and well-being in children, young people and their parents.

The project's success was attributable to the adopted holistic family approach. That approach provided soft entry points for families and was therefore more accessible for people from disadvantaged backgrounds who might otherwise be 'hard to reach'. The direct involvement of schools also provided the project with long-term sustainability and facilitated better functioning developmental systems. Ultimately, the Pathways to Prevention project increased opportunities for children and families from disadvantaged populations to improve their personal health and wellbeing and to gain access to supports and resources that addressed any issues with poor mental health^{xiv}.

In May 2011 our Pathways to Prevention program celebrated a decade of supporting children and families in the Inala and Carole Park areas of Brisbane. In that decade of operation Pathways touched the lives of more than 4,200 individuals from more than 1,130 families in the local community.

Early intervention to address risk factors

Slightly further along the continuum of prevention are those more targeted approaches that focus on children and families where risk factors for abuse or neglect may be present. These programs still aim to intervene prior to the onset of such abuse or neglect and are triggered in response to the early identification of risk.

- **Project Circuit Breaker (PCB)**

Funded by the QLD Department of Communities, Project Circuit Breaker (PCB) is a free and mobile service supporting families with young people aged between 9-17 years old on Brisbane's north side to make changes to their lives. In 2010-11, PCB provided support to 150 families experiencing issues of family conflict to increase confidence in parenting, prevent intervention by Child Safety Services and to build resilience within families.

PCB provides a broad range of flexible, tailored and integrated services to enable families to manage differences and develop strategies to prevent any further conflict and ultimately to reduce the need for statutory intervention. Services offered include family support; practical skills development; conflict resolution; negotiation skills; therapeutic group work; referral and linkages with other services; community development and awareness-raising activities; and advocacy.

- **Brisbane North Family Support (BNFS)**

BNFS is a prevention and early intervention program funded by the Queensland Department of Communities. It provides support and assistance for individuals and families who are experiencing any form of difficulty or crisis situation. Operating as a mobile service, BNFS provides services to isolated families with complex needs to enhance their family functioning and reduce their involvement in or need for statutory child protection intervention.

A range of services to help families, children, parents and significant others maintain a family unit and promote positive relationships is offered. Assistance to families & individuals is offered in the form of practical support, early intervention, referral, parenting support, advocacy and general support for clients between all other services and agencies as required.

Client outcomes include enhanced family functioning, improved family connectedness, and greater resilience for families experiencing a range of complex issues including financial hardship, mental illness and family conflict.

- **Family Support Gateway and Integrated Family Support Services (IFSS) (Tasmania)**

Family Support Gateway and IFSS involves the provision of a holistic, flexible approach that is tailored to the individual needs of vulnerable children, young people and families. It includes case management, counselling, advocacy and supported referrals to appropriate services. Mission Australia supports at-risk families through promoting safety, stability, effective interpersonal relationships and enhancing positive parenting strategies.

Mission Australia clients presenting to Family Support Gateway and IFSS experience a range of issues that are potential risk factors for childhood abuse and neglect such as financial hardship, social isolation, relationship breakdown, alcohol and other drug misuse, mental health issues, and unstable housing or tenancy issues. Through the provision of a range of integrated prevention and early intervention services, Mission Australia works with families towards addressing these issues and enhancing the protective factors for vulnerable children and their families.

Early intervention where abuse or neglect has occurred

While universal and targeted prevention and early intervention approaches will help to substantially reduce the incidence of family violence, abuse and neglect, there will still be occasions of such harm. It is vital that services are able to respond effectively and efficiently in these instances in order to prevent further/future instances of such abuse for that child. They also have a role in reducing the likelihood that the child will go on to repeat the cycle given that an abusive childhood has been documented as the most consistent factor in the histories of those who abuse children^{xv}.

- **Fostering Families**

Mission Australia has recently tendered to deliver the Fostering Families initiative. If we are successful in the tender we will offer the initiative across three sites: Maryborough, Toowoomba and South Brisbane. These

three sites were chosen due to the high numbers of children entering out-of-home care and the growing need for intensive family support services in these locations.

The program will provide families with education and practical support to improve their parenting skills and reduce the number of children entering the out-of-home care system. It represents a new early intervention service that will be part of a two year trial. Intensive in-home and out-of-hours family support services will be offered to vulnerable families where a child protection notification of neglect has been made. It is a way of addressing the gradual impact of neglect on families where a parent may be able to manage the first couple of children but neglect becomes too overt by the birth of the third or fourth child with the result that the children may be taken into care.

Specific interventions will include a wide range of practical assistance with the ability to refer on to more specialised services when needed. Fostering Families will also provide counselling services and referrals to rehabilitation services to assist parents suffering from addiction

- **Referral for Active Intervention (RAI)**

Referral for Active Intervention is funded by the QLD Department of Communities and is offered by Mission Australia in three locations: Inala/Goodna, Ipswich and Caboolture/Deception Bay. The aim of the RAI initiative is to improve the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families by providing prevention and early intervention support for children, young people and their families who may be at risk of entering the child protection system as a result of abuse.

As a prevention and early intervention program, the objectives of RAI include reducing (re)notifications to Child Safety Services; supporting the development of a comprehensive prevention and early intervention service system; and a reduction in the over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the statutory child protection system. RAI works with families through collaborative goal setting and assertive case management. Families receive in-home support; are assisted to access community supports including health, psychological and welfare services; and are offered a range of specifically developed group activities and general parenting skills development. Professional specialists may also be sourced using brokerage funding as needed and case-conferencing may be supported to ensure consistent and on-going support is available.

In 2010-11, Mission Australia supported over 900 families experiencing a range of issues and complex needs including child protection needs; health and mental health issues; disability issues; family violence; low parenting skills; housing instability; social isolation; and drug and alcohol issues. A 2010 Queensland Department of Communities evaluation of RAI showed that 85 per cent of families presented to RAI with at least two of these complex needs and over 30 per cent presenting with 4 - 7 co-occurring complex issues^{xvi}.

The evaluation also showed a reduction in the frequency of contact with the child protection system for families and children in each RAI location. Importantly, families with the highest proportion of presenting risk factors and family functioning challenges were those that demonstrated the greatest improvement or resolution upon exiting the program.

- **Intensive Family Based Services (IFBS)**

IFBS is based on a family preservation model called "Homebuilders" that developed in the United States. It now operates in a number of countries including Australia, where it was introduced in NSW in 1994. The program in Australia was developed initially to operate in areas of disadvantage. In NSW for example the

program has since been used as an intensive home based program for Aboriginal families in crisis whose children are either at risk of entering out-of-home placement due to protective concerns or where children have been placed in out-of-home care and are to be restored with their families. The service works intensively over a short period of time (up to three months) with families and the primary focus of the service is the safety, welfare and wellbeing of the child and/or young person. Families referred to IFBS often have multiple issues including: financial, relationship issues, housing, domestic violence and drug and alcohol.

The program uses a strengths-based approach to support families working in partnership with the program, and helps them to identify goals and strategies for the intervention and tailors the process to meet their specific individual needs. A flexible, holistic approach is used with the primary focus being on solutions and skill development rather than “problems”.

IFBS caseworkers work with families to improve life skills, parenting capacities, coping abilities and problem solving. Families are also linked up with appropriate community and service supports both during and after the intervention. IFBS caseworkers work with families for up to 16 hours in home per week and are available to families 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist in defusing any new crisis that may occur while the intervention is in process.

The NSW program was evaluated in 2008 at a time when six Aboriginal community organisations were funded under IFBS. Positive results were found in relation to reduced child protection reports at both 6 and 12 months post-intervention and better reunification rates were also observed. Further, the evaluation found that the program benefits outweighed its costs by a ratio of 1:9^{xvii}.

• **Helping Out Families**

The Helping Out Families initiative aims to reduce the demand on child safety services by providing support earlier and more effectively to families in need. This includes the establishment of new services and provision of additional funding for existing organisations that support children, young people and families. A trial across 3 sites (Gold Coast, Beenleigh and Logan) commenced in 2010 and involved establishing the Family Support Alliance Service to manage referrals from Child Safety Services to Intensive Family Support Services. The Alliance consists of existing government and non-government agencies, such as domestic and family violence prevention and support services. These agencies will only provide support to families who have consented to the referral from either the Family Support Alliance Service or Intensive Family Support Service.

An evaluation of the Helping Out Families initiative has shown:

- *a reduction in intakes from the trial sites to Child Safety Services;*
- *families accessing the services have had less re-reporting to Child Safety Services; and*
- *a small number of families have had their cases closed and have reported improved outcomes^{xviii}.*

We need to learn more about how to better respond to and assist children who have been subject to abuse and neglect so that we can reduce the short and longer-term impact of their experience. More work is needed on identifying what responses are effective at assisting children to deal with their abusive or neglectful experiences given the catastrophic consequences these experiences can have on the child immediately and over the longer term. Family support appears to be a key feature of some of the initiatives proposed but we need to learn more about what works.

Tertiary responses

In addition to providing out of home care services, Mission Australia works with many people who have experience of out of home care including young people who have left out of home care and are

accessing our homelessness services. We also offer a number of programs for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren – sometimes as a result of the child being removed from their biological parents due to neglect or abuse issues. We have also recently established a safe house aimed to keep children and young people connected to their community. Our direct experience in providing out of home care is outlined below.

- **Out of Community Care program**

The Out of Community Care program is a residential care service in the Far North Queensland Region assisting referred children, young males and young females aged 12-17 years from the Department of Child Safety who have complex to extreme support needs. Priority is given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people from the Cape York region. During their approximate six month stay in the residential service young people are provided with stable accommodation and are assisted through case management to address their needs in the areas of physical, mental and emotional development. The care and case work provided is based on the Child Safety Case Plans. All residents have experienced a level of trauma which may have included physical, emotional and sexual abuse so also have access to specialist counselling services while with the program. The residential program is therapeutic in intent and staff are required to operate in culturally appropriate ways with understanding of trauma and attachment related behaviours.

- **Mornington Island Safe house**

The safe house provides safety for children and young people whilst supporting them to remain in their community. This model works within the child safety system to provide pathways to safety, healthy development, connectedness, participation and achievement for the children and young people within our care. Children who have been unable to visit their family and friends will now be able to reconnect in a safe and welcoming environment. It will also allow more children who are under the protection of the Department of Child Safety to stay on Mornington Island while in care.

(An overview of the related services to address family violence on Mornington Island is provided at Appendix 1).

Recommendation:

Mission Australia would like greater investment in prevention and early intervention as a way to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect, reduce the personal cost associated with the longer-term impact of such neglect and abuse on affected individuals, and also to reduce the financial cost to the community.

Responses required into the future

Given that families with multiple and complex problems now constitute the majority client group for contemporary child protection services, a key challenge for the service system is to respond holistically to the often inter-related adult problems of alcohol and substance misuse, mental health issues, family violence and homelessness^{xix}. While individually, these factors represent a significant risk to children, they rarely occur in isolation and the cumulative harm has a “profound and exponential impact on children, and diminishes their sense of safety and wellbeing.”^{xx}

Addressing the multiple and complex needs within families is also a challenge due to a lack of routinely available data that provides an accurate picture of the co-occurrence of multiple issues and how these intersect with families in contact with the child protection system. For example, there is a lack of

published data that indicates the degree to which children in contact with homelessness services are also in contact with child protection services. The prevalence of multiple contributing factors for homeless children and infants such as experience of domestic violence (65%), parental financial problems (89%), parental imprisonment (17%) and experience of neglect (77%) does however indicate the increased likelihood of their contact with child protection services^{xxi}.

Homelessness services, drug and alcohol services, family violence support services, mental health services, the justice system and the child protection system are potentially responding to the same families with multiple and complex needs. To enhance prevention and early intervention within a highly collaborative framework, there is a need for increased investment in building the capacity of adult-focused services to be child-sensitive, for adult clients to be seen as parents and “to shift the orientation of a child-focused workforce towards the parent-child relationship being the primary unit of attention^{xxii}”.

The transition from care to independence is an opportunity for greater collaboration between service sectors to ensure that young people begin their independent adult lives with an integrated system of supports^{xxiii}. Mission Australia homelessness services, youth support services and employment services are working with young people who are dealing with the challenges of out-of-home care and the implications of this transition experience. We have taken such action as we are concerned about the intersection between out of home care and the juvenile justice system that can occur at this point.

It is also important that a collaborative and holistic response for families with multiple and complex needs exist within a whole-of-government framework that facilitates integration across service systems through joint or pooled multi-agency funding^{xxiv}. While there is broad consensus that strong collaborations across health, housing, employment, justice, education and family support sectors will contribute to the most efficient and cost-effective prevention and early intervention strategies, there is a need for greater research into how an effective level of collaboration can be achieved^{xxv}.

The National Framework provides an opportunity to engage in strategic collaboration across sectors and service systems (2012-15)^{xxvi}. The capacity of state and territory governments to align service initiatives and policy frameworks in housing and homelessness, drug and alcohol support, family violence support and health services with the National Framework priorities and objectives will be integral to achieving greater and more meaningful collaboration and integration. In addition to integrated and collaborative responses there is also a need to look at the elements of successful interventions.

In our view, there are a number of factors that contribute to the success of interventions that are aimed at improving the well-being of children and young people, including those who are at risk of or who have experienced family violence, neglect and/or abuse. Common characteristics associated with successful interventions include:

- *Holistic approaches*

The development and delivery of services and programs need to integrate approaches that take into consideration the multiple areas of need and the interdependent relationships that exist between the different challenges that disadvantaged people face. Taking a holist approach to helping people break, or

avoid cycles, of disadvantage ensures services and programs extend beyond any apparent ‘presenting’ issue/s and facilitate a continuity of care and incremental change.

- *Empowerment and choice*

Services need to be flexible and adaptable to individual circumstances and needs. While young children in particular may not be in a position to determine their own goals and priorities, there is room for older children to contribute to individual program development. Parents, families and care-givers however, can be provided the opportunities and guidance to be proactive in determining the priorities and goals for their children.

- *Soft entry points*

Co-locating services provides multiple avenues for entry into services and programs. It is important to have a range of activities available that allow individuals to engage in structured and meaningful activities at their own pace while also progressively building their confidence and skills.

- *Service workers*

The role and capacity of the service workers are pivotal to successful interventions. Appropriate workforce development and ongoing workforce support are therefore integral to the development and ongoing capacity of models of support that provide a continuity of care in a trustworthy, stable and professional environment.

- *Long-term focus*

Reversing the impact of entrenched disadvantage and achieving strong and sustainable outcomes related to well-being and mental health require an intensive, long-term approach. Services and programs that remain in operation and are available to clients over long timeframes facilitate sustained outcomes. Longevity also enables programs and services to learn, evolve and grow to better meet community and client needs.

- *Place-based*

Clearly, services and programs that are located and embedded in local neighbourhoods are better able to meet the needs of the community. Geographically accessible services and programs are pivotal to enabling participation but also enable the service workers to focus on issues relevant to the specific local community groups – whether that be consideration of diverse languages, backgrounds or cultures or varying social and economic circumstances. Place-based services and programs are more flexible and less constrained by the bureaucratic processes. Finally, establishing services and programs within local communities raises awareness and encourages opportunities for the broader community, including local businesses and individuals and families who may not be socially or economically disadvantaged, to become involved.

- *Collaborations*

Many of Mission Australia’s programs and services involve collaborations with philanthropic funders and a range of other agencies and individuals. These collaborations provide the advantage of additional expertise, knowledge and resources while also creating, in some instances, economies of scale and encouraging broader social change.

Recommendation:

Mission Australia recommends that workforce development is required to ensure that the workforce

providing service responses across the child protection spectrum is adequately equipped to deal with the multiple and complex needs of the individuals and families with whom they come into contact.

Further greater integration and collaboration is required between justice, health, community services, legal, child protection and other related services given these agencies often share a common client group.

In summary

A genuine shift in how we meet the protection needs of children and young people will not be realised without substantial and long-term investment in prevention and early intervention. Effective collaboration and integration across and between sectors and service systems that embeds the concept of proportionate universality will contribute to the creation of a strong universal system of supports that makes the most effective use of limited resources. The critical role of quality early childhood education and care for vulnerable and at-risk children as an effective prevention and early intervention strategy cannot be underestimated.

Only when we reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect through the adoption of the suggestions outlined can we truly improve the long term outcomes for many children and young people. In the meantime it is vital that we continue to provide support that is well-resourced and based on evidence as to what works for those children and young people who have experienced child abuse and neglect. More work is needed as to how best to respond to, address and mitigate the immediate and longer term impacts of abuse and neglect, particularly if we are to prevent future generations from perpetuating the cycle of abuse and neglect.

In our view a fundamental policy shift is required to ensure that approaches are focused on child protection *before the fact* rather than child protection *after the fact*. With an assorted toolkit of prevention and early intervention responses, plus better informed, tailored and collaborative responses we consider the Queensland Government will be well placed to reduce the incidence and impact of child abuse and neglect in the state.

Appendix 1: Additional Mornington Island Services to support the Safe House

- *The Women's Shelter*

The shelter provides emergency accommodation and a place of safety for women and children affected by domestic violence. The service will: help women to plan for their own safety; partner with health services to support women through pre and post natal care - acting as both an early intervention program and crisis response; provide safe and sustainable housing options for women who access it – including a return to the family home for those women who wish to do so or working with housing providers to source appropriate housing options where returning home is not an option.

- *Safe Haven*

This element has been designed to be responsive to community needs; provide soft entry/engagement strategies to encourage people to access the service; and fill any service gaps in the continuum of care in the community. The long term plan for the safe haven is that it will build relationships with the community and build on the strengths of that community – it will then be delivered across the community and be available to all members of the community. At the outset the safe haven has focused on family support and counselling given the importance of this service element.

End notes

- ⁱ The outcomes hierarchy is available for download at <http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/document-downloads/category/4-annual-report-2009>
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- ^v Bromfield, L & Holzer, P (2008) *A national approach for child protection: project report*, National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
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- ^{xiii} The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (2011) *Submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission Re: Early Childhood Development Workforce Draft Research Report*. Available at: <http://www.ccydpcg.qld.gov.au/pdf/submissions/S307-CCYPCG-submission-to-Productivity-Commission-Early-Childhood-Development-Workforce-Draft-Research-Report.pdf>
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- ^{xv} As per xi
- ^{xvi} Queensland Department of Communities (2010) *Referral for Active Intervention Initiative: A three-year evaluation report*, Queensland Government.
- ^{xvii} More information on this program including an overview of the evaluation is available at <http://www.snaicc.asn.au/uploads/rsfil/02866.pdf>
- ^{xviii} Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2012) Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry: Emerging Issues, September 2012, Queensland Government.
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