

# The critical role of NGOs in delivering Family Preservation Services in NSW

Fams Briefing Note – May 2023

## Overview

- Family Preservation Services play a key role in the continuum of child protection. With the objective of keeping children and families out of out-of-home care, successful service delivery requires highly skilled staff, cross-agency collaboration and an efficient referrals process.
- In NSW, evidence-based Family Preservation Services are successfully delivered by the NGO sector, which holds specialist knowledge and the capacity to invest in relationships with families that support change and heal and disrupt the patterns of intergenerational trauma and disadvantage.
- The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) begun recommissioning the Family Preservation Program more than two years ago, however the process has stalled, and the NGO sector remains in the dark around key reform pillars including Service Provision Guidelines and future funding and referral models.
- The current lack of clarity around policy settings for Family Preservation is impacting planning and staff retention in the NGO sector. Ambiguity around funding, unclear service specifications and a lack of program logic is adding pressure to services in an already challenging and complex space.
- Family Preservation Services have capacity to support more families, however the high staff turnover within DCJ and a subsequent lack of experience is impeding the referrals process. In many cases, incorrect referral pathways are taking the allocated spaces for community referrals, while the placements for DCJ referrals are underutilised.
- There is a significant opportunity to deliver better outcomes by increasing flexibility and improving cross-agency collaboration. Services must be responsive to needs beyond funded programs. Providing 'wrap around' services from one organisation can increase a family's capacity to engage with the Family Preservation program.

## What is Family Preservation?

Family Preservation describes intensive, short-term, in-home crisis intervention services that teach skills and provide supports for families where a child is at imminent risk of being placed into out-of-home care.

As noted in [Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020](#), Australian and international research shows that families have strengths that can be built upon to keep children safe and well. Provision of services early in a child's life and/or early in the life of a problem can improve long-term outcomes for children and reduce negative impacts, and a focus on early intervention and prevention is more cost-effective in the long term than responding to crises, or treating the impacts of abuse and neglect.

The aim of family preservation is to build the capacity of families so that they no longer need specialist services, to enable them to navigate and advocate for their needs in the mainstream service sector.

Families are referred by DCJ to the NGO sector when there are concerns for the safety and wellbeing of a child. NGOs then affect change by building strong relationships with families, including children and young people, and identifying goals and barriers. These services work alongside families to build confidence and agency to weather the ups and downs for families who experience constellated disadvantage.

Centring the child and family voice is essential to Family Preservation work. It is often complex and challenging work and funding models do not often reflect this complexity or its interface with family violence, mental health, housing and disability services.

### **The critical role of NGOs in supporting families**

NGOs support families by:

- **Investing time in relationship-building:** While the justice system is constrained by time and resources, the NGO sector is able to focus on building trusted relationships with families. When people are hurt in relationships (violence, childhood trauma etc) it is essential to invest time into establishing strong therapeutic relationships because it sets the foundation for positive changes that ensure children are kept safe. It can take 12 months-two years to build the relationships needed to deliver lasting change for families.
- **Enabling more flexible service delivery:** System challenges require flexibility in service delivery and the NGO sector is well-placed to support this. For example, delays with getting a family on to the NDIS necessitates an extension of time because family preservation work can't be engaged in its entirety if the supports needed for a family aren't in place. Equally, a woman may leave a violent relationship half-way through engagement with Family Preservation leading them to be homeless, so the priority must be ensuring safe housing before family work can continue.
- **Managing the interface between government services:** Many families in Family Preservation programs are also required to engage with DCJ, the NDIS and housing services. Government siloes can impact family outcomes as each service system wishes to stay in "their lane", however families are complex and multifaceted with differing needs. The NGO sector supports families in navigating these systems, holding the children and families at the heart of service provision.
- **Providing a trusted source of information and support:** NGOs are located in the community where there is trust, knowledge and inhouse resources that can be utilised by families engaging in their service. Cultural knowledge and expertise within the NGO sector, particularly in engaging with First Nations communities, is critical. This is particularly key where relationships with government institutions are marred by distrust, fear and intergenerational trauma.

### **Immediate risks to Family Preservation Services**

- **Lack of certainty, clarity or consistency in policy settings:** The lengthy recommissioning the Family Preservation Program has created significant uncertainty for the sector. This is adding to existing difficulties in retaining staff.



- **Staff turnover and capacity constraints at DCJ are impacting referrals:** A high turnover of staff at DCJ, staff capacity constraints and low levels of knowledge around Family Preservation referrals are increasingly resulting in incomplete or incorrect referrals to the NGO sector.
- **Access to housing:** The housing crisis in NSW is significantly impacting families and adding additional stressors to service delivery.

### **Opportunities to strengthen NSW Family Preservation Services**

- **Improved data collection:** Improving the NGO sector's data collection capacity will help the sector to demonstrate impact and the strong evidence base as a collective. A data and reporting model similar to what is utilised in the Targeted Early Intervention sector would support better planning and program delivery and highlight the true extent and impact of Family Preservation Services.
- **Investment in evidence-based programs:** There is scope to review and invest in evidenced based programs that focus on voice of child and family, are strengths focused and located in community. For example, the best interest case practice framework, practice guidelines developed through Voices and Choices trial, SafeCare® or Sanctuary model.
- **Support for more flexible models of care and support:** Families need greater flexibility in Family Preservation Services to meet their diverse and often complex needs, and enable sufficient time for services to support them. For families engaged through DCJ, this should include a transition period between referral and case closure. This would reduce re-reporting, enable a quality handover between DCJ and the NGO, allows for step up/step down responses and allows for changes in family situations.

## **About Fams**

Fams is a New South Wales peak body that supports the not-for-profit sector to build on capacity and capability. We advocate for improved policies for children, families, communities and services.

Fams works collaboratively with Government, Policy and decision-makers, non-government organisations, academic organisations, peak bodies, family and community services sector, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and organisations working with diverse communities.

The below principles are modelled in all aspects of planning, service delivery, management and administration:

- Children and families should be safe.
- Children and families receive services that are flexible and responsive to their needs.
- Children and families can access services embedded in their community.
- Children and family's growth and development is enhanced by research supported practice.
- Children and family's social, cultural, racial and linguistic identities are affirmed and strengthened.
- Children and families work together with services in relationships based on trust and respect.

## **Contact**

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