

# Reverse Budget Cuts to Family Counselling and Family Dispute Resolution

## Funding Cuts Not Warranted

The Federal Budget 2010 included proposals that would strip \$48.4M over 4 years from the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). Specifically, the following funding cuts were proposed within the Attorney-General's portfolio:

- \$4.5M over 3 years reduced investment in Family Counselling (from 2011).
- \$9M over 3 years reduced investment in free Family Dispute Resolution through Family Relationship Centres – reducing 'free' hours from 3 to 1 with a means test to be introduced for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> hour of service (from 2011).
- \$5.2M reduced investment in post separation services – to be offset by a consistent approach to means testing (from 2010\*)
- \$16.8M redirection of funding to Community Legal Services to provide legal assistance within Family Relationship Centres (from 2010).
- \$19.5M reduced investment in research and evaluation (from 2010).
- \$6.4M reduced investment in workforce development – training, support and resource development (from 2010).

These funding cuts are not warranted. Services are experiencing strong demand with waiting lists for counselling and dispute resolution services in most areas. Client satisfaction with services is high, with evidence of solid long-term outcomes for both parents and children (see for example AIFS, 2009).

The reason for making funding cuts was to substantially increase funding provided to legal assistance services but that rationale is flawed. Children in separated families need their parents to communicate and make good decisions, not just once but throughout their childhood. Legal assistance may be needed to finalise the separation but it should not be seen as an alternative to counselling and dispute resolution. Families generally need both relationship support and legal advice not one or the other.

\* Cuts scheduled to take effect in 2010 have since been deferred to 2011 pending further consultation with the sector on how they are to be implemented.



**Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) calls for funding to family and relationship services to be increased not decreased. More specifically:**

1. Increase investment in Family Counselling to match community demand.
2. Maintain '3 free hours' of Family Dispute Resolution for all separating parents.
3. Address the need for increased capacity in areas with high demand.
4. Reinstate investment in research, evaluation and workforce development.
5. Promote services to encourage help seeking & reduce children's exposure to conflict.



Family Relationship Services  
A U S T R A L I A

# Investment Priorities

## 1. Increase investment in Family Counselling to match community demand.

Demand for Family Counselling is higher than it has ever been. Anecdotally waiting times are currently as long as 8 weeks which is too long. Ideally counselling should be provided within 2 weeks of first contact with a service. There are many reasons why couples seek family counselling, some want to strengthen and maintain their relationship, others are looking for help with parenting issues and nearly half are adjusting to separation or re-negotiating parenting arrangements with a separated partner. Across the spectrum of circumstances, counselling can help to address current difficulties and prevent more serious problems developing down the track. Just as staying healthy is better than fighting illness, counselling is much more cost effective than trying to resolve intractable disputes and mental health issues which can arise when problems are left to escalate. Any reduction in funding for Family Counselling will have a negative impact on people seeking help; there will be a decrease in service capacity, fewer counsellors and longer waiting lists. Instead we seek increased funding to better match community demand and reduce waiting times.

## 2. Maintain '3 free hours' of Family Dispute Resolution for all separating parents.

Parents seeking Family Dispute Resolution are often managing on a tight budget as they adjust to separation. The affordability of services is a major factor in their decision to seek help from a family relationship service. The '3 free hours' of Family Dispute Resolution provided by Family Relationship Centres has encouraged separated parents in dispute to seek help early rather than 'fight it out' on their own. Without this incentive, a proportion of these families would be likely to end up in protracted dispute with very negative consequences for children. Reducing the number of 'free' hours and increasing the complexity of means testing may act as a disincentive to early help seeking. Instead we seek to maintain the '3 free hours' of Family Dispute Resolution.

## 3. Address the need for increased capacity in areas with high demand.

In addition to Family Counselling and Family Dispute Resolution, other family support programs are struggling to meet community needs. There are some areas that desperately need a Children's Contact Service, Family Violence Program or more intensive family support options for families at risk. Demand for relationship education programs is high outstripping supply in many areas as are referrals to therapeutic programs for children and young people affected by parental separation.

## 4. Reinstate investment in research, evaluation and workforce development.

Research is critical to informing service delivery and demonstrating the outcomes being achieved for families. In particular, the investment in evaluation has been critical to ensuring that policy and legislative change in Family Law is evidence based rather than reactive. Finally, the capacity of organisations to deliver safe, high quality and effective family relationship services is entirely dependent on the capacity of its workforce. The importance of ongoing workforce development cannot be underestimated.

## 5. Promote services to encourage help seeking & reduce children's exposure to conflict.

FRSA believes that we are just beginning to see cultural change where it becomes 'the norm' to have an amicable parenting relationship after separation. More could be done to encourage parents who are separating to seek help early before conflict or dispute become entrenched and intractable. Advertising for Family Relationship Centres was cut in 2007, we believe this should be reinstated with a focus on promoting healthy relationships (see our mock ad below).

### Cooperative Parenting after Separation



You don't have to do it  
all on your own

Family relationship services can help you to:

- Talk things over
- Resolve disputes
- Avoid conflict
- Listen to children
- Involve children in decision-making
- Review agreements

For advice and information call  
1800 050 321

Family Relationships Advice Line

**“Children benefit when parents  
seek help early – before conflict  
becomes entrenched”**

Sam Page, Executive Director, FRSA



Family Relationship Services

PO Box 326  
Deakin West ACT 2602  
Ph: 02 6162 1811  
E: [admin@frsa.org.au](mailto:admin@frsa.org.au)

[www.frsa.org.au](http://www.frsa.org.au)