Workforce issues across the family relationship services sector: Models, responses and strategies

Natasha Cortis, Sharni Chan and Fiona Hilferty

Service quality and effectiveness in all community services depend on having a stable, capable and sustainable workforce, and family relationship services are no exception. Workforce quality and stability are essential if these services are to continue to meet the complex relationship services needs of families and individuals. This paper reviews and analyses workforce issues and challenges across the family relationship services sector, and identifies key models, responses and strategies through which the workforce can be supported and sustained. The main aim is to stimulate debate about strategies for improving the quality and sustainability of the family relationship services workforce, inform research and policy development, and encourage sectoral and organisational initiatives.

1.   Background

Family relationship services refer to those that aim to support children, young people and adults to develop and sustain nurturing family relationships, and to minimise the social and economic costs associated with disrupted family relationships. The sector consists of a group of services with three interlinked sets of aims:

- early intervention to prevent family relationship problems from arising (services such as parenting education and skills training);
- providing support to stabilise families where problems have arisen (services such as family counselling); and
- helping families to manage their relationships during any period of family breakdown, including post-separation, and to resolve disputes themselves without going to court (services such as family dispute resolution and children's contact services).

The core of the sector in Australia consists of over 100 community organisations that receive funding under the Australian Government's Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP)[1]—although services may also

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1.   The FRSP was incorporated into the new Family Support Program in February 2009. For more information, go to: <www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/familysupport/Pages/default.aspx>.

Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is an information and advisory unit funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Clearinghouse aims to enhance family relationships across the lifespan by offering a resource and a point of contact for providers of family relationship and support services, policy makers and members of the research and broader communities. The Clearinghouse collects, synthesises and disseminates information on family relationships and facilitates networking and information exchange.

Contents

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receive funds from other government programs or from religious agencies, charities, or user contributions. The FRSP is jointly funded by the Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Why the family relationship services workforce matters

In order to fulfil their goals and achieve social and personal outcomes, family relationship services must be staffed in appropriate and sustainable ways.

The health of the workforce within the family relationship services sector has recently become a priority, with the FRSP Senior Executive Forum (representing FRSP-funded services) reiterating the need for accurate data about the workforce and reaffirming its commitment to identifying strategies to address workforce challenges through its Working Group on Workforce Development (FaHCSIA, 2008). The reasons for doing so are compelling. Remuneration in this sector is low compared with similar industries, and there is evidence of emerging challenges in recruiting, retaining and training practitioners, and in establishing career paths within the service system, particularly in rural and remote locations (FaHCSIA, 2008).

Because these services are labour intensive, the ways in which family relationship services are staffed and how staff capacity is sustained have significance for children and families, managers and practitioners, policy-makers, and the wider community. Like many other human services, family relationship services have enabling effects, in that the benefits of service provision extend beyond those individuals who directly use the services. Such services require a great deal of time and care, as they offer to build the capacity of people to meet their own social and emotional needs and better meet the needs of others. As well as improving clients' lives, the effective provision of these kinds of services has significant flow-on effects throughout the economy and society, further emphasising the need for a stable and sustainable workforce (England, Budig, & Folbre, 2002).

At an organisational level, unstable or inappropriate staffing arrangements incur additional direct and indirect costs that compromise service quality, efficiency and sustainability. Direct costs include those that arise from unnecessarily having to select, orient and train new staff, and indirect costs include loss of organisational knowledge, experience and expertise, and reduction in staff morale. Operating with too few staff overall (understaffing) or with under-qualified staff makes it difficult for agencies to run programs that meet clients' needs, and compromises the organisation's capacity to complete

the administrative requirements of funding agencies, thereby jeopardising program continuity (Flaxman, Muir, & Oprea, 2009).
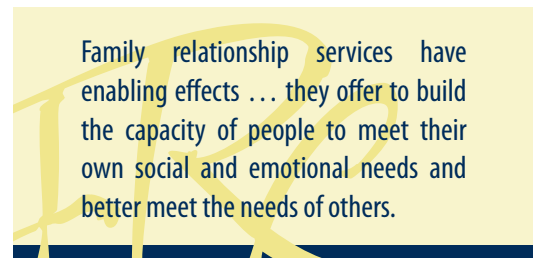
In service delivery, unstable staffing depletes capacity, reducing prospects for the strong relationship formation between staff and clients that is considered so essential for service quality and successful outcomes (Colton & Roberts, 2007). High staff turnover and caseloads may limit opportunities for clients and staff to get to know each other, and may also affect the quality and timeliness of decision-making, which is particularly problematic where child safety and wellbeing may be involved (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). A further problem is homogeneous staffing, which may impede the capacity for organisations to build relationships with and meet the needs of diverse populations (including Indigenous Australians, culturally and linguistically diverse populations or people with a disability). Inconsistencies in staffing arrangements may also compromise equity of access, with some services not being consistently available in some areas such as remote locations.

Workforce research and family relationship services

Workforce issues are complex, multi-faceted, interlinked and dynamic, and manifest in various ways in different community services sub-sectors and in different organisational, cultural and geographic contexts. Research is only beginning to unpack the context-specific nature of these challenges, and to explore the different models and strategies required to respond to these challenges in various community services contexts.

The services offered in the family relationship services sector are diverse and often require staff to work closely with a range of other services. Thus, the workforce—and potential workforce—consists of a pool of personnel with disparate professional identities and educational backgrounds who have skill sets that are shared and transferable across other family services and in other areas of community services. Family relationship services are thus likely to be affected by workforce issues and challenges in other areas of child and family services, many of which may be shaped by broader trends in community services.

As yet, there is no definitive academic research that focuses on the family relationship services workforce in Australia, and other research about the sector has tended to overlook or only touch on workforce matters.[2] In outlining the context shaping Australian relationship education and the challenges affecting these services, Halford and Simons (2005) emphasised the need to build evidence-based approaches and expand program access, but their arguments focused on aspects of program design, such

> Family relationship services have enabling effects … they offer to build the capacity of people to meet their own social and emotional needs and better meet the needs of others.

as timing, reach, targeting and tailoring. They did not consider issues of workforce quality and capacity, thus underestimating the challenge of arranging human resources in order to effectively implement programs and achieve the organisation's aims.

Indicators of workforce quality and capacity are not routinely monitored in family relationship services, perhaps reflecting the low profile of human resource issues in community services research and management generally. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998) conducted a national survey of providers of marriage education in Australia that counted numbers of courses and participants, but not numbers of workers, or any other worker characteristics. It is therefore no surprise that key players in the family services sector have voiced concerns about the lack of information about challenges affecting not-for-profit agencies, including workforce challenges (Families Australia, 2007).

Although there has been a lack of academic research and routine monitoring, several program evaluations and other studies of the sector have highlighted workforce issues and challenges. Issues raised include recruitment and retention difficulties, poor remuneration, high proportions of part-time work, and an ageing workforce (Family Relationships Services Australia [FRSA], 2008a; Morgan Disney & Associates, 2004; Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

In associated areas of community services, there is a burgeoning interest in workforce issues, especially in the area of child welfare (including both child protection and family support). The proliferation of studies in the United States has caused some to call for the coordination of research designs and methods, and standardisation of definitions of concepts like "retention" and "turnover" to ensure comparability (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008).

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2. It is hoped that the workforce mapping project for the FRSP, being developed by FaHCSIA's Working Group on Workforce Development, will assist with addressing this problem.

In Australia, a number of workforce studies have been conducted in child and family welfare over the last decade, as service systems have come under strain. Research has included interviews with stakeholders about recruitment, retention and workforce management strategies (e.g., Hodgkin, 2002), with some using comparative methodology to explore the views of employers, policy-makers and researchers as to the factors contributing to the turnover of professional child welfare staff in different national welfare contexts (Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009; Meagher, Cortis, & Healy, 2009). Other research has focused on specific occupations in other contexts, rather than on community services sectors, such as a longitudinal study of Australian rural social workers (Lonne & Cheers, 2004), and Healy and Meagher's (2007) study (using survey data and interviews) of the educational preparedness of social workers for child welfare work. Surveys have been conducted across community services, including the largest national sample survey of social and community services workers in Australia, conducted by the Australian Services Union (ASU, 2007). A broader statistical resource comes from Meagher and Healy's (2005, 2006) analysis of the characteristics of workers in community services occupations from the Australian Census.

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Despite these studies, evidence of the specific issues affecting the workforce in the family relationship services sector remains scant. This is problematic because, although it is relatively small compared to other community sub-sectors (FRSA, 2008a), the sector's capacity and sustainability is strategically important to family wellbeing, especially for the most fragile or vulnerable families. While these studies together capture issues that are also likely to be found in family relationship services, research needs to more systematically unpack the specific issues and challenges in this (and other) community services subsectors and contexts.

Approach and scope

In the remainder of this paper, we review and analyse literature relating to workforce issues, models, challenges and strategies in the family relationship services sector specifically and where such information is not available, in community services more broadly.

Due to the disparate backgrounds and skills of the family relationship services workforce, the review incorporates information about workers employed in a range of programs that aim to support and nurture children and families, not just those funded under FRSP. Relevant articles, policy documentation and submissions were identified through an extensive search of academic databases, and the websites of the state, territory and Commonwealth governments, and of non-government organisations and peak bodies. Articles were surveyed primarily to source specific information about the family relationship services workforce, and secondly, to source information about those community service subsectors that could be expected to work with family relationship services. Australian and international literature was included, with efforts made to review overseas literature that had most relevance to Australia.

Articles were analysed using the categories of workforce composition and characteristics; working conditions; workforce dynamics; workforce strategies; and background and contextual issues to provide the framework for discussion in this paper.

We explore the origins of the family relationship services workforce, and some of its key characteristics, before assessing the workforce challenges evident in the sector, including recruitment and retention, and the factors affecting these. Finally, we assess the range of workforce strategies that are, or could be, adopted in family relationship services and related sectors, appraising their strengths and appropriateness for addressing key challenges.

2.   Family relationship services: Workforce origins

The family relationship services sector is characterised by its diversity. Services have a set of goals ranging from primary prevention of relationship problems, to supporting families throughout a break-up and after separation. Family relationship services in Australia are provided by a mix of secular and church-affiliated community-based (non-government) organisations, working in partnership or networks with each other, and with government agencies. Services vary in size, with diverse funding sources. While the Family Relationships Services Program supports the sector, services may also receive funds from other government programs, or from religious agencies, charities, user contributions or other sources.
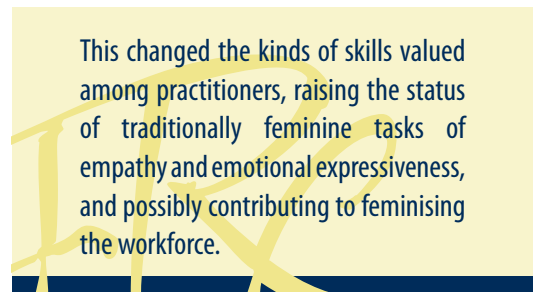
Family relationship services are relatively young, having grown out of the marriage and relationship education programs provided by clergy since the 1940s. During World War II and in the post-war period, structured group relationship education—focused on education for traditional marriage—emerged to respond to stresses as husbands and fathers returned from wartime service (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Reiger, 1987). Services involved lectures by the clergy and volunteer laypersons, with voluntary support from doctors, psychologists, teachers and social workers (Halford et al., 2003; Reiger, 1987; van Acker, 2003). These services, which had a strong Christian values base, went on to expand in the 1950s, but were not centrally resourced or coordinated, and few employed paid staff.

Following the introduction of the first national divorce law in 1959 and the establishment of the Commonwealth's Family Services Program in the 1960s, non-government agencies began to receive government support to deliver family relationship services. This had implications for the workforce, allowing services to employ paid and trained staff. However, there was some resistance to paying for these services, with the then Attorney-General, Garfield Barwick, continuing to see them as being best delivered by volunteer (albeit trained) staff. In 1959, Barwick stated to Parliament:

> I do not hold the view that this work can be done satisfactorily by people who make it no more than a means of livelihood. The work will best be done by those who, as well as being trained, have a sense of vocation and who, to a large extent, volunteer their good offices in this very skilful and sympathetic task. (Cited in HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998, p. 95)

Notwithstanding the then Attorney-General's view that paying staff would compromise service quality, program funding facilitated both professionalisation and service expansion. Church and secular organisations subsequently expanded their focus from marriage education and counselling to include family mediation, family skills and parenting programs, and many organisations began to use professionally trained, mostly female, counsellors (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998; Reiger, 1987; van Acker, 2003).

Government funding for marriage education remained modest throughout the 1970s and 1980s (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998). Yet the goals of service provision started to shift, moving goals from maintaining marriage as a legal institution and formal status, to providing support to enhance the quality of relationships, with an emphasis on emotional wellbeing (Reiger, 1987). Indeed, the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) introduced no fault divorce, and goals in relationship education subsequently turned from preparing couples for traditional marriage to supporting personal growth. It has been argued that this changed the kinds of skills valued among practitioners, raising the status of traditionally feminine tasks of empathy and emotional expressiveness, and possibly contributing to feminising the workforce (Reiger, 1987). In this period, the development of counselling as a field gave rise to debates about techniques—debates that compounded demands to increase and improve training and replace voluntary workers with paid staff (Reiger, 1987).

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More recently, these services have come to prioritise reducing the risk of relationship breakdown and violence as a way to promote child and family wellbeing. Services also aim to encourage and provide support for parents to resolve their own disputes without going to court. As such, they are becoming more closely aligned with priorities of other early intervention and prevention services, and with a range of other services for children and families.

After 1996, the Commonwealth increased spending on the core part of the sector: the Family Relationships Services Program. Funding grew from $20 million in 1996–97 to $80 million in 2005–06, with FRSP services coming to involve over 100 organisations, which work with over 135,000 clients per year (van Acker, 2007). The family law reforms over the period 2006–07, 2007–08 and 2008–09 increased funding to FRSP considerably. Programs supported by FaHCSIA and the AGD now range from early intervention and prevention to post-separation services such as children's contact services. The sector has also been expanded with the establishment of the Family Relationships Advice Line and 65 Family Relationship Centres, the first of which opened in 2006 followed by subsequent openings in 2007 and 2008. These centres provide three free hours of family dispute resolution for families and a single gateway to a range of relationship services, which is a response to previous reports about the confusion among families about the multiple pathways through, and the potentially adversarial nature of, the family law system (Moloney & Smyth, 2004). Family Relationship Centres and the renewed importance of dispute resolution in the family law process also consolidate the

position of social workers as key professionals (alongside lawyers and psychologists) in the field (Martin & Douglas, 2007).

Also over the last decade, the family relationship services sector and its workforce have been shaped by the growth of early intervention in the child welfare sector, and the increasing collaboration and integration of these services. The Commonwealth has increased its role in providing early intervention and family relationship support through funding programs for non-government organisations other than the FRSP, including the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (2000–04 and 2004–09). In February 2009, the Minister for Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs announced the Family Support Program. This program formally brings together the Family Relationships Services Program with seven other FaHCSIA-funded family services, including programs previously funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

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This development, recommended in a review of the FRSP (Urbis Keys Young, 2004), reflects a vision for FRSP services to sit alongside other programs that support families, parents and children, as a way to more effectively integrate services and facilitate flexibility and responsiveness. The continuing focus on child-inclusive practice, and on ensuring child safety and wellbeing is likely to have implications for the workforce. As family relationship services integrate increasingly with other family support and early intervention services, practitioners are likely to require skills in assessing risk, engaging children and delivering child-centred interventions, as well as in collaborating across professional disciplines and agencies. Indeed, an evaluation of the FRSP recommended the development of competency standards for child-inclusive practice, along with increased funding to cover the practitioner hours, child-friendly spaces, and materials required to work effectively with children (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

3.   Workforce composition and characteristics

As the previous section has indicated, the family relationship services sector has evolved from being a group of small and relatively uncoordinated church-based and volunteer-run programs, to a more coordinated set of government-supported and professional programs prioritising national social policy goals of promoting child and family wellbeing. However, while governments have recognised the social and economic costs of family conflict and break-up, and have sought to expand the sector and the range of services it provides, initiatives to develop the capacity of the sector's human resources have tended to lag. Like the rest of the non-government sector, coverage by industrial awards is a relatively recent development. Workers in family services and across community services previously fell outside the system of basic industrial protection, contributing to poor work conditions and problems of workforce sustainability (Briggs, Meagher, & Healy, 2007).

In this section, we outline some key workforce characteristics in family relationship services—including gender, age, qualifications and geographic spread of the workforce. This helps to build a profile of the workforce and to identify gaps in knowledge about their characteristics and composition. It also foregrounds discussion of key workforce challenges affecting the sector, considered in more detail in following sections.

Data on family services workers

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003) provided some data about family services workers, defined as:

- welfare workers (those who assist individuals and families with social, emotional and financial difficulties);
- family counsellors (who provide marriage or relationship counselling to individuals, couples or families); and
- family support workers (who assist social and welfare workers by providing services and support to families).

The AIHW noted increasing numbers of welfare and family support workers in the late 1990s, but a decline in numbers of family counsellors. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of welfare workers increased by 44% and family support workers increased by 38% (perhaps reflecting growing support for early intervention services). In contrast, the number of family counsellors decreased by 6.4% (AIHW, 2003). The data also show that while just over a third of welfare workers worked part time, more than half of family counsellors (52.4%) and family support workers (57.4%) did so.

The workforce and FRSP services

Data collected as part of the FRSP also offer insight into some of the characteristics of practitioners in the family relationship services sector. This information originates from reports by agencies providing services to their funding body, FaHCSIA, through the "FRSP Online" system. Because it relies on up-to-date reporting by agencies, data should be considered approximate only. Moreover, because the data relate only to workers who provide services to clients, it does not include those in office or other roles that do not involve client contact, so does not give a full picture of the sector's workforce. A further caveat is that many family relationship services will receive funding from sources other than the FRSP, and workers in these services will not be included in the data collection. Notwithstanding these limitations, the data do provide current indicative information about a large and significant part of the family relationship services workforce.

Gender and the FRSP workforce

Table 1 shows that in February 2009, there were approximately 6,805 staff who had active registration in the sector, according to organisations' reports to FaHCSIA. Around three quarters of these workers were female, confirming the expectation, and the point made in a previous evaluation of the FRSP that more women than men work in the sector (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). The state with the highest proportion of male workers was the ACT (33.5%), while Queensland had the lowest (18.9%).

Table 1: FRSP registered practitioners by gender and state, February

	Females		Males		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
VIC	1,396	74.6	475	25.4	1,871	100.0
NSW	1,224	71.1	498	28.9	1,722	100.0
QLD	1,209	81.1	281	18.9	1,490	100.0
WA	442	77.1	131	22.9	573	100.0
SA	373	78.5	102	21.5	475	100.0
TAS	205	71.9	80	28.1	285	100.0
ACT	141	66.5	71	33.5	212	100.0
NT	140	79.1	37	20.9	177	100.0
Australia	**5,130**	**75.4**	**1,675**	**24.6**	**6,805**	**100.0**

Note: Registered FRSP workers as of February 2009. Numbers are approximate, because data rely on up-to-date agency reporting.

Source: FaHCSIA FRSP Online administrative data (unpublished), February 2009.

The gender split in the family relationship services workforce is not surprising—women predominantly perform similar kinds of work in Australia and in other countries (Meagher & Healy, 2005). Family relationship services involve direct client contact, emotional engagement and emotional provisioning—capabilities traditionally assumed to be intrinsic to women's roles. As such, work involving these characteristics has sometimes been considered extensions of women's mothering and domestic roles, reinforcing ideas that skills related to social and emotional care are natural rather than the result of formal learning, and that industries involving the provision of care are suitable areas for female employment (Daniels, 1987).

Indeed, the strong sex-typing of these kinds of work underpins a series of workforce challenges. Because of assumptions that providing social and emotional care and support are intrinsic female proclivities, these kinds of work have traditionally been seen as low skill, contributing to relatively low pay and poor training across community services and other industries (England, Budig, & Folbre, 2002). Further, because women still carry the main responsibility for domestic work, responsibilities for family care are likely to be more pertinent issues in female dominated industries like family support, given that a large part of the workforce is female. Retaining and sustaining this workforce is thus likely to require systems of work–family supports (Moss, 2003).

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The gender split also raises further issues for sector capacity, in that the strong sex-typing of work involving emotional engagement and care may deter men from working in family relationship and associated services. That family service work is seen as typically "female" work may contribute to shortages of male workers, which may limit the capacity of services to offer specialised educational and therapeutic groups for men (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

> While many positions require vocational qualifications ... or bachelor or higher degree qualifications ... previous experience and on-the-job training may also provide pathways into the sector.

Importantly however, while the sector appears overwhelmingly dominated by women, data above from FRSP Online suggests there may be higher proportions of men working as registered practitioners in family relationship services (24.6%) than in other areas of community services. Indeed, analysis of occupation information reported in the 2001 Census suggests 88.4% of care workers in community services were female (Meagher & Healy, 2005), while 81% of respondents in a large survey of social and community services workers conducted by the Australian Services Union were women (ASU, 2007).

Indicators of organisation size

FRSP Online data also tell us about the distribution of practitioners between organisations, which gives some indication of the opportunities for development of practitioner cultures and support, and of professional isolation. Table 2 shows how FRSP services are dominated by a large number of organisations employing small numbers of registered practitioners. In February 2009 there were 64 funded organisations that employed 10 or less practitioners, and relatively few (12) organisations employing more than 100 practitioners. However, over two-fifths of registered practitioners worked in organisations employing more than 100 registered practitioners, and over three-fifths work in the largest 31 organisations. While these data are indicative only and require further exploration, they raise questions about how working conditions, and training and development opportunities might differ across small and large organisations, as those in small organisations could be expected to have less access to peer networks, and fewer opportunities for promotion.

Table 2: Number of organisations by number of FRSP registered practitioners, February 2009

Number of practitioners	Number of organisations	% of practitioners
10 practitioners or less	64	5.9
11 to 20 practitioners	52	11.2
21 to 50 practitioners	43	20.0
51 to 100 practitioners	19	21.2
More than 100 practitioners	12	41.7
Total	**190**	**100.0**

Note: Registered FRSP workers as of February 2009. Numbers are approximate, because data relies on up to date agency reporting.
Source: FaHCSIA FRSP Online administrative data (unpublished), February 2009.

The data in Tables 1 and 2 indicate the size of the workforce in FRSP funded services, the gender split, the spread of registered practitioners across the states, and their distribution between organisations. This gives an indication of the overall size of the family relationship services workforce, subject to the limitations outlined above. While it does indicate some key characteristics of registered practitioners, it does not give sufficient detail to support a full understanding of the workforce and the challenges emerging, as FRSP Online data are approximate only and key indicators such as workers' age, qualification levels and occupational background, or the geographic spread of workers are not included.

Other characteristics of the family relationship services workforce

While FRSP Online data only provide information about practitioners' gender and organisation size, other sources give an indication of workforce age structures and ageing, and issues around qualifications, accreditation and registration, pay, volunteering, and the geographic and cultural characteristics of the family relationship services workforce.
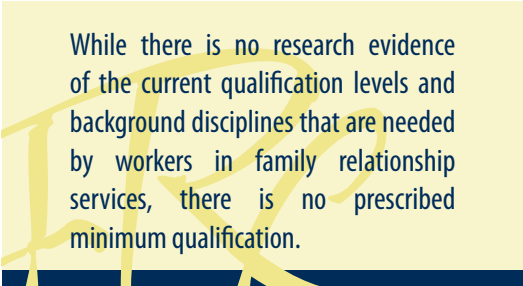
Age

Along with other areas of community services, the family relationship services workforce is ageing (Meagher & Healy, 2005; van Acker, 2008). While the ageing of the Australian workforce is a national trend (Kryger, 2005), human services workers are particularly affected. On average, care workers in community services are older than workers in other industries, and this in itself can make it difficult to recruit younger people into the industry, compounding concerns about workforce sustainability when the older generation retires (Meagher & Healy 2005). The age profile of workers in the marriage and relationship education field may also raise challenges for service delivery—if an older workforce may be poorly matched to younger clients, and if the life experience and expertise of younger workers comes under challenge by older, more experienced workers (van Acker, 2008).

Qualifications

The precise mix of qualifications in the family relationship workforce is unclear. Family relationship services employ staff in a range of positions, including family counsellors, family therapists, dispute resolution practitioners, educators and skills trainers, managers, facilitators, youth workers, and community liaison workers. There are several pathways into these jobs. While many positions require vocational qualifications (Certificate IV level in, for example, relationship counselling or relationship education) or bachelor or higher degree qualifications (for example in social work, youth work, psychology, counselling, family law or community development), previous experience and on-the-job training may also provide pathways into the sector (FRSA, n.d.).

While there is no research evidence of the current qualification levels and background disciplines that are needed by workers in family relationship services, there is no prescribed minimum qualification. Over a decade ago, the House of Representatives Committee report encouraged higher levels of education among marriage and relationship educators, but did not believe a particular tertiary qualification should be a necessary prerequisite for practice (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998). Rather than requiring particular qualifications, a registration process was recommended for family relationship services, based on the idea that a level of proficiency is required for practice in the marriage education field (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998).

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Registration and accreditation

Practitioners in services funded by the Family Relationships Services Program who provide services to clients are required to have their details registered on the FRSP Online system. This registration is not an accreditation system, and does not indicate attainment of a level of competency. As registration data are minimal, this system cannot be used to provide a detailed picture of workforce capacity, such as qualifications, or experience, however there is scope for it to play an expanded role in ensuring service quality.

A different system applies to those providing family dispute resolution as defined in the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (who may also perform other roles in family relationship service provision). This group do require accreditation. For these workers, an accreditation system was introduced to ensure service quality and recognise professionalism among family dispute resolution practitioners, alongside reforms phasing in requirements for parents to attend family dispute resolution prior to seeking parenting orders through a court. From 1 July 2009 family dispute resolution practitioners can meet accreditation standards through three pathways: completing the Vocational Graduate Diploma of Family Dispute Resolution (specially developed for the family relationship sector) or higher education equivalent; completing an appropriate qualification or be accredited under the National Mediator Approval Standards and gaining competency in all compulsory units from the Vocational Graduate Diploma (or the higher education equivalent units); or being registered before 1 July 2009 and gaining competency in three specified units of competency from the Vocational Graduate Diploma (or the higher education equivalent units)[3] (AGD, n.d.). While this helps maintain service standards, there was some criticism from social workers during the development of the regulations about the focus in the accreditation system on vocational competencies over theoretical understandings and reflexive practice knowledge (Martin & Douglas, 2007).

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3. For full details of the Family Law (Family Dispute Practitioners) Regulations 2008, see <www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_reg/fldrpr2008662/>.

Remuneration

There is little systematic information about pay rates in the family services sector. However, a review of the FRSP found evidence that professional salaries across services are around 25% lower than salaries earned in comparable government sector positions, with staff paid less than teachers or nurses (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). This was documented for counsellors, social workers and psychologists, who earn less than those who could be employed doing similar work in government agencies, the family court or in legal aid. Those with legal training were reportedly much more poorly paid than their counterparts in the government or private sectors (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

FRSA also cites a gap between the community-based FRSP sector and the public sector of around $15,000 and $30,000 per annum for each full time equivalent position. In light of mortgage and rent increases, non-monetary incentives like flexible hours or training in the community sector are unlikely to adequately compensate (FRSA, 2008b). Although the salary sacrificing options sometimes offered in community organisations with public benevolent institution status can compensate, these options are spread unevenly across the community sector and are not universally available (ACOSS, 2008a), and the structure, take-up and implications of these arrangements in family relationship services is unclear.

Volunteers

> While volunteers still play a role in some aspects of service delivery, and in post-separation services in support roles, the emphasis has turned to up-skilling and professionalising the paid workforce.

In general, community services use high numbers of volunteers, which may depress wages and constrain the development of professional identities (Community Services and Health Industries Skills Council [CSHISC], 2008). Like the wider sector, family relationship services have been found to overly rely on volunteers (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). While there are no data available that quantifies the use of volunteers, the sector is historically underpinned by voluntarism, given its church-based roots. However, volunteers have progressively been replaced with paid staff since the Family Services Program was introduced in the 1960s, and this trend has been reinforced with the development of the academic study of counselling and related disciplines. While volunteers still play a role in some aspects of service delivery, and in post-separation services in support roles, the emphasis has turned to up-skilling and professionalising the paid workforce. Many agencies have developed their own internal education and professional development programs (HRSC on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998), and accreditation was recently introduced for part of the sector (family dispute resolution).

Geographic profile

Geographic patterns of service provision and need raise challenges for human service delivery, including for family relationship services (Halford & Simons, 2005). In many rural areas, incomes tend to be low, and unemployment tends to be high and volatile where communities depend on a narrow range of industries, or a single industry (Catholic Welfare Australia [CWA] & Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaCSIA], 2006; Green, 2003). These trends, combined with the financial uncertainty, anxiety and stress relating to the drought in some regions of Australia, contribute to poor health, education and financial outcomes, and to high levels of need for family and relationship services in rural areas (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006; Green, 2003). In some areas, the mining boom has put pressure on relationships: family members have been relocated and face prolonged or episodic separation.

As well as contributing to demands on family relationship services, these regional patterns raise workforce challenges. Where other health and social services are lacking, family relationship services may need to fill the gap. Developing specialised services is impractical in small communities, limiting service choice and meaning family relationship professionals may pick up clients that need other kinds of assistance—widening the repertoire of required skills (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). Further, in small communities, workers may find it difficult to maintain boundaries where personal and professional roles and relationships intersect (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). There may also be shortages of training providers in many areas, and limited funds to travel to access training or professional development opportunities.

Ethnic diversity

The cultural profile of the workforce is important, because capacity to speak languages other than English enables practitioners to connect with, and deliver services to, culturally diverse communities. Overall, the community services workforce appears slightly less ethnically diverse than all occupations, and the wider

Australian population. Whereas 15.2% of Australians reportedly spoke a language other than English at home in 2001, the figure was 14.1% for the working population, but lower, at 12.2% for care workers in community services (Meagher & Healy, 2005). These are aggregate figures for community services in general and include nursing homes and childcare services where workers who speak languages other than English are concentrated (31% and 27%, see Meagher & Healy, 2005). As such, they are likely to underestimate the gap between the linguistic diversity in the family relationship services workforce, and diversity in the general population.
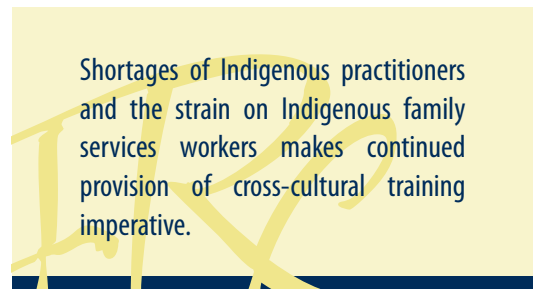
This profile raises challenges for the workforce, and for service capacity to engage culturally diverse families. However, while hiring bilingual staff is generally seen as important for delivering services to culturally diverse communities, some argue that the cultural profile of service providers may, in some contexts, be less important to service effectiveness than cultural competence, work skills and the relationship-building style of staff (Forehand & Kotchick, 1996; Katz, La Place, & Hunter, 2007; Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004; Sawrikar & Katz; 2008).

The Indigenous workforce

According to the 2001 Census, Indigenous Australians comprise 2.2% of the total population, 1.2% of employees, and 2.4% of care workers in community service industries (Meagher & Healy, 2005). Although Indigenous workers are over-represented in community services, they are under-represented among professionals in these industries (Meagher & Healy, 2005).[4] Indeed, there is evidence of shortages of Indigenous workers who are formally trained and qualified, which may compromise the capacity of services to effectively meet the needs of Indigenous populations (Healy, 2002).

In family relationship services, suitably qualified Indigenous practitioners have been described as in "critical undersupply" (FRSA, 2008b). CWA and FaCSIA (2006) documented difficulties in recruiting Indigenous staff with formal qualifications, as well as non-Indigenous staff who are trained to work effectively cross-culturally and are experienced in working with Indigenous communities. Retention is a further problem, especially because of isolation and poor informal supports, for example, when there is only one Indigenous worker and high community expectations (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). In a study of Indigenous child and family services funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, Flaxman et al. (2009) found general difficulties recruiting and retaining Indigenous workers, with positions often left vacant and re-advertised. Where "gatekeepers" or cultural brokers were used to link service providers from outside the community with community members, these individuals tended to become over-burdened with managing communication and relationships, compromising the sustainability of these roles. Shortages of Indigenous practitioners and the strain on Indigenous family services workers makes continued provision of cross-cultural training imperative, along with strategic approaches to developing the Indigenous workforce, and recruiting and retaining Indigenous staff.

> Shortages of Indigenous practitioners and the strain on Indigenous family services workers makes continued provision of cross-cultural training imperative.

4. Workforce challenges in family relationship services

The capacity and sustainability of family relationship services to deliver quality services and meet the needs of families depends on it attracting skilled workers who are well prepared for the challenges of this kind of work. The previous section outlined the main features of the family relationship services workforce. In the following section we examine the key workforce challenges associated with these workforce characteristics and dynamics. The main focus is on recruitment and retention issues and the factors contributing to workforce turnover.

Recruitment and retention: Key workforce challenges

Staff recruitment and retention are key issues. The sector's difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff were identified by the Family Relationships Services Program review (Urbis Key Young, 2004). More recently, senior executives in the FRSP have reiterated concerns about recruitment, retention and training—especially for rural and remote, Indigenous, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers, and for those practicing in

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4. Although Meagher and Healy's analysis has not been replicated with 2006 data, Indigenous people's over-representation in care work and under-representation in professional positions in community services can be expected to persist.

the area of dispute resolution (FaHCSIA, 2008)—and Family Relationship Services Australia have identified a critical undersupply of qualified Indigenous and CALD practitioners (FRSA, 2008b).

Challenges in recruiting and retaining appropriate staff are not unique to family relationship services. High turnover of staff has been a consistent finding of workforce studies in community services (ACOSS, 2008a; Briggs, Meagher, & Healy 2007; Hodgkin, 2002). In a national survey of 2,100 non-government social and community services workers, 52% of workers reported that they were not committed to staying in the industry beyond the next five years (ASU, 2007). The 2008 ACOSS survey of community and welfare services

> Recruitment and retention challenges draw large numbers of inexperienced practitioners into the sector, which can have an adverse effect on the capacity of the sector to deliver quality services.

found that there was an average turnover of 19.2% annually in their respondent agencies (ACOSS, 2008a). At first glance this appears to be only marginally higher than the all industry average of 18.5% (AHRI, 2008), however, turnover is perhaps of more concern in community services. The labour intensive nature of this work and the investment required in staff cooperation and collaboration mean the impact of staff turnover is generally more intense than what would be experienced on average across other industries (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Graef & Hill, 2000).

While recruitment is a problem in child and family services overall, some specific groups of workers appear to be particularly difficult to attract. As outlined in Section 3, men are under-represented in family relationship services, a trend which reflects the view that work involving emotional care is women's work (and therefore low skill and low pay), and which is expected to compromise capacity to meet the needs of male service users (Meagher & Healy, 2005; Urbis Keys Young, 2004). As well as men, recruiting Indigenous workers is reportedly problematic in family relationship services (Families Australia, 2007). Again, this problem is evident in community services more widely, with reports that more than half of surveyed managers reported trouble recruiting and retaining Indigenous workers (ASU, 2007). A study of services funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy found these difficulties were widespread among providers in child and family services, with positions being left vacant for long periods and re-advertised (Flaxman et al., 2009).

There are compelling reasons to be concerned about these trends. The cost of turnover in financial terms alone is significant, estimated at around three quarters to one and a half times an employee's salary (MacDermott, 2006). As well as the costs of hiring and training new staff, shortages can strain existing staff, deter new recruits and constrain the development of experience and expertise (Healy et al., 2009). Indeed, recruitment and retention challenges draw large numbers of inexperienced practitioners into the sector, which can have an adverse effect on the capacity of the sector to deliver quality services. Supervisory support, recognised as critical to staff retention, becomes harder to provide where experienced staff are in short supply (Curry et al., 2005; Healy et al., 2009). Funding for routine professional development opportunities is also important to retaining those in social work—a key profession—as they require regular professional development to maintain accreditation (Urbis Keys Young, 2004).

Staff vacancies also leave gaps in service provision, and can jeopardise program funding and continuity. In a qualitative study of services funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, difficulties recruiting and retaining frontline staff were found to directly impede the capacity of service providers to engage and build relationships with client families, especially with those who may be particularly vulnerable or "hard to reach" (Cortis, Katz, & Patulny, 2009). Moreover, competition for staff may strip workers from other organisations, contributing to churning and instability throughout the sector. Indeed, the consequences are likely to be felt throughout the sector. Because community service agencies work in collaboration, service delivery and referral options may be limited where the partner organisations are under-staffed.

Factors affecting recruitment and retention

There are a range of factors affecting recruitment and retention, and different ways to understand them. Here we present the range of factors in four categories (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2005; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007):

- personal factors (e.g., education, experience, professional commitment, experience, work–family conflict, and demographic characteristics);
- recognition and reward factors (e.g., pay, opportunities for promotion);
- organisational factors (e.g., workloads, training, flexibility and organisational valuing of employees); and
- political or contextual factors (e.g., length of program funding, competition in the labour market).
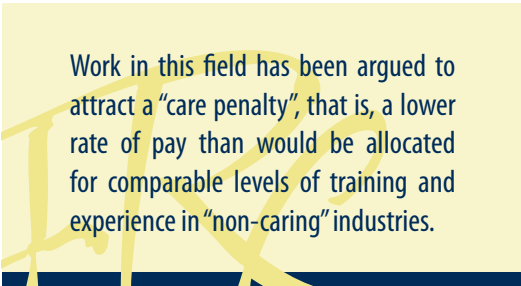
Personal factors

The education and work experience of individuals are key factors affecting retention. Across community services, qualification levels and requirements are recognised as being lower than in other industries, with many non-qualified workers performing challenging work (Community Services and Health Industries Skills Alliance [CSHI Skills Alliance], 2008). In child protection, problems are evident where inexperienced staff are given a disproportionate level of responsibility for frontline work (Healy et al., 2009). Workers lacking education or experience have been found to be less likely to meet job expectations, more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their jobs and less likely to remain in their job over the long term (Hodgkin, 2002). However, more educated workers may also have more prospects, so are vulnerable to being "poached".

Other factors affecting retention include personal experiences of work–family strain (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Nissley, Borak, & Levin, 2005). The concentration of women working in family relationship services makes family-friendly provisions like paid parental leave critical. Indeed, across community services, there is a distinct gap during the prime years of family formation, indicating conflict between paid and unpaid caring roles for many workers (Meagher & Healy, 2005).

Those most likely to stay in child and family services jobs have been found to demonstrate particular personal characteristics, including a sense of mission, professional commitment to the job and service users, professional standing, and willingness to invest in relationships (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003, cited in DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Bednar, 2003; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). They may also be those most likely to find, and thrive on, challenge and meaning in their work (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). From some perspectives, work that involves this level of intrinsic motivation and commitment to clients rather than money may be seen to underpin a pay penalty, which exacerbates recruitment and retention difficulties (Healy & Meagher, 2004). England, Budig, and Folbre (2002) made the argument however that many jobs outside the care sector are also attractive to the people who choose them for a range of reasons. As such, the commitment and intrinsic motivation of workers can explain only part of the gap in pay between community services and other fields of work. While personal motivation may influence who takes on particular jobs and the conditions under which they are willing to be employed, pay and associated recruitment and retention patterns are also shaped by organisational arrangements, policies, and supports—including opportunities for recognition and reward.

Recognition and rewards

Recognition and reward factors affect recruitment and retention. Indeed, low pay and poor opportunities for career advancement reflect a general undervaluing of child and family services, including family relationship services (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Urbis Key Young, 2004). Work in this field has been argued to attract a "care penalty", that is, a lower rate of pay than would be allocated for comparable levels of training and experience in "non-caring" industries (Briggs et al., 2007; England et al.,2002; Meagher & Healy, 2006). Moreover, claims for better pay

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and conditions have been constrained historically by the tendency for workers to place lower priority on their personal income and security than their service to the community, and by the extensive use of volunteer labour in the sector (Briggs et al., 2007).

Across community services, pay has been identified as the single most important factor for workers intending to leave their jobs, and 77% of surveyed managers identified low wages as the main barriers to attracting and retaining staff (ASU, 2007). Like other areas of community services, the family services sector is disadvantaged by considerable competition in this regard because of the higher salaries and entitlements offered in the public sector and in comparable sectors (Families Australia, 2007). The review of FRSP, for example, reported that staff earn around 25% less than those in comparable public sector positions (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). For services in rural communities, funding levels may not reflect the true cost of delivering services, especially where populations are scattered and outreach raises travel costs, keeping salaries low (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006).

Career development opportunities also affect recruitment and retention, with work opportunities needing to be structured in ways that allow for internal promotion and lateral movements within organisations (Bednar, 2003; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007). These pathways should ensure workers with qualifications have additional options which provide incentives to professional qualifications, and that frontline workers have opportunities to develop discretion and creativity (Healy, 2002). Indeed, senior executives in the FRSP recently voiced

concerns about how best to develop and structure career paths within the FRSP, and how to ensure the sector is attractive to young people (FaHCSIA, 2008).

Organisational factors

Organisational factors feature strongly in the literature explaining problems of turnover in child and family services, as poor organisational supports contribute to stress and burnout. Organisational supports likely to improve retention include engaged supervision; clearly defined roles; opportunities to collaborate with peers; leadership in goal setting; formal review to encourage a sense of accomplishment; and supportive administration to ensure that workers have meaningful input into decision making (Barak, Nissley, & Levin, 2001; Bednar, 2003, Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins, 2005; Zlotnik et al., 2005). However, these supports are difficult to sustain where the workforce is unstable, especially where experienced supervisors are unavailable to help replenish workers' personal and professional resources (Healy et al., 2009).

Workload is a key contributor to staff turnover, with high workload found to contribute to intention to leave and to undermine workers' job satisfaction, as workers are unable to properly deploy their skills to engage families, or spend time learning from other staff (Barak, Nissley, & Levin, 2001; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). High workload also contributes to burnout, especially where the small numbers of skilled workers results in them being overcommitted.

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Work is especially intense and demanding where there is family violence, where clients may be highly emotional, and where time and organisational resources limit the extent to which workers can engage with client families (Memmott, Chambers, Go-Sam, & Thomson, 2006; Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Further, where work is routinised and organised around "thin" staffing levels, or where work is fast and intense, workers will have few opportunities to establish relationships with each other, and to share experiences and ideas, contributing to a loss of practice knowledge and capacity to innovate. Where services are working with particularly vulnerable clients, lower caseloads may be necessary to allow workers to engage more intensively—including where there are child protection concerns, and where families have not used services before and may be cautious about professional intervention (Cortis, Hilferty, Chan, & Tanous, 2009). For social workers, support from co-workers has been found to moderate the relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, and prevent burnout (Stalker et al., 2007).

Workload also contributes to workforce challenges by constraining the uptake of training opportunities. Indeed, high efficiency funding models pressure workers to process clients, impeding the ability of organisations to provide or fund training and to release staff and backfill to enable training (CSHISC, 2008). Training may also be difficult to support in smaller organisations, whereas larger organisations are generally able to invest more in training due to internal planning capacity and economies of scale (CSHISC, 2008). For those in rural and regional areas, barriers to training include travel time and distance, cost of training and backfilling, and the lack of staff to backfill (NSW Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Board, 2007).

Political and contextual factors

Broader contextual factors also affect recruitment and retention. Competition among community organisations for staff, and competition between the community, government and private sectors, can be unhelpful for the overall stability of the sector (Families Australia, 2007). Wage disparities between government and non-government agencies, underpinned by government funding arrangements, also contribute to movement of staff from community agencies into the public sector (CSHI Skills Alliance, 2008).

Further, short-term funding contracts present barriers to staff retention. Longer-term funding cycles allow for longer-term planning and greater certainty which can be passed on to staff (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). Where program funding is short-term or insecure, employment contracts will also be short-term or insecure (Briggs et al., 2007). Care should be taken to ensure funding levels cover standards of qualification and training required, even where these increase over time (Victorian Council of Social Services, 2008).

Workforce challenges in rural and remote areas

Family relationship services operating in rural locations face additional challenges relating to their distance from metropolitan areas (Families Australia, 2007). Indeed, the problem of recruiting and retaining skilled staff
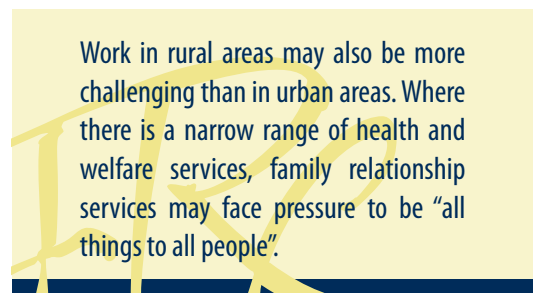
in rural areas is not confined to family relationship services but is evident across community services and other industries.

Recruitment and retention difficulties are likely to be most apparent in the most remote areas, including central and north-west Australia, and north-west Queensland. Indeed, across community services, there are serious workforce issues in Central Australia, with clients getting younger while the workforce is ageing, and staff being drained from industries unable to compete in terms of wages and conditions (ACOSS, 2008b). In addition, the sector has been impacted by changes brought about by the mining boom, especially in its prime years from 2004 until the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008. Community services were reportedly losing workers to mining and associated jobs, resulting in difficulties recruiting because of isolation and poor infrastructure (CSHI Skills Alliance, 2008). In addition the mining boom was absorbing available resources for accommodation, pushing up the cost of housing for workers in the community services (ACOSS, 2008b). Similarly, there was a period of labour and skill shortages in health and community services in regional areas of Queensland, especially those areas with mining projects (CSHI Skills Alliance, 2008). People had reportedly been leaving their industries to work in mining due to higher wages and better conditions, including school-hour shifts which appeal to working mothers. This enhanced competition for staff throughout these regions. At the time of writing however, the mining industry in Australia is contracting in line with the global economic downturn. As a result some rural areas are experiencing dramatic job losses due to several large mine closures. While the precise effects of this on rural family relationship services is unclear, it could be expected to increase demand, which may place additional pressures on organisations and staff already working in communities facing financial uncertainty, anxiety and stress relating to drought in some regions of Australia (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006; Green, 2003).

Another explanation for staff shortage in rural areas is that demand for family relationship services has grown with the decline of the voluntary labour which historically helped people deal with social and personal problems, such as the Country Women's Association. Economic problems and industry restructuring have strained rural communities, and as a result, women have been increasingly engaged in managing farms or businesses or in other paid work, reducing their provision of informal or voluntary supports (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). Other explanations focus on community factors (access to local facilities and networks); professional issues (overload, isolation, lack of training, inadequate pay); and personal factors (housing, family factors) (Roufeil & Battye, 2008).

Low staff retention in rural services may also be a result of urban-trained workers' poor preparation for rural contexts, and poor supports for negotiating the challenges of living and working in these communities. Indeed, there are costs associated with relocation. While rural employment offers opportunities to gain experience, housing may be in short supply, and living costs may be increased. Family relationship service providers may be unable to assist with either the costs of relocation or these increased living costs. In addition, relocating to rural areas can place strain on workers own relationships, where they are often far from the support of family and friends (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006).

Work in rural areas may also be more challenging than in urban areas. Where there is a narrow range of health and welfare services, family relationship services may face pressure to be "all things to all people" (Roufeil & Battye, 2008). Where specialists are lacking, roles in generalist organisations are often flexible, making rural work an opportunity for rapid skill development. These professional opportunities may however be associated with stress (Green, 2003). Indeed, there are reports of higher stress among social workers in rural areas, relating not only to their multiple and ambiguous roles, but also to their visibility in the community and challenges around confidentiality, personal privacy and safety (Green, 2003).

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Workers in rural areas may have less access to resources that would help them cope with these pressures, including clinical supervision and training, because of the costs of travelling to attend city-based training (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). Rural staff may also work in small organisations, and may become isolated from peer networks, professional bodies and education providers, and have access to few opportunities for lateral movement or promotion.

Indigenous communities are also among those most affected. Services in rural and remote locations have particular challenges attracting and retaining workers with the necessary skills and qualifications to work in Indigenous communities (Flaxman et al., 2009). In a study of federally funded child and family services,

providers were found to be competing intensely for qualified and skilled staff, both with other human service organisations, and with organisations in other industries. This was a particular problem in areas where other industries were high paying, such as mining, as these could lure skilled Indigenous workers away from the child and family sector (Flaxman et al., 2009).

5. Workforce responses: Strategies in family relationship services and related fields

This paper has analysed a number of workforce trends and issues that raise challenges for the quality and sustainability of the family relationship services sector. This section examines a number of strategies that have been initiated, proposed or could be considered as ways to develop workforce capacity in family relationship services, and in related community service areas, including child welfare services. Such strategies are multiple and diverse—ranging from those that broadly focus on reforming policy, models of service delivery and professional practice, to more modest initiatives aimed at improving workplace training and supervisory arrangements. In this section we present a typology of options that categorise strategies into levels of implementation, distinguishing between strategies that may be introduced at:

■ the policy level, including changes to regulatory arrangements and funding terms;

■ those that could operate at the sectoral level, including cross-agency training and partnerships;

■ those that operate at an occupational level which involve professionalising the family relationship services workforce; and

■ employer-led initiatives at the organisational level, such as targeted recruitment, training and supervision.

Strategies at the policy level

The workforce challenges outlined above highlight a growing need for the family relationship services sector to develop policy responses that strategically address issues of workforce capacity and sustainability. Policy of this nature needs to be informed by research-based evidence such as that provided through a national workforce mapping process to identify personnel, qualifications, remuneration benchmarks, workforce distribution, demand trends, and examples of best practice. Delegates to the Family Relationships Services Program Senior Executive Forum committed support for a project of this type at the end of last year (FaHCSIA, 2008), and it is currently ongoing. Once finalised, this data should help workforce planners to identify staff shortages and forecast future workforce requirements. Findings from this project could also be used to inform the development of a national workforce framework, like that jointly developed by government and professional representatives of the health sector. The National Health Workforce Strategic Framework (Australian Health Ministers' Conference, 2004) for example, effectively guides new policy relating to workforce development goals. The adoption of a similar model for the family relationship services sector would enable both government and industry representatives to take a proactive leadership role in addressing workforce challenges and developing effective policy responses. Van Acker (2007) argued that action of this type is needed.

One structural change that could be implemented at the policy level, and that is identified in the literature as a barrier to workforce development, is the short-term funding of the sector through the Family Relationships Services Program and additional discretionary grants and subsidies. Families Australia (2007) recently argued that funding cycles of more than three years can help to achieve stability within the workforce by making employment contracts more attractive. Cortis, Hilferty et al. (2009) go further by arguing that short-term funding contracts result in short-term staffing, which place relationship building, overall service quality, and service continuity at risk. As identified in Cortis, Hilferty et al. (2009), funding contracts also need to factor in the increased costs associated with recruiting, training and supervising a rural workforce.

> Families Australia recently argued that funding cycles of more than three years can help to achieve stability within the workforce by making employment contracts more attractive.

A recent policy initiative in early intervention services affecting the family relationship sector (and one which industry representatives have had little power to influence) is the ongoing shift towards closer integration of service providers and greater collaboration between practitioners. Whilst some writers have questioned whether collaborative models are necessarily more effective and efficient ways to work (Sloper, 2004), others assert benefits such as less replication between different service providers, and increased professional development

and career progression opportunities for staff. The literature also indicates that whilst multi-agency working can pose challenges to workers' professional identities, it offers greater flexibility to work across agencies, thereby facilitating greater access to supervision and training opportunities. In addition, multi-agency working can facilitate a greater understanding of partner agencies' roles and improved communication. Despite contention, "multi-agency working" and "joined-up services" have become key policy priorities across child and family and other community services. Indeed, government policy increasingly specifies requirements for collaboration and service integration as a means of enhancing service delivery and promoting better outcomes for clients (Horwath & Morrison, 2007).

The recently announced Family Support Program is an example of such a policy. This Australian Government initiative brings the Family Relationships Services Program together with 7 other family, children and parenting programs. The multi-agency collaboration advocated within this policy acknowledges the complex and interconnected nature of family relationship services to children's services (including early intervention). For the workforce, more connected ways of working are likely to require good systems of communication and information sharing within agencies and professions and between them, as well as clarification of role overlap (Scott, 1997; Sloper, 2004).
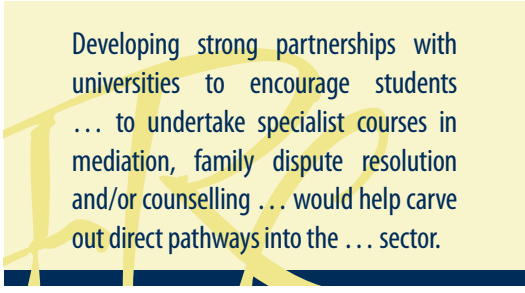
In the UK, the move towards multi-agency working in children's services has been accompanied by a broad reform package that has seen children's services agencies restructured in an effort to create a more coherent configuration of services. The UK's wide-ranging reform agenda was at risk because of a crisis in the recruitment and retention of a range of child welfare professionals, so the UK Government devised the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* (Purcell, 2008). Changes stipulated in this policy include increased support for industry leaders and managers; a targeted approach to graduate recruitment that involves exploring ways to fast track recruitment as well as raising the profiles of jobs in the children's services workforce; developing a knowledge bank for workers to ensure that practice, training and workforce development is firmly rooted in evidence based practice; and supporting the ongoing learning of workers by ensuring that training and career progression are accessible and of high quality. Drawing from this, a workforce strategy for Australia's Early Years services is currently being developed at the national level (OECECC, n.d.). While similar reforms could be applied to family relationship services in Australia if required, more proactive work in the area of workforce planning and development should reduce the necessity for such a comprehensive program of reforms.

Strategies at the sectoral level

A number of workforce development strategies can also be implemented at the sectoral level. One such strategy, which could follow the mapping project and workforce framework outlined above, involves the family relationship services sector conducting a training needs analysis (as suggested in the Urbis Keys Young 2004 review of the FRSP), and establishing workforce development priorities. This approach has been adopted in Queensland where training advisory councils (e.g., the QLD Workforce Council's Community Services and Health Industries Alliance) set priorities across the sector such as expanding the size of the workforce through vocational and higher education, and strengthening existing practitioners' skills base by improving the quality and accessibility of training.

Improved training and professional development for practitioners was identified in the Urbis Keys Young (2004) program review as a critical challenge for the sector. Improvement in this area needs to begin at the level of undergraduate education, as many agencies in the program review reported that they prefer not to employ new graduates because they do not have the requisite skills or experience for FRSP work. Simple solutions to this situation are partly hampered by the fact that pathways into the sector are provided by a variety of degree programs and vocational training. The range of entry points prevents straightforward reform of course content and structure. However, doing so across the various entry points would ensure new graduates are better prepared for the challenging context of FRS work, including in rural and regional areas.

One way to improve undergraduate education would be by developing strong partnerships with universities to encourage students in social welfare, social work, counselling, psychology and other human services degrees to undertake specialist courses in mediation, family dispute resolution and/or counselling. This would help carve out direct pathways into the family relationship services sector. Strong lobbying by sector representatives could help specify relevant courses as compulsory content for certain human services degrees. Field placement at

> Developing strong partnerships with universities to encourage students … to undertake specialist courses in mediation, family dispute resolution and/or counselling … would help carve out direct pathways into the … sector.

Family Relationship Centres, internship programs, and supported employment for students during academic breaks could provide further incentives for graduates to enter the sector.

Improved training and professional development within the sector is also hampered by a lack of designated funding for these purposes. This situation especially disadvantages individual and small agencies that are often unable to provide training for their staff. The Urbis Keys Young (2004) review recommended cross-agency and joint training as a cost effective use of sectoral infrastructure. This strategy also provides the additional benefit of facilitating greater collaboration between service providers and practitioners, which may be undermined where funding is allocated through competitive tendering processes.

Changes to workers' entitlements and conditions could also be adopted at the sectoral level to help retain and recruit staff. Families Australia (2007) suggested examining the scope for transferable long service and sick leave entitlements throughout the community sector, and between both government and non government agencies. The cost burden and impact on individual agencies, and across the sector, would need to be determined prior to further consideration of this strategy.

> Reform of rural services should focus on the kinds of employer initiatives which could be introduced to improve service delivery, rather than … on the constraints of the rural environment and practitioner characteristics.

Strategies at the sectoral level could also be introduced to address the specific needs of rural and regional practitioners. In a recent study examining effective service delivery in regional, rural and remote areas, Roufeil and Battye (2008) argued that the most effective ways to build sustainable services is through making changes to the "training environment, maximising workforce participation and service re-engineering" (p. 4). They maintain that reform of rural services should focus on the kinds of employer initiatives which could be introduced to improve service delivery, rather than the usual focus on the constraints of the rural environment and practitioner characteristics. Most recently, the Australian Government acknowledged the demanding practice context of rural work and the greater needs of these practitioners by agreeing to allocate funding to assist rural practitioners to attend conferences and professional development courses (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006).Such funding initiatives need to be sustained and expanded to support rural workers' development and delivery of quality services.

Finally, the national compact being developed between the Australian Government and the not-for-profit sector, may provide a window of opportunity for non-government family relationship services to participate more centrally in agreements with government. This compact will provide a platform for discussion and agreement between the government and the not-for-profit sector. FaHCSIA and ACOSS have already consulted a number of community organisations about the development of the national compact. Towards the end of 2008 an expert panel was established to advise on the consultation process. This panel included representatives from mental health, aged care services, disability services, Catholic social services and other organisations (although there was no specific representation from family relationship services). The expert panel called for the creation of an Office of the Third Sector within government to better inform and coordinate government strategies and drive positive change in the way government currently engages with not-for-profit organisations and communities. Melville (2008) argued that the broader community services sector should use the opportunity to reframe its own partnership agenda and seize the political opportunities that may be provided by this compact. Taking an activist approach, and advocating for the inclusion of representation from the family relationship services sector would be a first step in ensuring that the voice of the sector is strongly heard.

Strategies at the occupational level

The core strategy for addressing workforce challenges at the occupational level involves further professionalisation of the family relationship services sector. This strategy was first employed during the late-70s and early-80s and led to the phasing out of trained volunteers and the recruitment of paid professional staff. As outlined in Section 2, the family relationship services sector had its roots in marriage guidance services, delivered largely by volunteer labour, however, service provision today relies upon skilled and qualified practitioners to deliver a broad range of services to suit the needs of an increasingly diverse society. A renewed focus on professionalisation of the workforce has been proposed as a way to retain experienced practitioners and attract new graduates into the sector.

Professionalisation has been described by Larson (1977) as a "collective mobility project" (p.xvi) in which occupations seek to improve not only their economic position and working conditions, but also their status and prestige. Professionalisation is therefore a process that emphasises the power and political strategies used by occupations to maintain or increase their position. The description and promotion of family relationship

services practitioners as professionals by their representative professional association is one such strategy, as is the relocation of education and training of more practitioners into universities or accredited organisations.

The ideology that underpins an occupation's quest for increased professionalisation is the argument that it will result in an improved quality of services, and enhance staff capacity and sustainability. No research has been identified on whether increased professionalisation within family relationship services can achieve these goals, although some research is available from other community service sectors. Van Acker (2008) argued, for example, that the introduction of training competencies in relationship education will help to professionalise the marriage education sector and attract more staff. Recent attempts at increased professionalisation of this small sub-sector include the development of competency standards by the Marriage and Relationship Education Association of Australia (MAREAA). This peak body has worked with educators and government to develop competency standards and a qualifications framework. This framework, which has been ratified by the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, provides a "benchmark" for training programs for relationship educators. It positions Australia ahead of the UK and the US in terms of training requirements for marriage educators (MAREAA, cited in van Acker, 2008).

Van Acker's (2008) work, which relates only to marriage education, highlights divisions within the family relationship services sector. Such divisions reflect the broader fragmentation of social services work. Healy and Meagher (2004) argued that the fragmentation and routinisation of social work into discretely identifiable parts, and the underemployment of qualified social workers in para-professional positions has contributed to the deprofessionalisation of social services work. Instead, they proposed the development of collaborative alliances between unions, professional associations and accredited training bodies as a way of professionalising social services work.

Healy and Meagher's (2004) strategy advocates mobilisation of the collective strength of the social services sector to lobby policy-makers and funders to recognise service provision as a professional activity, with practitioners requiring improved remuneration and working conditions. This strategy could similarly be enacted by the family relationship services sector as many of the workforce issues are shared. Healy and Meagher's (2004) research also identifies potential obstacles to concerted united action, which in relation to family relationship services concerns the disparate professional identities and educational backgrounds of practitioners, and the fact that these practitioners may be motivated by a commitment to helping clients, rather than a desire for prestige and money. The former obstacle suggests that broadening or weakening the qualification requirements necessary to become a family relationship services practitioner as a way of increasing potential inductees, may be a problematic strategy.

Continued fragmentation dissipates the collective power of family relationship service practitioners to force structural changes that may encourage more graduates to join the sector, under-qualified practitioners to undertake further professional development, and experienced practitioners to remain. The recent amalgamation of three former industry representative bodies into a single representative body (FRSA) should provide a stronger, collective voice to policy and funding negotiations.

Finally, and as part of a renewed focus on professionalisation within the sector, it is suggested that the newly formed FRSA, like the MAREAA, consider embarking on a program to develop professional standards. The development of standards by FRSA could act as protection against the imposition of standards developed outside of the sector, mandated by government agencies, and connected explicitly to practitioner registration and/or accreditation. This is representative of a regulatory approach to standards development (Mahony & Hextall, 2000). The alternative model proposed here, known as the developmental approach (Mahony & Hextall, 2000) emphasises the potential of standards to increase practitioner control, and improve the professional practices and learning of practitioners.

> The development of standards by FRSA could act as protection against the imposition of standards developed outside of the sector … and [be] connected explicitly to practitioner registration and/or accreditation.

Strategies at the organisational level

At the organisational level, a range of employer-led strategies may improve workforce capacity and sustainability. Although this range of strategies may give single organisations an edge in recruiting and retaining staff, initiatives at this level are likely to be introduced unevenly across the sector, and may exacerbate competition between organisations for staff. These strategies may therefore improve working conditions and make the

sector more attractive, but may not be coordinated in such a way as to offer comprehensive solutions to workforce challenges across the whole family relationship services sector.

Strategic approach to recruitment and staff development

Organisations might consider adopting more targeted approaches to recruiting, developing and retaining staff. Targeting may be adopted to enhance workforce diversity, for example, by attracting and retaining Indigenous and bilingual workers, as well as men, or specialist fathers' workers. Of course, while services often seek to employ Indigenous, ethno-specific, male or female staff to help meet the needs of target groups through culturally appropriate service models (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006), some argue that employing staff who share characteristics or identities with clients is less important than ensuring the overall quality of practice, and the quality of worker–client relationships (Cortis, Hilferty et al., 2009; Forehand & Kotchick, 1996).

Services in rural and remote locations may also require targeted approaches to ensure they can recruit, develop and retain staff. Those providing services to rural and remote Indigenous communities under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, for example, found that employing, training and mentoring local people was more successful than bringing new workers into the area (Flaxman et al., 2009).

Where there are acute recruitment challenges, the use of temporary agency staff may offer ways to fill positions. Indeed, in child and family welfare in England this strategy has increasingly been used, especially in the statutory sector. However, the use of short-term, agency staff may exacerbate problems throughout the sector. The high wages required by temporary, agency staff may be beyond the grasp of many NGOs, especially smaller agencies. Rather than resolving sector-wide recruitment challenges, agency salaries may strip workers from partner organisations, contributing to a churning of staff throughout the sector (Meagher et al., 2009).

> Providing thorough competency training and networking opportunities to complement university studies can help ensure new graduates can "hit the ground running" and be prepared to take on complex tasks.

Another strategic recruitment model is to provide pathways for graduates into the sector via student placements (Southwick & Solomona, 2007). This may involve offering professional placements that articulate into paid positions, or partnering with universities in other ways to recruit graduates early and prepare them intensively. Selecting promising staff early in their training and providing thorough competency training and networking opportunities to complement university studies can help ensure new graduates can "hit the ground running" and be prepared to take on complex tasks. Such a model has been used in public child welfare in the US (Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003), and is most suited where there is high competition for new graduates and where work is highly complex and contributing to burnout within the first few years. Although new graduates provide a potential source of labour, inexperienced workers tend to require intensive supervision, and investing in this group may be seen to divert resources to staff least likely to stay (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006).

Wages, conditions and job structures

Improving the wages and conditions on offer is a way organisations can attract and retain staff. In rural and remote areas, organisations may need to pay a premium for staff, including support for relocation where local sources of skilled labour are lacking. Where pay rates and job tenure are constrained by funding levels and arrangements, other organisational initiatives may help attract staff, including increasing the availability of flexible hours and family friendly working arrangements, which is particularly important for attracting and retaining female workers, and for retaining workers aged between 25 and 40 (Meagher, 2005).

Changing how jobs are structured may also help organisations attract and retain workers. Job sharing and secondment opportunities, partnerships to supplement shortages of particular staff (e.g., Indigenous staff), and other opportunities to work alongside experienced workers, managers or role models may make the work more attractive (Flaxman et al., 2009). Where workers consider fulfilling bureaucratic accountability requirements (such as filling in forms or inputting management information data) to be burdensome and to detract from more rewarding frontline work, managers may be able to help reorganise the work process, to improve the ratio of direct client contact to administration and increase opportunities for professional discretion (Meagher et al., 2009). Work processes should be organised to maximise client contact over administration. In small communities outside metropolitan areas, management roles may be redesigned to be shared so that responsibilities of leadership do not fall onto, and overburden, a single person (Roufeil & Battye, 2008).

Supervision and mentoring arrangements, and opportunities for skill development, may also be reorganised. Where work is emotionally demanding, supervision may be important to the prevention of burnout. Regular supervision meetings may also offer organisations a way to monitor and manage emerging feelings of dissatisfaction, enabling them to identify emerging intentions to resign, and to intervene (Barak et al., 2001, p.656). Strengthening peer support networks and mentoring systems, and providing strong orientation for new staff, may also offer strategies for improving retention (Hodgkin, 2002).
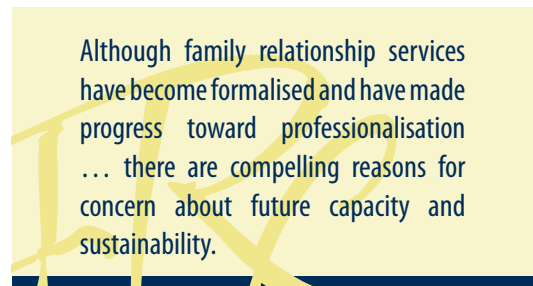
Organisational support for training

A further set of organisational supports relates to training and professional development programs, provided internally or externally with employer support or subsidy. This is important both for improving capacity and job satisfaction, and for communicating organisational commitment to workers and clients (Curry et al., 2007; Hodgkin, 2002). In family relationship services, identified training needs include working cross culturally, especially with Indigenous people in rural and remote communities (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006), and management and leadership training (FaHCSIA, 2008).

For new employees, investing in training can provide important orientation and networking opportunities. For more long-standing staff, training is a way to update and develop skills and reflect on their work. Technology offers ways to reach rural workers and ensure they can participate in training and professional development activities. Where organisations support staff to complete tertiary studies, they should also foster a work environment that facilitates staff completion of training, and supports graduates' transitions to work or to higher positions (Lonne & Cheers, 2004).

As well as supporting tertiary studies or offering short professional courses to their own staff, some family relationship services have training units that offer specialist courses throughout the sector. Some short courses are endorsed by the Australian Association of Social Workers and the Australian Psychological Association, making them especially attractive to staff and organisations. While courses are likely to be difficult and costly for organisations in rural and remote locations, technologies may provide some opportunities, as recommended by the sector (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). In areas where formal training is not available, informal on-the-job training along with mentoring offers ways to train local workers and improve service sustainability (Flaxman et al., 2009).

6. Conclusions

This issues paper has analysed workforce issues, models and solutions across the family relationship services sector, and has identified key challenges and strategies through which the workforce might be better supported and sustained. It has tracked the development of family relationship services from a system based on uncoordinated, church-based voluntary provision to a paid sector, funded largely by government, and increasingly integrated with other early intervention and prevention services and family law processes.

> Although family relationship services have become formalised and have made progress toward professionalisation … there are compelling reasons for concern about future capacity and sustainability.

Although family relationship services have become formalised and have made progress toward professionalisation such as requiring accreditation for family dispute resolution practitioners, there are compelling reasons for concern about future capacity and sustainability. As in other areas of child and family welfare, family relationship services face challenges in recruiting, retaining and developing skilled practitioners. An undersupply of suitably qualified Indigenous workers, and of non-Indigenous staff experienced in working with Indigenous communities has been documented, along with shortages of workers in rural and remote locations, and of male workers. Indeed, the female-dominated workforce, combined with the persistent sex-typing of work involving emotional engagement, may deter men from working in the sector, and contribute to relatively low pay and poor training. A further challenge is the diversity of occupations and qualifications in family relationship services, which means there are several uncoordinated pathways into these jobs, a range of qualification levels, and no core professional identity.

These challenges can be explained by a combination of personal, recognition and reward, organisational, and political and contextual factors. Factors that can promote workforce capacity and sustainability include engaged supervision; clearly defined roles; low caseloads; opportunities to work collaboratively with peers; leadership in goal setting; formal review to encourage a sense of accomplishment; and supportive

administration to ensure that workers have meaningful input into decision-making. Organisational, employer-led initiatives, such as targeting recruitment efforts, adjusting working conditions and job structures, and employer-funded training should be welcomed. Employer-led strategies are likely to give some organisations a competitive edge; however, they may allow leading employers to strip staff from other parts of the sector. Strategies need to be comprehensive and coordinated across the sector, to ensure they do not exacerbate problems of unevenness of working conditions, and associated churning of staff.

Indeed, there is much that can be done at the policy level and across the sector to address workforce issues in a more strategic way. Such policies need to be informed by research-based evidence such as that which should be provided through a national workforce mapping process identifying personnel, qualifications, remuneration (including pay parity between the government and community sectors),[5] geographic and occupational distribution, and examples of best practice. The workforce could also be more comprehensively monitored in routine administrative data collections.

The following key points arising from this review can inform an agenda for action. Implementing such reforms would require commitment from policy makers, industry leaders, employers, practitioners and peak bodies. These suggested strategies should not be seen as providing universal solutions, but rather as offering key messages which may inform the next stage in a dynamic and necessary process of sectoral reform.

Funding

- Introduce funding cycles of 3 years or more where possible.
- Ensure funding for non-government service providers allows for pay parity with the government sector.
- Ensure funding for service providers enables access to training and professional development, including for rural and regional staff.

Preparation of practitioners

- Target graduate recruitment and placements to prepare graduates for the challenges of working in family relationship services, including in rural and remote areas.
- Offer secondment opportunities to broaden workers' experience.
- Continue efforts toward professionalisation, by promoting professional bodies, introducing training competencies and accreditation, and promoting training through the vocational education and university systems.
- Build collaborative alliances between unions, professional associations and accredited training bodies, to ensure graduates are better prepared.
- Provide access to mentoring networks for less experienced workers.

Working conditions

- Ensure access to flexible work arrangements and family friendly work structures.
- Ensure access to engaged supervision that focuses on staff development as well as accountability and administrative issues.
- Offer supports to managers and leaders within organisations, especially in small organisations.

It is interesting to note that several of these messages were also contained in the Urbis Keys Young (2004) FRSP review. The fact that they are being restated 5 years later suggests many of the workforce challenges highlighted within this review are long-standing and chronic. Resolution requires coordinated action, and a range of integrated reform strategies that can be prioritised according to short- and long-term goals for the sector. There is much room for further innovation around workforce management and strategies, the results of which should be documented and shared.

Finally, ensuring adequacy of FRSP funding, and that of other funding schemes, is imperative if the workforce is to be developed and sustained. Indeed, the capacity of FRSP and other family services is likely to come under strain as family needs increase due to the global economic crisis. The federal government's social inclusion agenda, a national compact between government and the non-government sector, and the current broader policy context offer windows of opportunity for the family relationship services sector to demonstrate its strengths, raise its profile and secure ongoing resources. With the new Family Support Program bringing family relationship services closer together with other federally funded child and family services, collaborative strategies with these services as well as governments, practitioners and researchers will help build a broad agenda for reform to support and sustain quality service delivery.

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5. Under current funding arrangements, service providers may be constrained in the terms and conditions they can offer, including rates of pay. This can make it difficult to offer above-award pay and conditions, and to attract and retain staff (Cortis, Hilferty, Chan, & Tannous, 2009).

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