

Resource sheet

Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

NUMBER 5 2009

**This Resource sheet is based on information contained in AFRC Issues No. 5,
available at www.aifs.gov.au/AFRC/pubs/issues/issues5.html**

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

Natasha Cortis, Sharni Chan and Fiona Hilferty

Over several decades, family relationship services have evolved from a set of small and relatively uncoordinated church based and volunteer run programs, to a coordinated service system which is supported by governments and which employs professional staff (Reiger, 1987). Recognising the social and economic costs of family conflict and breakdown, governments have expanded the range of services, from marriage education and counselling, to include parenting skills training, family mediation and dispute resolution, and children's contact services. Yet while the scope of service delivery has expanded, initiatives to develop the sector's human resources have tended to lag. Recent research, along with program evaluations and reviews identify a series of workforce challenges confronting the sector, consolidating workforce development and management as key current priorities for family relationship services.

Workforce challenges

Recruiting, retaining and developing skilled practitioners emerge as core concerns, with uncompetitive pay rates considered key contributing factors (Urbis Keys Young, 2004; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008; Family Relationships Services Australia [FRSA], 2008). This set of challenges is not unique to family relationship services, with high staff turnover being a consistent finding across both child and family services, and community services generally (Australian Council of Social Service [ACOSS], 2008; Australian Services Union [ASU], 2007). Staff most difficult to recruit and retain include those in rural areas, men and Indigenous workers.

In rural areas, recruitment and retention challenges are influenced by working conditions, including professional isolation, role overload, stress and inadequate pay, as well as distance from family (Roufeil & Battye, 2008; Catholic Welfare Australia [CWA] & Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaCSIA], 2006). In areas affected by the mining boom, higher paying mining and associated jobs have reportedly stripped workers from community services, and high housing costs have also made

working in these areas less attractive (Community Services and Health Industries Skills Alliance, 2008).

Men are reportedly difficult to attract to the sector, deterred by the sex-typing of work involving emotional engagement, and the associated pay penalty. Undersupply of male workers has implications for service delivery, compromising capacity to offer specialised educational and therapeutic programs for fathers and other male service users (Urbis Keys Young, 2004; Meagher & Healy, 2005).

Recruiting Indigenous workers is also a challenge in family relationship services (Families Australia, 2007; FRSA, 2008; CWA & FaCSIA, 2006). Difficulties recruiting Indigenous workers is reported in other child and family services, and across community services, suggesting shortages may be more widespread (Flaxman, Muir, & Oprea, 2009; ASU, 2007). Retention of Indigenous workers may be a particular challenge where workloads and community expectations are high, and where informal workplace supports are limited (CWA & FaCSIA, 2006; Flaxman et. al., 2009).

Uneven access to training presents a further set of challenges. The costs of training may not be covered by funding agreements, and may be difficult to support—especially in smaller organisations and in rural and regional areas, where there are barriers including travel time, costs of backfilling, and a lack of staff to backfill (Community Services and Health Industries Skills Council, 2008; NSW Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Board, 2007).

Further workforce issues relate to qualifications and accreditation. Vocational qualifications or bachelor degrees are generally required, given the complexity of family relationship services tasks and contexts. Yet previous experience or on-the-job training may also provide pathways into the sector. Indeed, the diversity of occupations and qualifications in family relationship services means there are several uncoordinated pathways into these jobs, a range of qualification levels, and no core professional identity. Moreover, while practitioners working in services funded

by the Family Relationship Services Program¹ must be registered (but are not required to demonstrate competency) those providing family dispute resolution services must, under a new system, gain competency-based accreditation.

The costs of poor workforce management

The costs of poor workforce management are profound, going beyond immediate costs to organisations of selecting, orienting and training staff. Organisations with unstable or inappropriate staffing arrangements risk losing valuable organisational knowledge, experience and expertise, and depleting staff morale. Poor staffing quality (such as underqualified staff) also reduces prospects for the formation of relationships between staff and clients considered essential to human service quality and outcomes (Colton & Roberts, 2007). High staff turnover and high 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).

Culturally inappropriate or homogeneous staffing may impede the capacity for organisations to build relationships with, and meet the needs of diverse populations. Indeed, understaffing in terms of operating with too few staff overall, underqualified staff or mismatched staff makes it difficult for agencies to run programs in ways that meet clients' needs, and compromises capacity to complete the administrative requirements of funding agencies, jeopardising program continuity (Flaxman et al., 2009). In terms of equity and access, inconsistencies in staffing arrangements across organisations or regions is also an issue, as some services may not be consistently available, such as for families in remote locations.

Workforce strategies

Workforce challenges can be explained by a combination of personal, recognition and reward, organisational, and political and contextual factors. Some factors that can promote workforce capacity and sustainability relate to job design, including access to engaged supervision; clearly defined roles; realistic workloads; opportunities to work collaboratively; formal review to encourage a sense of accomplishment; and supportive administration to ensure that workers have meaningful input into decision-making. Employer led initiatives, such as targeting recruitment efforts, adjusting working conditions and job structures, and funded

training should be welcomed. However, while employer-led strategies are likely to give some organisations a competitive edge, 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.

At the policy level, there is much that can be done to address workforce issues in a more strategic way. National workforce mapping would help identify key characteristics of the sector, such as qualifications, remuneration, geographic and occupational distribution, and examples of best practice in workforce development and management. The workforce could also be more comprehensively monitored in routine administrative data collections, and funding arrangements could be reviewed to ensure associated pay rates, training opportunities and workloads are optimal for developing and sustaining the workforce, and ultimately, for delivering the best possible outcomes for clients.

References

- Australian Council of Social Service. (2008). *Australian Community Sector Survey (ACOSS Paper 154)*. Sydney: ACOSS.
- Australian Services Union. (2007). *Building social inclusion in Australia: Priorities for the social and community services sector workforce*. Carlton South: ASU.
- Catholic Welfare Australia & Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2006). *Lessons from the field: Family relationship services in rural and remote Australia. Challenges and good practice*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.
- Colton, M., & Roberts, S. (2007). Factors that contribute to high turnover among residential child care staff. *Child and Family Social Work, 12*(2), 133–142.
- Community Services & Health Industries Skills Alliance. (2008). *Industry skills report October 2008*. Brisbane: Health and Community Services Workforce Council.
- Community Services and Health Industries Skills Council. (2008). *Environmental scan 2008* (Version 2, 24 April 2008). Retrieved 28 August 2009, from <<http://tinyurl.com/nbwqqj>>
- DePanfilis, D., & Zlotnik, J. (2008). Retention of front-line staff in child welfare: A systematic review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*, 995–1008.
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2008). *FRS Sector e-News* (Issue 21). Retrieved 7 August 2009, from <<http://tinyurl.com/llatoz>>
- Families Australia. (2007). *Key challenges facing the not-for-profit community sector* (Working Paper, October 2007). Canberra: Families Australia.
- Family Relationships Services Australia. (2008). *Sustainable services for Australian families* (Submission to the Federal Budget). Canberra: FRSA.
- Flaxman, S., Muir, K., & Oprea, I. (2009). *Indigenous families and children: Coordination and provision of services* (Occasional Paper No. 23). Canberra: FaHCSIA.
- Meagher, G., & Healy, K. (2005). *Who Cares? Volume 1: A profile of care workers in Australia's community services industries* (ACOSS Paper No. 140). Sydney: ACOSS.
- NSW Community Services and Health Industry Training Advisory Board. (2007). *Community services training needs in rural and remote NSW*. Sydney: Department of Education and Training.
- Reiger, K. (1987). The coming of the counsellors: The development of marriage guidance in Australia. *Journal of Sociology, 23*, 375–387.
- Roufeil, L., & Batty, K. (2008). *Effective regional, rural and remote family and relationships service delivery* (Briefing Paper No. 10). Melbourne: Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Urbis Keys Young. (2004). *Review of the Family Relationships Services Program*. Canberra: Department of Family and Community Services and Attorney-General's Department.

1. The Family Relationship Services Program 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.

The authors

Natasha Cortis is a Research Associate and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. **Sharni Chan** is a Research Officer at the SPRC and a PhD student at Macquarie University. **Fiona Hilferty** is a Research Fellow at the SPRC.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2009

Views expressed in Clearinghouse publications are those of individual authors and may not necessarily reflect Government, Institute or Clearinghouse policy.

AFRC Manager: *Elly Robinson*

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Email: afrc@aifs.gov.au Internet: www.aifs.gov.au

Edited and typeset by Lauren Di Salvia
ISSN 1835-1166 (Online)