he forty Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) now spread across the country from Darwin to Hobart and from Lismore to Joondalup, are set to become the ‘face’ of the family law reform package. One year after the first fifteen services opened their doors for business, we sought to find out more about the centres, the people running them, and some of the regional differences in the services they provide.

Following are excerpts from interviews with Gai Campbell, Senior Clinician at Ringwood FRC, and Paula Washington and Steve Hackett, Managers of Townsville and Penrith FRCs respectively, by Institute researcher Catherine Caruana.

Townsville FRC

According to Paula Washington, Manager of the Townsville Family Relationship Centre, Townsville has a largely transient population. This is due to the influx of people servicing the mining industry, many of whom live on the coast and are flown in to the mines, and defence personnel at the nearby military base. The city is also a major port that serves as a transport hub for the outlying agricultural industry, especially the cane fields. Paula believes the centre’s client base reflects the demographics of the area, which includes significant communities of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander people, as well as those of Italian and Greek descent – a legacy of the sugar industry.

The Townsville FRC is located on an arterial road, about 10 minutes’ drive from the CBD and 100 metres from one of Townsville’s major shopping centres. Unlike many FRCs, which are run by a consortium, the Townsville FRC has a sole auspice arrangement, with Centacare as the parent body. They share the ground floor of an office block with that agency.

The centre currently has eight staff, including two information referral officers (who are the first point of contact for clients), three family dispute resolution (FDR) practitioners (or mediators), an FDR team leader, an Indigenous adviser, a librarian, a resource officer and a café assistant. The café, small bookshop and library (from which the public can access phones and the Internet), located within the centre, aim to create a welcoming environment.

In their first year of operation, Paula estimates that they have seen approximately 2000 clients, and held around 320 individual and 150 joint sessions. Outreach services are currently provided to Burdekin, Charters Towers and Ingham. They have no waiting list as such, but have bookings listed three months in advance.

Q. What are the main services your centre provides?
A. As a gateway service, a large part of our work consists of information provision, both in relation to resources useful for families, via public and supported access to the library and Internet, and referral to other services. Of course our core business is the provision of family dispute resolution (FDR) services. We have recently started providing information sessions on FDR, and these are open to the public, as well as to clients of the centre.

Q. What form of dispute resolution do you use?
A. We are not prescriptive about the processes we use, but ideally we follow a co-mediation model, which is both child-focused and child-inclusive, where appropriate. The ethos of child-focused practice permeates all levels of service delivery. We have an in-house child consultant who is one of the FDR practitioners. This person’s role is to help bring the voice of the child into the discussion, but their involvement is not intended as a therapeutic intervention.

Q. How many cases have required more than the initial free three-hour session?
A. In the last six months, I would estimate that around 10 per cent of cases have required more than a three-hour FDR session.

Q. How long does it take most clients to reach some kind of resolution?
A. We find that it takes about two months from first contact to some kind of resolution, but our timelines may be a bit skewed as, by necessity, we work around mine rosters and army deployments.
Family Relationship Centres

Family Relationship Centres are being promoted as the first port of call for families seeking information about relationship and separation issues. They provide information and referral for people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationships stronger, and those having relationship difficulties and experiencing separation.

When families separate, the centres provide information, advice and dispute resolution, such as mediation, to help them negotiate parenting arrangements for their children. Individual, group and joint sessions are available. The first three hours of dispute resolution are provided free of charge.

The first 15 Family Relationship Centres were established in July 2006. A further 25 FRCs opened for business on 2 July 2007, bringing the total to 40 centres in cities and towns around the country. The remaining 25 centres are scheduled to start operation on 1 July 2008. The majority of centres are run by a consortium of local family relationship service providers.

As of 1 July 2007, parties seeking a court determination in a dispute over children (which has not previously been the subject of proceedings) must first attempt family dispute resolution. Registered family dispute resolution practitioners at a range of organisations, including those employed at Family Relationship Centres, can issue certificates to confirm that an attempt at family dispute resolution was made. It is expected that, from 1 July 2008, this requirement will apply to all applications, including those seeking changes to an existing parenting order.

For contact details relating to the 40 centres currently operating and the planned locations for the next 25 centres, go to Family Relationships Online at http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au

In the first 12 months of operation, 57,773 people contacted a Family Relationship Centre. Of these, 47,913 contacted by phone and 9,860 people visited a centre for assistance with family relationship issues. In the first 12 months, the centres conducted 17,536 interview and intake sessions and 7,125 family dispute resolution sessions.1

Family Relationship Advice Line

The Family Relationship Advice Line is a national telephone service established to complement the information and services offered by Family Relationship Centres.

The Advice Line provides information on family relationship issues and advice on parenting arrangements after separation. It can also refer callers to services that may be able to assist, and can be accessed on 1800 050 321.

In the first 12 months of operation, from 3 July 2006 to 30 June 2007, staff members at the Advice Line answered 100,457 calls. Callers to the service fitted the following profile:

- 58% of callers were female and 42% were male;
- 87% were parents;
- 7% were grandparents;
- 0.5% were children under the age of 18;
- 90% of callers were separated;
- 5% of callers were considering separation;
- 5% of callers were from intact families; and
- 2% of callers identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.2

The remaining callers fell into the ‘other’ category, which included extended family members and step-parents.

Family Relationships Online

This website provides information and advice about family relationship issues, the government-funded services available to assist families with these issues, and information on the reforms to the wider family law system. In the first 12 months of the website’s existence there have been a total of 320,321 visits to the site, 1,229,053 ‘hits’ and 862,210 page views.3 The website can be accessed at http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Endnotes
counselling and other support services, such as Lifeline, Relationships Australia, Centacare and domestic violence services.

Q. How prominently have allegations of family violence or child abuse figured in the cases the centre has dealt with so far?

A. If you are talking about the number of cases with a history of violence, I would say that close to half our clients are in that category. We spend a lot of time in the assessment stage to assess risk and to address safety issues. Often one or both parties need additional support, by way of counselling, legal advice or amendments to domestic violence orders before they can proceed.

Q. From your knowledge of other FRCs, what are some other unique characteristics of the Townsville FRC?

A. We’ve found there is quite a bit of diversity across FRCs. It’s been a definite advantage to have the flexibility to develop services that reflect the demographics of the communities we service.

In terms of the client’s pathway through the service, we do things a little differently here. What seems to be important in rural areas is consistency in the contact with staff and our model reflects that. We don’t have separate intake workers – the family dispute resolution practitioners do most of the assessment in the individual sessions and then they go on to mediate with the clients in the joint session.

Perhaps another difference is the degree of reviews of parenting plans that we provide. It is our standard practice to set a review date in all parenting plans negotiated at the centre, whereby the parties come back to see us 3, 6 or 12 months after the plan is drawn up. This is an inbuilt way of establishing a forum or structure for resolving future disputes. We find that we have a pretty high level of client re-engagement.

Given the transient nature of our population, we have started to understand at a practice level the effects of parents living far apart. This has been one of our challenges. We have held FDR sessions via teleconference with other FRCs in Australia. That has allowed us to establish bonds with FRCs elsewhere and draw on our collective wisdom.

I’d have to say however that the café has been an unexpected star at our FRC. We get ongoing feedback from clients who say that it contributes to the sense of welcome and comfort and helps them feel looked after.

Q. What are your overall impressions of the first 12 months of operation?

A. It’s been an extremely challenging year, particularly in relation to the very tight timeframe to establish the service from scratch. For the first months we were operating out of a training room at Centacare. The refurbishment of the building was delayed as the majority of the tradespeople were busy rebuilding Innisfail after cyclone Larry.

However I wouldn’t have changed the experience for the world. It’s been invaluable through the first year to have staff members who are so committed to supporting families. It’s been obvious in the past year what a high level of generosity and goodwill exists between FRC staff, and in particular between the managers. It is important for us to extend this same support to the new centres as they open up.

Ringwood FRC

Ringwood is an outer-eastern suburb of Melbourne, approximately 25 kilometres from the CBD. In the past, this eastern metropolitan region was considered to be affluent and would probably have been best described as middle-class, with most people being from English and European backgrounds. However, now there are more people of Asian background, particularly Chinese, and also a significant community of South Sudanese people in the catchment.

According to Gai Campbell, Senior Clinician at the FRC, there is a growing number of young people with children in the area who are dependent on government support. There is now severe disadvantage throughout the region, in one area in particular. The centre’s geographic boundary is broad, and also encompasses Indigenous groups in Healesville and surrounds.

The Ringwood FRC is currently located in a small, stand-alone, weatherboard house near Eastland Shopping Centre, in the same street as the Family Assistance Office and Centrelink. The centre moved to temporary, more suitable premises at the end of August, and a purpose-built FRC is being erected on the current site.

The centre is managed by Eastern Access Community Health (EACH) as the lead agency in a consortium also made up of Relationships Australia – Victoria (RAV) and Regional Extended Family Services. Staff members at the centre include a senior family dispute resolution practitioner, who is in charge of clinical services; three additional family dispute resolution practitioners, one of whom is full-time; three family relationship advisers; one intake worker; one community development worker; an office administrator; an administrator’s assistant; and several part-time receptionists.

Gai’s estimate is that approximately 2,400 people have attended the service in its first year. During high- peak periods they receive up to 50 new phone queries a week.

Q. Do you use a co-mediation model?

A. In some cases we offer co-mediation, where a male and female FDR practitioner will conduct a joint session to address any perceived gender imbalances. This strategy is also employed with couples in high conflict. The type of FDR we offer is more facilitative in nature.
than it might have been in the past. The Family Law Act 1975 now places obligations on us to provide legal information where appropriate, and to also fulfil the role of adviser on occasion. This continues to be a challenge, given the traditionally neutral role of mediators.

Since 1 July 2007 all parties wishing to take their dispute to court in relation to new parenting orders are required to attend FDR unless they meet one of the exceptions. As a result, our procedures are currently changing to meet this new demand. Given the new compulsory regime, we also anticipate challenges in engaging reluctant clients in the process in future.

Q. Describe the early days of the service.
A. Initially four workers were accommodated in one small room, cheek-by-jowl so to speak. This was very cozy, and ensured there was lots of discussion about how each of us dealt with the phone enquires – a good learning experience. Two workers had to work in the kitchen – a trap if you had no willpower.

In the first six months, approximately 50 per cent of the cases we dealt with were single assessment appointments and referrals only. An interesting observation is that approximately 75 per cent of matters in those early months involved separation issues, whereas in the last six months I estimate 95 per cent of the cases have been related to separation.

Q. What kinds of people are using the service?
A. There is a wide and varied presentation of potential clients; all at different ages and stages in their relationships, including concerned grandparents, aunts and uncles, who all want to navigate the complex situations around the children of separated couples. However, over the last three months we have found no children or teenagers have called or presented at our centre.

Q. Does your client base reflect the demographics of the area?
A. We’ve had some representation from every cultural group in our local region. However, we are conscious of the need to work harder in this area. It is part of our brief to provide outreach to the outer eastern metropolitan region, in particular to Healesville and Yarra Junction. There are pockets of severe hardship for many people in the region.

Our ultimate goal is to provide an accessible and community-friendly outreach space to engage Indigenous clients. As part of this process we are liaising with Indigenous service providers in the local area, with the hope of fostering improved two-way communication with Indigenous people and service providers. We are also looking to establish community-based connections at Yarra Junction.

Q. What percentage of the centre’s work relates to information provision and referral?
A. Anecdotally our perception is that about 20% of callers appreciate a general explanation regarding what our centre offers and the recent legislative changes to the Family Law Act.

Q. What are the main issues people are seeking assistance with?
A. Our observation at this stage would be that the majority of clients now presenting are seeking help in relation to issues about parenting after separation.

We are finding as word spreads in the local community about our service, there does seem to be a steady increase in clients presenting with domestic violence concerns. We can only surmise at this stage that this is happening because our reputation and credibility is growing in the local area. We are also seeing more complex high-conflict cases presenting at the centre.

Q. How are the interests of children taken into account in work done with separating parents?
A. Like other FRCs all our services are ‘child-focused’ in that clients are constantly encouraged to consider the needs of their children. We also offer ‘child-inclusive family dispute resolution’. Our practice in this regard is based on Dr Jennifer McIntosh’s work. The feedback will relate to how the children are ‘experiencing’ their parent’s separation and it is emphasised to the parents that children will not be asked to ‘choose’.

We offer a group Children in Focus sessions on a weekly basis, once again based on Dr McIntosh’s material. All clients are strongly encouraged to attend one of these sessions before proceeding to FDR. These sessions have been run weekly since we opened last year.

Q. What work are you doing to engage with the local community?
A. We have been running monthly information sessions for the last three months and these will continue indefinitely. These are designed to inform local service providers and any other interested parties about the Family Relationship Centre and how it runs.

We also regularly attend forums conducted by other service providers to provide information about our services. For example, we have participated in Child Support Agency forums conducted in the eastern region, and we are working with Child First and Child Protection. We were also guest speakers at the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (DVIRC) annual forum in June.

Earlier this year we ran a forum for legal practitioners and provided a panel for discussion, which included representatives from the Attorney-General’s Department, the Family Court, the Aboriginal Legal Service and DVIRC, together with members of our staff.

Our community development worker has also worked tirelessly during the year to raise our profile at local community fairs and seminars. She has tried to take advantage of every opportunity to tell people about us. We have hosted groups at the centre on a regular basis so that we can also be informed about the services offered in the eastern region.
Q. Do you make provision for the review of parenting arrangements negotiated at the centre?

A. Most clients are entering into short-term parenting arrangements that recognise the changing developmental needs of their children. In the circumstances, they tend to reach substantial agreement in the initial free three hours but there is an expectation that they may need to review their agreements in perhaps six months, 12 months, or possibly two years. If they cannot review their agreements by themselves then the expectation would be that they would return to the centre at that stage.

Only a small percentage of clients have entered into formal parenting plans.

Q. How prominently have allegations of family violence or child abuse figured in the cases the centre has dealt with so far?

A. No specific data is available at this stage but staff report anecdotally that family violence issues are prominent and potential child abuse is of concern in a number of cases. A high percentage of callers present with domestic violence concerns and wish to gain an understanding of the support services available to them in their local city.

Our intake worker will make an initial screening and assessment for family violence. The Family Relationship Advisor (FRA) will then make an assessment as to whether the matter is suitable for FDR, and will continue to screen for family violence or any other issues which may make a joint session unsuitable. An invitation to FDR will be sent to the other party if the initial assessment suggests that a joint session may be appropriate.

Where there has been family violence but the parties still want to try FDR we offer a variety of forms of FDR to meet their needs. Some parties may participate in 'shuttle FDR' with the practitioner moving from one room to another without the parties actually coming into contact with each other. We can also provide shuttle FDR on separate days, or one party can participate via the telephone. The emphasis is on providing a safe, supported environment for people to attempt to resolve issues, with a focus on the needs of their children. The safety of the parties is always a priority. We have separate waiting rooms and parties can be escorted to their cars after a session if necessary.

Q. How have the last 12 months been for you and your staff?

A. It has been a steep learning curve for everyone in terms of establishing the centre and developing and implementing the service model, ensuring we meet the requirements under the Act, while ensuring we are responsive to the needs of clients. The service model continues to be a work in progress.

Critical areas for the service have included the importance of clarity around service model, protocols and procedures, integrated systems development and team building, and supervision to support staff dealing with both the confronting and complex issues on a day-to-day basis and the inadequacy of the current premises.

We had no benchmark at the start, and all the centres have developed differently. Our staff members have experienced the pressure of ambiguity and constant change. It has been a daunting task sometimes to establish appropriate protocols and procedures while simultaneously dealing with high demand from clients dealing with complex issues. It has been a year of constant changes and this is ongoing with the introduction of compulsory FDR. Currently, only two of the original staff members remain and we are currently recruiting more staff. The needs of the centre have changed since its initial opening, and we are now consolidating some of the lessons learned in the first year.

Postscript

Gai was proud to include this example of recent feedback received from the Family Relationship Advice Line:

I’d just like to provide you with some feedback I have just received from a very satisfied client who dealt with Ringwood FRC. Whilst she was calling to get contact details for FRCs in WA for her brother, she mentioned that last year she separated from her husband and found the assistance of Ringwood to be very beneficial, making the transition into single parenthood much less scary for her and gave her a more positive outlook on all matters regarding the children and parenting. This obviously is the reason why she’s so keen to refer her brother to a FRC.

Penrith FRC

Penrith is an outer-urban suburb of Sydney, located approximately 55 kilometres west of the Sydney CBD at the foot of the Blue Mountains. The Penrith FRC services the communities of Penrith and surrounds, the Blue Mountains extending to Lithgow, and the Hawkesbury Shire, including Windsor and Richmond. The population of the area is made up of a broad mix of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

A consortium known as The Resilient Families Group, and made up of Relationships Australia – NSW (RANSW) and Uniting Care Unifam, have the service contracts to operate six FRCs in NSW, including Penrith. RANSW is the lead agency at the Penrith centre.

The Penrith Family Relationship Centre is situated on the ground floor of an office building on a busy street surrounded by shops, close to Westfield Shopping Centre. It is just three blocks from a railway station and main bus routes. The centre is located within walking distance of a range of other community services, including the Children’s Contact Centre.

Apart from the manager, the centre is staffed by three first-point-of-contact administration staff, four full-time family advisors and four family dispute resolution (FDR) practitioners. RANSW as the parent organisation also provides a group leader for the Kids in Focus group, and clinical supervision for both the family advisors and the FDR practitioners.
In the first 12 months of operation, the centre has offered over 1,700 individual face-to-face or phone interviews with a family advisor, and conducted nearly 150 (co-mediated) joint mediations. They have held over 370 individual pre-FDR sessions and around 30 group sessions. Almost 1,200 people were ‘walk-ins’, i.e. clients who drop in without an appointment seeking information and advice. Staff members have fielded over 9,000 incoming phone calls.

Q. What services are currently provided at the centre? Are there plans for expansion of these services?

A. Perhaps our most important role is that of providing a gateway to support services for individuals and families in the area, and collaborating with local community service providers to facilitate access to those services. We don’t presume that the best or only thing clients need from our centre is family dispute resolution. Having said that, we have probably offered some aspect of specific family dispute resolution service to approximately one-third of all clients registered with the service. A lot of people think that dispute resolution is all that we offer, and so education about our role has been a big part of our work over this first 12 months.

Our family advisors undertake extensive intake, screening and family assessment (see below). We offer child-focused and child-inclusive family dispute resolution services using a co-mediation model.

General information on family relationship issues is provided by way of group sessions, classes, short courses and counselling. We distribute lots of printed material on the needs of children in separating families.

We also run two six-week programs, one called ‘Focus on Kids – Parenting after Separation’ and the other entitled ‘Building Better Relationships’ (helping couples to strengthen their relationships). We also run a relationship and social skills workshop for children during each of the school holidays called ‘Kids Skills’.

We are about to commence a Family Advisor outreach service one day per fortnight to the Upper Blue Mountains and Lithgow, as well as to Richmond in the Hawkesbury shire, later this year.

Q. Can you walk me through a client’s likely trajectory through the centre’s services from initial contact?

A. Initial queries are fielded by our reception workers. If clients need further assistance, appointments are booked with a family advisor who provides a one-hour minimum, holistic face-to-face interview (or by phone if preferred), to get a broad picture of the family story, paying particular attention to what’s happening for the children. Family advisors take time to check out issues to do with the individual client’s physical, mental and financial wellbeing and safety, as well as that of their children. There may be referrals to other services at this stage.

On the client’s instructions, the family advisor may then write to the other party and invite them into the FRC. If both parties wish to move through the service to family dispute resolution, they are booked into separate sessions of the Kids in Focus seminar, before attending a one-and-a-half hour pre-FDR information group session. Following this, clients will have an individual pre-FDR session with an FDR practitioner during which issues, including issues of safety, are explored further. If it is appropriate for the matter to proceed, then a date is booked for a joint FDR session.

If it is judged that child-inclusive practice (CIP) would be helpful to both the children and the parents, and again with the parents’ consent, a RANSW child consultant will conduct a separate session with the children and then provide feedback about the children’s experiences of the separation, initially to the practitioners and then to the parents. This is often a very powerful way for parents to more fully understand the impact of conflict on their children.

Practitioners then work with both parties in a joint session to try and develop a workable interim and/or final parenting plan agreement that is responsive to the developmental age of the child or children and the capacity of both parents.

Q. What percentage of matters relate to disputes about parenting between separated parents?

A. The majority of our clients over this initial 12 months have been separated or separating parents, possibly because of the widespread government advertising about FRCs and the changes to the Family Law Act. Through our community education work and involvement in community service network meetings, we are creating more awareness of our broader role of assisting people with their relationships while still together, and expect visits from these families to increase.

Q. What has been the most challenging aspect of the last 12 months?

A. As one of only two FRCs in the broader Sydney metropolitan area, and west to South Australia, north to Lismore and south to Wollongong, the most challenging aspect of this first 12 months has undoubtedly been the strong and constant client demand for service. We had planned to be offering outreach to the Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury within the first six months, and have simply not been able to get out of the centre, given the sheer numbers of clients coming into the service at our main location, often from far afield.

Endnotes

1. Under a co-mediation model, two mediators, often of different genders and with different skill sets, assist the parties.