



Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

Frequently notified families – new innovative,
pro-active and integrated service responses

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Presentation



- Will describe a recent Victorian policy initiative aimed at improving the service response to frequently notified children and their families.
- Consider this initiative in the context of policy, systemic and case practice issues

Note on Victorian context



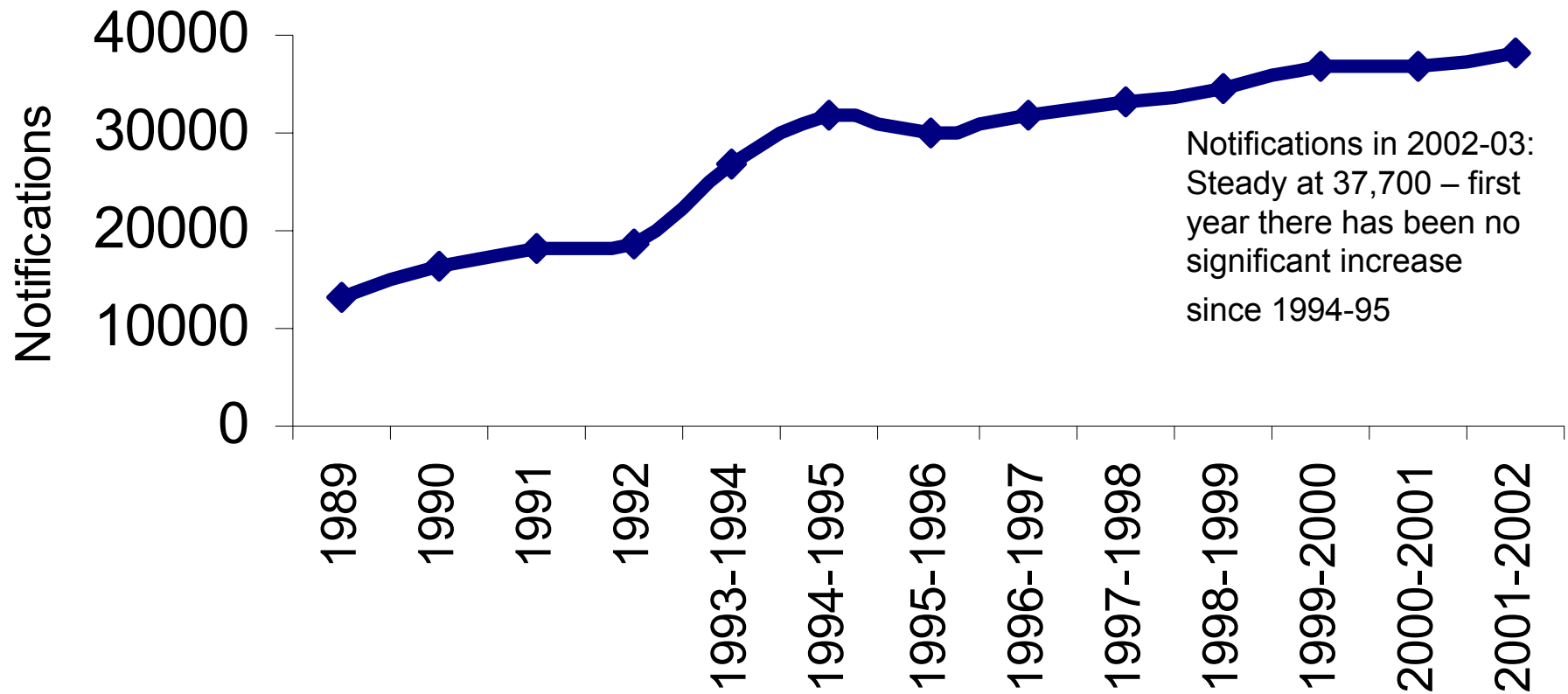
- Victoria has a two-tiered approach to child and family welfare services:
 - A statutory government funded child protection program, with an exclusive focus on child protection
 - Out of home care services and family support services are delivered by CSOs

Context



- 2001 Victorian State Budget outcome included request that DHS develop an “integrated strategy for child protection and placement”
- Reflected Government’s concern that:
- Demand for child protection and placement services has continued to grow in spite of additional recurrent investment provided over the past several years
- Victoria’s rates of notifications, investigations, and substantiations are high when compared to other States
- *An Integrated Strategy for Child Protection and Placement Services* (September 2002)
- One element of the strategy included \$5 million provided over 2002 and 2003 Budgets to establish 12 LGA based Innovation projects

Annual Notifications to Victoria's Child Protection Service



Issues



- Key Finding of Integrated Strategy – Demand is being driven by
 - Service system issues
 - Issues in the client population

Frequently notified families



- What do we know about families notified to child protection?
- Families with very young children are over represented
- 45% of families investigated are sole parent families (compared to 20% in the general population)
- 77% of families investigated are low income
- Proportion of parents in investigated cases with one recorded characteristic – domestic violence, psychiatric illness, substance and alcohol abuse, intellectual disability) has increased from 41% to 73% since 1995/96

Family Characteristics



- Co-occurrence of these characteristics has also increased. In substantiated cases, parents exhibiting two or more concerning characteristics have increased from 9% in 1995-96 to 44% in 2000-01
- Renotification is more likely when a parent has a substance abuse problem or when they are a sole parent
- Significant increase in the involvement of Indigenous children and young people at all phases
- 6.7% of all notifications last year were of Indigenous children

What challenges does the service system face in working with families exhibiting these characteristics?

The challenges for the service system in working with frequently notified families



• Case Example

- Dyslexia
- Anger management
- Social relationships
- Household management
- Financial management
- Identified carer of Joan
- Inhibited emotional development

Peter 24 Joan 24
Infant

- **Concerns:**
 - **The combination of all these factors, and their implications for the infant's safety and well-being**

- Victim of child abuse
- Victim of rape
- Acquired brain injury
- Financial management
- Household management
- Gestational diabetes
- Inhibited emotional development

The challenges for Peter and Joan in working with the service system:



- To engage effectively with the the following array of services
 - Obstetrician
 - Paediatrician
 - Hospital social work department
 - Accident and Emergency
 - Antenatal services
 - Adult mental health including Crisis Assessment team
 - Maternal and Child Health Services
 - General practitioner
 - Home based care service (respite)
 - Department of Housing
 - Client Disability Services
 - HACC services
 - Pregnancy Support Service
 - Carer Respite and Information Service
 - Parent-child program
 - Men's program
 - Family support services
 - Centrelink
 - Child protection services

What will determine the service outcome for Joan, Peter and their infant?



1. The quality of professional practice in each service sector
2. Joan and Peter's motivation and capacity to change; and
3. The quality of the interaction and communication between these services – or, how well the 'service system' operates

What do we know about the current outcomes for frequently notified families?



- All areas hosting Innovation Projects undertook detailed case reviews of frequently notified families. Key findings for children and their families:
 - About half of the families received a family support service
 - Children notified did have genuine safety issues
 - Children notified at very young age, and often part of large sibling groups
 - Parents had a range of characteristics with high mobility, DV and D & A prominent
 - Families were very well known in the service sector, but often difficult to engage

Key findings for service sector



Service Sector

- Multiple service involvement – but little sign of sustained improvement
- Inadequate communication between services
- Lack of active engagement
- Little coordinated, multi-disciplinary intervention for families
- Lack of community intake – with CP services often acting as the ‘gateway’
- Lack of contingency plans for cyclic mental health or substance abuse episodes
- Absence of sustained, enduring support

Key findings for child protection



Child protection

- Primary notifiers were family, police and schools
- Families viewed in narrow, 'forensic' terms:
 - Is the child at immediate risk?
- Cases closed if no obvious protective issues
- While referrals to support services were made, often there was no evidence that family had been engaged



- Our understanding of frequently notified families shows that there is no single cause – nor a single solution.
- What seems to be needed is coordinated, flexible and often long term service intervention.
- These findings informed the innovation project service model.

Innovation Projects



- LGA selection criteria – high rates of child protection notifications. All eight selected LGAs exceed the statewide average of 32 notifications per 1000 children (0-17 years)
- Two key objectives:
 - Appropriate diversion to community based services
 - Minimise progression into the CP system

Innovation Projects



- Percentage targets for reductions in notifications and renotifications have been set in each LGA
- CSOs and DHS regions have entered into a formal commitment to use their “best endeavours” to support achievement of these targets
- Projects are trialling new ways of working with vulnerable families – i.e families repeatedly notified or those likely to fall into that pattern
- Key focus on assisting families to maintain basic needs
- Funded capacity to work with some (not all) families over the longer term
- New funds doubled existing family support funding levels

Innovation Projects



- Strong focus on the establishment of collaborative working approaches between CSOs and child protection and notifier groups such as Police and schools:
 - Establishment of a formal service network in each project area
 - Community based child protection workers in each project
 - with DHS workers having CASIS/DHS network access at main agency site

Innovation Projects



- Funding aims to significantly boost existing service capacity and provide new service capacity to work with vulnerable families
- Detailed LGA notification data reports available each month to all project participants
- Two and half year evaluation – Australian Institute for Primary care, La Trobe and Melbourne Universities

Early Learning



- Full involvement of CSOs and regional child protection services in all planning and implementation phases is vital. Case Reviews of frequently notified families has been critical first step in gaining consensus on 'what's needed'.
- Roles and responsibilities of community based child protection worker have been positively received and helping to promote better mutual understanding between child protection, family services and the broader service network
- Service Networks established in each project helping to foster a higher level of community and system ownership
- Sharing data fosters shared understanding

Early Learning



- Integrated central point of family services intake evident in a number of projects appears highly promising – with clear benefits for clients and professionals
- Focus on practical resources to offer family does create change. Has been a key characteristic of active engagement strategies that are establishing contact with previously 'hard to reach families'
- Flexibility of models of Innovation Projects tailored to each LGA's needs/families seen as key strength
- Need to ensure balanced range of interventions across the family services continuum

Early Learning



Indigenous Projects:

- Listen to what Indigenous communities need rather than assume what they know
- Critical importance of partnerships, planning, communication, collaboration
- Open, honest consultation, capacity and willingness to review mainstream processes

Innovation Projects

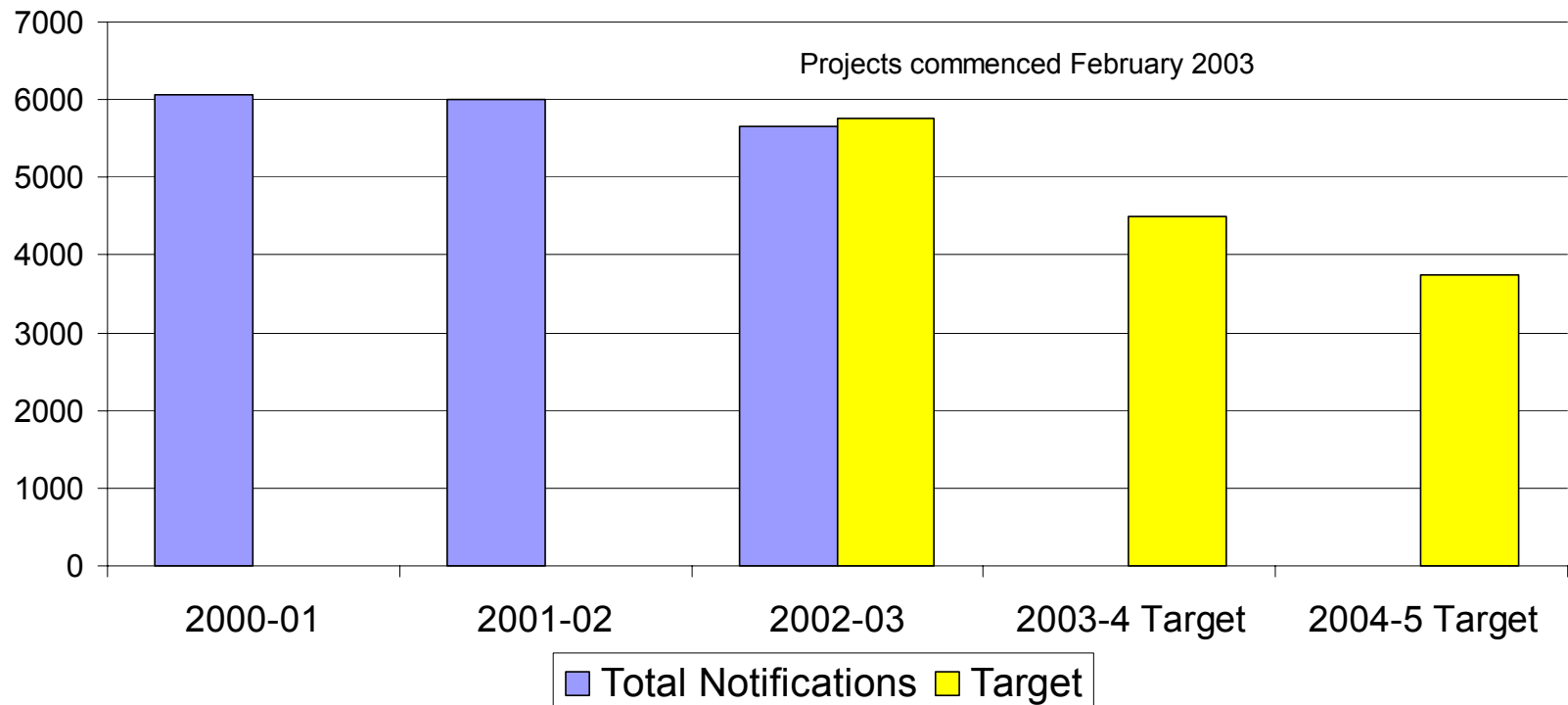


- Early performance data from the projects is encouraging:
- 7.1% reduction in notifications, 9% in investigations and 10.8% in Protection Applications (PAs) in the first eight months of 2003 compared to 2002.

Notification Performance Targets



**Notifications and Targets in the Six 2002-03 Innovation Project Sites,
2000-01 to 2004-05**



Practitioners Views



- The approach has been well received by local services and notifier groups:

“Additional resources together with the new community capacity building opportunities currently underway in Ballarat present us with a unique opportunity to make a significant difference to outcomes for families over the next few years, with the potential for sustained service system change”
Kevin Zibell Child and Family Services Ballarat

"The Innovation Network is the best thing to happen for child protection in many years. I have seen great improvements in cooperation between schools and support agencies. This has led to breakthroughs in support and positive outcomes for a number of students and families at my school." Cliff Downey, Principal Mooroopna Primary School

It's great; at last we have a group with a truly coordinated approach that actually achieves real results for both community and practitioners."
Graham Wigg, District Inspector, Victoria Police."*

*Source - Shepparton Service Network Annual Report

Next Challenges



- Establish new projects
 - Maintain positive momentum
 - Spread the learning
 - Continue building the evidence base for more projects
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- More information:
 - www.dhs.vic.gov.au/innovationprojects