



**NSW Department of
Community Services**

OUT-OF-HOME CARE SERVICE MODEL

SUPPORTED FAMILY GROUP HOME

This service model for Supported Family Group Homes has been developed by the NSW Department of Community Services in consultation with the non government sector. The paper describes the key elements of a Supported Family Group Home service which are considered to reflect best practice. As such, the service model is not designed to be prescriptive but should be read as a guide to current service development priorities.

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SUPPORTED FAMILY GROUP HOME SERVICE MODEL

Summary

Supported Family Group Home (SFGH) care is as a placement option of first choice for children and young people who are in the parental responsibility of the Minister, or in the care of the Director General, with low to moderate needs and who require a different response to foster care to adequately address their specific needs. It will prepare them for restoration to family, or independent living if restoration is not an option. It will provide a sensitive placement option for large sibling groups and adolescents in transition to independent living.

This paper describes the key components of Supported Family Group Home care. These include:

- house in the local community specifically set up for the purpose of providing Supported Family Group Home care;*
- maximum number of 6 residents except where a home has the demonstrated capacity to accommodate a large sibling group comprising of 6+ children;*
- live in carers provide 24 hour care, 7 days a week, in a family-like setting;*
- relief carers care for children in the home when primary Supported Family Group Home carers take leave or access planned respite;*
- focus on increasing stability, continuity and a sense of belonging by creating an environment where children have the opportunity to build and maintain relationships, establish connections with their local community, develop educational, vocational and life skills, and participate in social and leisure activities; and*
- caseworker support.*

1. Introduction

This paper both describes the key components of the Supported Family Group Home (SFGH) model for low to moderate needs children and young people, and outlines issues for consideration relating to the implementation of the service model.

A range of Family Group Home programs in both Australian and overseas contexts were reviewed in developing the model for Supported Family Group Home care. Evidence suggests that Supported Family Group Home care is an option that should be considered for specific groups of children and young people, such as large sibling groups, who cannot be appropriately placed in relative, kinship or foster care. For a small number of children and young people Supported Family Group Home care has been found to have the capacity to accommodate a variety of care needs in a family like environment that foster care placement is unable to address. It also provides some adolescents with a safe, structured and nurturing environment without the pressures and expectations associated with family relationships.

Supported Family Group Homes are part of the service system continuum which includes foster care involving the care of children by carers (volunteers) in their own home and residential care involving the provision of care by paid staff in a house owned or rented by an agency.¹

The main features that distinguish the proposed model from other residential care models are:

- children live in a family-like environment rather than the more structured environment of residential care; and
- care is provided by live-in carers, 7 days a week, rather than a number of rostered staff.

¹ PeakCare, *The Role of Residential Care in Meeting the Needs of Children and Young People in Care*, Queensland, December 2003

2. Definition of supported family group home

A Supported Family Group Home is a house in the community that is owned or rented by the service provider, for the purpose of providing out-of-home care in a family like setting for a specific group of between 4 to 6 children or young people. Supported Family Group Home carers comprise of couples or single people who are employed, contracted, or reimbursed expenses to provide live-in, 24 hour care and supervision 7 days per week.

3. Research

The main research resources relied on to develop this model are listed in the research bibliography at the end of this paper on pages 14-15.

4. Outcomes

Supported Family Group Homes are designed to provide medium to long-term community based placements for a group of children and young people with low to moderate support needs that:

- increase placement stability by creating a secure home for the group of children or young people that they continue to live in for as long as required, even if a Supported Family Group Home carer ceases to provide care;
- provide a focused case management service that coordinates required services and supports to meet the assessed needs of each child or young person in placement and prepares them for restoration or independent living;
- assist children and young people placed in the service to progress towards meeting the level of skills and competencies appropriate to their age/developmental level, including achieving developmentally appropriate educational and/or vocational goals;
- enable children and young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making that affects them.

5. Target group

The main target groups for Supported Family Group Home care are :

- sibling groups (including Aboriginal siblings and siblings from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds);
- adolescents (including young people transitioning to independence) who have low to moderate support needs;

and for whom parental responsibility has been allocated to the Minister, or who are in the care of the Director-General.

There are no age restrictions on placing children in Supported Family Group Home care which is provided in a family-like setting by live in carers as opposed to models that use rostered staff. However, children under 12 years of age will not generally be placed in the program unless placement in Supported Family Group Home care is required to keep a sibling group together or a child has special needs that cannot be adequately met by foster or relative/kinship care.

6. Key model components

6.1 Physical environment

Supported Family Group Homes are regular houses in the local community. Homes may be owned by the agency, but are preferably rented to better enable resources to be reallocated in response to any changes in demand. One of the main benefits of having this level of flexibility is that it

reduces reliance on out-of-area placements which may occur when there is a mismatch between the service location and area of need.

6.2 Staffing

6.2.1 Program Manager

Key functions of this position include:

- overseeing the running of the service and quality of care provided in the home(s) in accordance with DoCS policies and Out-of-home care Standards specified by the NSW office of the Children's Guardian;
- actively promoting a positive culture within the service, which is reflected in the organisation's policies and procedures;
- ensuring the program's goals and philosophies are understood and implemented by all staff, including Supported Family Group Home carers;
- facilitating recruitment, training and supervision of Supported Family Group Home carers;
- supervising and supporting Supported Family Group Home caseworkers;
- facilitating ongoing staff training
- financial approvals and accountability;
- ensuring that the program is objectively evaluated, and reviewed in light of evaluation.

6.2.2 Supported Family Group Home Carers

Twenty-four hour care and supervision of children living in Supported Family Group Homes will be provided by couples or single people who have been assessed, recruited and trained by the service provider. A couple may be married or in a de facto relationship. The term de facto covers all relationships between two adults who live together as a couple, are not married to one another, or related by family.²

6.2.3 Relief Supported Family Group Home carers

The main role of relief carers will be to provide care to children within the home when employed, contracted, or volunteer Supported Family Group Home carers take leave, access respite, or require temporary assistance. To ensure continuity, regular relief carers should be used, wherever possible.

6.2.4 Supported Family Group Home carer job conditions and requirements

Potential carers will be expected to agree to the following conditions before accepting a Supported Family Group Home carer position:

- willingness to commit to program for at least 2 years to ensure stability for children;
- continued employment, or provision of care services dependent on satisfactory annual performance review;
- maintain employment as a couple if engaged as a couple, or continue to provide care as a couple if recruited as a foster care couple; and
- move out of home if relationship with agency ends.

A core job requirement, regardless of the staffing arrangement adopted, is to ensure that children residing in the home receive the level of care and supervision they require 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. Theoretically, a Supported Family Group Home carer could participate in outside employment if they were able to demonstrate that performing this activity would not affect the quality of care and supervision they agreed to provide. A Supported Family Group Home contract or agreement with foster carers would need to stipulate that engaging in any activity outside the

² *NSW Property (Relationships) Act 1984 – Section 4*

home, including part-time work, would not interfere with their primary duties and responsibilities. These include: taking children to appointments and after school activities, properly supervising children who are absent from school, and housekeeping duties.

6.2.5 Roles and responsibilities

Supported Family Group Home carer responsibilities

The duties and responsibilities of authorised foster and residential carers are broadly defined in the *Code of Conduct for Authorised Carers* and the *Code of Conduct for Residential Units*.³ As an integral part of the Supported Family Group Home team, carers will assist caseworkers with developing and implementing case plans and activity programs. Key responsibilities and tasks Supported Family Group Home carers will be expected to perform include:

- ensuring children at home are supervised at all times;
- daily care activities such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry and looking after children;
- modelling of appropriate skills and providing personal support, information and training to develop each child's social, daily living, domestic and budgeting skills;
- actively encouraging and facilitating contact between children, family members and significant others, where appropriate;
- transporting children to appointments and contact visits, where possible;
- assisting children with their homework and being actively involved in their schooling including attendance of school activities such as sports days and parent teacher nights;
- providing personal support, information and training to children and young people to help them access local community and cultural services, activities, and age appropriate transport options;
- providing personal support and modelling behaviours that assist a child or young person's transition back home or to independent living;
- attending and actively participating in meetings, reviews and training offered by the agency;
- maintaining all documentation in relation to carer activities linked to the goals set out in each child's case plan; and
- managing the household budget and maintaining proper financial records.

Agency responsibilities

In regard to ensuring that Supported Family Group Home carers have the skills and competencies they require to effectively carry out their duties and responsibilities, agency responsibilities include:

- undertaking thorough assessments of prospective Supported Family Group Home foster carers which may involve using the *Step by Step* foster carer assessment tool or the *Step by Step Aboriginal Assessment* tool ensuring that prospective Supported Family Group Home carers undergo full employment screening under Part 7 of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 1998* prior to authorisation;
- conducting induction or entry level training for Supported Family Group Home foster carers in accordance with recognised training packages such as the *Shared Stories, Shared Lives Training Package for Prospective Foster Carers*, and the *Aboriginal Foster Carer Training Package*;
- ensuring the carer has 'successfully completed such course of training as the designated agency may reasonably require in order to ensure that the individual is capable of exercising the functions of an authorised carer';⁴
- providing training on culturally appropriate care and cross cultural communication for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal children and young people;
- providing carers with training on how to develop and implement activity programs;
- providing carers with information and training about the guidelines relating to abuse in care allegations; and

³ Schedules 2 & 3, *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation 2000*

⁴ Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Regulation, Section 20 (b)

- assessing and providing ongoing training for carers to consolidate and extend their knowledge and skills and to promote carer wellbeing.

6.2.6 Case management and caseworker responsibilities

Agencies are responsible for undertaking case management functions and performing casework tasks in accordance with the each child's case plan, the Office of the Children's Guardian's OoHC standards and policies, the *Children and Young Persons' (Care and Protection) Act and Regulations* and the Service Agreement and Specifications.

Caseworker roles and responsibilities include:

- providing supervision and support to Supported Family Group Home carers and relief carers that aims to support them in providing a consistent quality service;
- annually reviewing the performance of Supported Family Group Home carers;
- working in collaboration with other agencies, relevant professionals, Supported Family Group Home carers, children, young people, families and appropriate cultural and community representatives to ensure that all relevant parties are involved in case planning and review processes;
- coordinating the range of services identified in the case plan so they are provided in a timely way, and effective channels of communication between the service providers are maintained;
- arranging regular meetings to review progress in achieving the objectives and goals of the case plan, and recording the outcomes of these meetings;
- maintaining care records;
- undertaking activities that support the child or young person in maintaining their identity through, for example, regular life story work;
- implementing the cultural placement principles of the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* including the principles relating to culture, language, self-determination, participation and placement;
- addressing cultural issues in the case plan for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse family backgrounds;
- developing a leaving care plan in conjunction with the young person and significant others;
- arranging or providing timely and appropriate transitional and/or aftercare services for young people.

6.2.7 Specialist staff

As Supported Family Group Home care targets children and young people with low to moderate needs specialist staff will not need to be specifically employed or contracted as part of the program but required specialist services will be accessed on a needs basis. Services will need to have appropriate access to and links with specialist service providers such as psychologists, speech pathologists or tutors.

7. Core service strategies

Supported Family Group Homes aim to increase stability, continuity and a sense of belonging by creating an environment where children have the opportunity to build and maintain relationships with other children and adults, establish connections with their local community, and develop interests, skills and self-esteem through participation in a range of activities. The main service strategies to be used to achieve these aims are described below.

7.1 Maintaining relationships with family members

Supported Family Group Home caseworkers and Supported Family Group Home carers work together to create opportunities for the child to develop healthy relationships with a variety of caring

adults from their immediate and extended family by actively encouraging contact (where appropriate) and offering a range of practical support to enable visitation and participation in family events. For example, family members can be encouraged to visit children in the home or become involved in regular activities such as helping the children with their homework. Supported Family Group Home care can also form part of a shared care arrangement if the case plan goal is restoration to family.⁵

7.2 Connection with community and culture

As far as practicable, connections to community are maintained by placing children in a home in their area and creating opportunities for each child to become involved in local programs and activities. Cultural identity is maintained by:

- placing children with Supported Family Group Home carers from the same cultural and linguistic background, where possible;
- making the home culturally diverse by, for example, including books, videos, music or art in the home that reflects the child's culture; subscribing to magazines or newsletters that provide information on community events; and ensuring toys are culturally appropriate;
- providing knowledge of a child's heritage by, for example, taking children to cultural events or culturally significant places; and
- seeking role models for the child from within the cultural community such as identified caseworkers, Aboriginal elders, or extended family.⁶

7.3 Involvement with activities

Supported Family Group Home caseworkers develop an activities program for each home based on an assessment of each child's functioning and interests. Extensive research indicates that developmental and therapeutic benefits are achieved by young people's participation in activities that interest them.⁷ A well planned and executed program has the potential to reduce incidents of acting out; engage children and carers together; energise children; help them to set goals and develop skills and knowledge they can use throughout their lives.⁸ 'Activities' are any pursuits that require a child's active engagement such as arts and crafts, music, drama, games, sports, exercise, food preparation, pet care, voluntary or part-time work and so forth.

7.4 Participation in education and training

All children and young people of compulsory school age in Supported Family Group Home care are expected to participate in full time education or training. If the child is not attending school or TAFE it is expected that plans are developed to return the child to full time education or training. Supported Family Group Home caseworkers will actively seek the necessary support from the Department of Education and Training or other accredited non-government education authority, the school or TAFE counsellor and teachers to enable the child or young person to attend the local school or TAFE college.

Supported Family Group Home carers will be actively involved in the child or young person's schooling by attending school meetings, activities and events such as parent teacher nights and sport days. Caseworkers, carers and school staff will work collaboratively together to identify the educational needs of the child, ensure the child regularly attends school and to identify 'return to school' strategies for students who have been suspended.

⁵ Notes of the Choice Protects Review meeting on Residential Care on 11 September 2002, UK.

⁶ Alaska Centre for Resource Families, *The Importance of Culture and Maintaining Connections for Alaskan Native Children*, revised 2004

⁷ VanderVen K, *Beyond Game Boys, Walkmans, and TV: The Significance of Activities and Activity Programming in Group and Residential Care*, CWLA, Residential Group Care Quarterly, Vol. 5, No 3, Winter 2005

⁸ VanderVen K, *Beyond Game Boys, Walkmans, and TV: The Significance of Activities and Activity Programming in Group and Residential Care*, CWLA, Residential Group Care Quarterly, Vol. 5, No 3, Winter 2005

7.5 Life skills development

The agency will provide Supported Family Group Home carers with specific training on how to develop and implement individually tailored life skills programs which provide young people with opportunities to learn and practice skills in their home and community as part of everyday living. Such skills include problem solving, getting along with people, budgeting, cleaning, shopping, cooking, personal hygiene, self management, job and house hunting. These skills are reinforced by the caseworker and carer when helping a young person moving to independence find an accommodation, furnish it and establish themselves in the community.⁹

7.6 Transition home or to independent living

Supported Family Group Home caseworkers and carers encourage young people to take an active role in planning their transition back to family or independent living and allow them to participate in decisions regarding their futures. Significant people in the young person's life such as family members, past and current carers, friends, Aboriginal elders, teachers, employers, mentors, and others who care about them are invited to act as a support system to help the young person reach their goals. The caseworker identifies and coordinates community based service and support options across child and adult systems to ensure continuity of services and supports which build on the strengths and address the needs and circumstances of each young person across the domains of education, employment, living situation and community life adjustment.¹⁰

Young people leaving Supported Family Group Home care will have the same access to needs based after care services and supports as young people leaving foster care for independent living. While it is expected that young people are adequately prepared to make a successful transition to independence by their 18th birthday there is some flexibility around when a young person has to leave the group home. Examples include where a young person turns 18 before completing Year 12, or where more time is required to secure appropriate alternative accommodation. Supported family group home carers may continue to provide informal support to young people when they leave the group home, in the same way that many foster carers remain a source of ongoing support to young people that formerly lived with them.

Supported Family Group Home caseworkers should keep in contact with the care leaver at regular intervals in the years following their exit from care. As a guide, follow up should occur once in the first 3 months of leaving out-of-home care and six monthly for the next two years.¹¹ The goal is to help the young person maintain skills developed in placement, strengthen family and community relationships, and promote long term growth and stability.

7.7 Outreach services

Program funding will cover additional support services required to maintain children in the home, reunite them with family, or help them achieve independence. Children in Supported Family Group Home care will have access to the same level of support as children placed in foster care. Types of additional services that may need to be purchased if they cannot be accessed through relevant government service providers include educational support, psychological counselling and therapeutic intervention, behaviour management support, specialist medical and allied health services and mentoring.

7.8 Participation of children, young people, families and carer

Supported Family Group Home services will:

⁹ Deschenes N & Clark H, *Best Practices in Transition Programs for Youth with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, 2001 in Focal Point, Vol. 15 (1), Spring 2001

¹⁰ Deschenes N & Clark H, *Best Practices in Transition Programs for Youth with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, 2001 in Focal Point, Vol. 15 (1), Spring 2001

¹¹ Children's Guardian benchmark policies suggest that the young person be contacted at least once within the first month of leaving out-of-home care, every quarter for two years and then six monthly for three years.

- conduct genuine, ongoing consultation and facilitate participation of children, young people, and their families in the making of decisions that affect them;
- provide children, young people and their families with information (in a manner and language that they can understand) which facilitates their participation; and
- conduct genuine, ongoing consultation and facilitate participation of carers in decision-making processes.

7.9 Promoting the rights of children, young people and families

Supported Family Group Home services will:

- inform children, young people, their families and foster carers of their rights (in a manner which is appropriate to their age, developmental capacity and cultural and linguistic background). This includes information about their rights under the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* and information about complaint and appeals processes;
- provide all children and young people with the *Charter of Rights* and ensure the agency advances and complies with the Charter;
- develop and implement policies and procedures that are reflective and consistent with the rights of children, young people and their families;
- ensure that the privacy of children, young people and their families is respected, confidentiality is maintained and information is collected and exchanged in accordance with the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*; and
- have policies and procedures in place to appropriately process complaints and appeals by children, young people and their families within clearly stated timeframes.

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