



***Keep Them Safe* achievements in Community Services the first 12 months**

The following summary provides an overview of some of the key changes implemented by Community Services since the supporting legislation was proclaimed on 24 January 2010.

Making a difference together for vulnerable children and families

In the year since the threshold for reporting suspected child abuse to Community Services was lifted from 'risk of harm' to risk of 'significant' harm, casework staff have been able to focus on children and families with the most complex problems.

The establishment of new Child Wellbeing Units means families who fall below the new reporting threshold are now being assisted by NGOs and other government agencies, getting the support and services that are right for them.

Following proclamation of the new threshold, we have seen a reduction in the number of reports to the Child Protection Helpline. There was a 32.7 per cent reduction in the number of reports where the reporter had concerns about a child or young person, compared to the child protection reports in the same period in 2009.

In this same period to 30 June 2010, there were 53.3 per cent fewer risk of significant harm reports compared to the number of reports referred for further assessment over the same period in 2009.

Guiding mandatory reporters

The new Mandatory Reporter Guide is an easy-to-use support for mandatory reporters to help identify children and young people at risk of significant harm, and to respond appropriately to those children and young people who are below that threshold.

Feedback from Child Wellbeing Unit Directors and a range of other stakeholders has helped fine-tune and improve the Guide over the past 12 months. Further improvements, including the inclusion of a new Neglect: Hygiene Decision Tree, will continue this year.

Information exchange working well

Government and non-government agencies can now exchange information relating to a child or young person's safety, welfare or wellbeing directly, whether or not the child or young person is known to Community Services and without Community Services involvement.

Case study

Police went to a home following a report of domestic violence between the parents of four children, with the father alleged to have assaulted the mother. Differing accounts were offered by the parents.

It also turned out the mother was suffering post-natal depression and alcohol had been consumed during the incident. Information on the case was exchanged between the Police Child Wellbeing Unit and NSW Health as part of the new collaboration strategy.

Collaboration resulted in a referral to a family support service for the family to work through their issues. Feedback from the service was positive as the family agreed to participate and the mother said she was grateful someone cared enough to make the referral and offer of family support.

Structured decision-making tools a boon to caseworkers

Community Services receives thousands of reports each year alleging abuse and/or neglect of children. Each time, caseworkers have to ask themselves difficult questions about the case and manage the fine line between child safety and a family's reputation.

To help caseworkers make these critical assessments and decisions, Community Services began using Structured Decision-Making (SDM™) tools at the Child Protection Helpline and in eight CSCs in 2010.

Five SDM tools have been customised for NSW to enliven the new statutory reporting threshold established by the *Keep Them Safe* legislation.

Two tools went live at the Helpline from the date of proclamation and have been used successfully by staff to identify serious cases of abuse and neglect.

The SDM™ screening tool is used by Helpline staff to assess whether the reported concerns meet the statutory threshold.

If so, the SDM™ response priority tool is then applied to determine which of the existing response time frames should apply: less than 24 hours, less than 72 hours or within 10 days.

At the CSC level, the safety, risk and risk re-assessment tools have been field-tested in eight CSCs. Often referred to as SARA (Safety and risk assessment), it includes three distinct tools:

- safety assessment
- family risk assessment
- family risk reassessment.

The safety assessment tool concentrates on identifying factors that represent imminent danger to the child or young person, while the family risk assessment tool incorporates factors that represent the future risk or likelihood of abuse and neglect.

The family risk reassessment tool reconsiders the original risk assessment in the following intervention that evaluate a family's progress towards case plan goals to ensure a child or young person is safe to stay at home. Reassessments are done at regular intervals to ensure that risk factors have been addressed and the safety sustained.

Trial sites St George, Nowra, Ulladulla, Coffs Harbour, Penrith, Ingleburn, Cessnock and Griffith CSCs are continuing to use the tools following completion of the trial and are very positive about the outcomes for children and families.

Sharon Nosworthy, Manager Casework at Cessnock CSC, says her team has found SARA has reinvigorated their approach to casework.

"At first we were hesitant to use SARA thinking the system would take away from our professional judgement, but we found that using the tools actually enhances our judgement and gets us thinking reflectively and holistically about casework."

Case study

Sharon says her team has used SARA with 32 families to assist on safety issues quite successfully and to set up safety plans with the cooperation of the families.

Recently they worked with an Aboriginal mother who had five children and had several risk factors including exposure to a known sex offender, lack of attendance at school and neglect/hygiene issues.

“When we sat down to talk to the mum about the safety plan with family members who would be involved, they readily accepted the plan because SARA was so precise about the problems. There was no room for argument, they agreed.”

The family is doing well with the plan in place.

Of particular interest was the opportunity to see how SDM had the potential to ease workload pressure on caseworkers by using SARA rather than the existing secondary assessment framework.

Community Services will roll out the SARA tools across the state later this year.

CWUs mark first anniversary

Child Wellbeing Units (CWUs) are marking their first anniversary of operations in NSW Health, the NSW Police Force, the Department of Education and Training, and the Department of Human Services NSW.

These four agencies accounted for more than 60 per cent of all reports to the Child Protection Helpline. Each CWU has developed their own service model to best support their frontline staff.

Four Community Services staff (Information exchange team caseworkers) are currently outposted in CWUs to assist with information exchange.

CWU Assessment Officers (AOs) come from a wide range of backgrounds, including child protection casework. The AOs all attended cross-agency training prior to taking up their positions.

Wellnet

One of Community Services most important achievements of 2010 was the development of the IT system, WellNet, which allows the CWUs to stand together on a common data platform.

CWU staff across mandatory reporting agencies can now access limited information from KiDS – to see, for example, whether a reported concern they’ve received relates to an open case at a particular CSC. CWU staff can then contact the relevant CSC directly, and work with caseworkers in the best interests of the child.

Keeping Aboriginal children safe

Community Services and the NSW Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care Secretariat (AbSec) made child protection history in 2010 when they signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will result in stronger collaboration to improve protection for Aboriginal children at risk and provide better support for their families.

“We actually believe that we are being listened to and acknowledged as being worthy of having considered input into policy decisions being made about our children,” AbSec CEO Bill Pritchard told DoCsVox, the staff online newsletter.

“The past two years have not only been about the consolidation of relationships, but the development of a true partnership between the agencies.”

The agreement has paved the way for collaborative projects between the two agencies, such as developing a specialist Aboriginal advice and support service to child protection agencies and establishing four Intensive Family Based Services (IFBS) to be delivered by NGOs.

New Intensive Family Based Services

Selected Aboriginal organisations will work in partnership with Community Services to manage four new IFBS sites in high-needs areas across NSW.

Service providers have been selected in the first two sites and will be announced shortly. We expect to have the other two sites up and running later this year.

Making a PACT

Protecting Aboriginal Children Together (PACT) is an initiative to develop locally driven service models which actively engage Aboriginal families and communities to keep children and young people safe.

Under the PACT model, Community Services caseworkers will seek Aboriginal community advice and involvement on their approach to child protection decisions for Aboriginal children in two pilot sites

Helping “frequently encountered” families

There are many families who, for a number of reasons, do the rounds of the social service and child protection agencies. In 2011, we are giving these “frequently encountered” families further attention so they get the help they need.

The Family Case Management project has been developed to help these families who have had repeated encounters with government agencies and NGOs, often with limited results.

Community Services staff are working with many other agencies and NGOs to use an integrated case management approach in nine locations across NSW. These are:

- South West Sydney - Greenacre, Green Valley/Miller and Fairfield
- South East NSW - Bega Valley, Goulburn, Queanbeyan
- Western NSW - Orange City, Leeton/Narrandera.

FCM Coordinators in each region are employed by Ageing, Disability and Home Care in South-West Sydney, by Housing NSW in South East NSW and by Mission Australia in Western NSW, where the project focuses wholly on Aboriginal families.

South East NSW and South West Sydney are currently operating at full capacity (30 families across the three sites in each region). Agencies report that families have, overall, found their participation in the project a positive experience. Uptake by families in the Western region has been slower but is progressing steadily.

Seeing positive results

By October 2010, several families had shown significant improvement after agencies re-prioritised services to meet their needs.

Families in the pilots include at least one child or young person at risk of significant harm, and are likely to be repeatedly seen by government and NGO agencies.

Involvement in the program is by consent, and focuses on families who have received a previous government agency or NGO response with limited results. Importantly, all family members receive case management as required, not just children and young people.

Helping kids in foster care to thrive

2010 saw the start of a new health initiative for children and teens in out-of-home care, plus the publication of two new resources for carers and care leavers to prepare for the transition to independent living.

Health and wellbeing for children entering care

As part of *Keep Them Safe* reforms, health checks for children and young people in NSW, entering statutory out-of-home care and who are expected to remain for more than 90 days, are being progressively provided as part of a pathway agreed to by NSW Health and Community Services.

The NSW Government allocated \$3 million this financial year and \$12 million over four years for the coordination of health assessments for children and young people in care.

“Many children entering statutory out-of-home care suffer health, development and wellbeing problems because of their previous experiences of neglect and abuse. We aim to get their health back on track through these health checks,” says Anne-Maree Sabellico, Acting Executive Director Operations Development.

These children entering statutory out-of-home care now undergo a comprehensive health assessment including growth and development, immunisation status review, and assessment of vision, hearing, mental health, oral health and nutrition.

A health plan is then developed to address their needs and specialised staff coordinate and facilitate access to appropriate services in their local area.

“At each stage, the flow of information between NSW Health, Community Services, the children’s carer and where appropriate, the child or young person, is supported and documented,” adds Anne-Maree.

“It’s important to get a health and development check early to see if a child or young person has any issues and to get help sooner rather than later.”

The new NSW Health out-of-home care coordinators across the state are now working with Community Services staff and are developing partnerships with other government agencies to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people entering statutory out-of-home care.

New resources developed for carers and care leavers

In 2010, the Project Development and Communication and Education teams along with several NGOs collaborated on two new publications aimed at preparing young people in care for a smooth transition to independent living. These were announced by Community Services Minister Linda Burney at a recent care leavers tea.

“Many carers had told their caseworkers they were looking for information to help them prepare their foster teens for independence. Similarly some care leavers had admitted to agency staff they could do with a list of resources to help them get set up when they leave care, so we knew there was a need for these publications,” says Alannah Ball, Manager Project Development Unit.

Your Next Step explains where young people can get advice about money and budgeting, finding accommodation, rental agreements, education, work and health. It also has a section on rights and responsibilities, plus useful contacts.

Leading the Way helps carers to prepare young people for leaving care and explains how to teach life skills, prepare for the transition and manage expectations around leaving.

In 2010, 4,600 copies of *Your Next Step*, 4,000 copies of *Leading the Way* and 10,000 postcards to alert young people about *Your Next Step*, were distributed in NSW.

Feedback has been positive. One NGO staff member said: “The resources look very good. *Your Next Step* is definitely attractive/appealing to young people.”

Young people in care, CREATE Foundation, Connecting Carers NSW, Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat NSW (AbSec), Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies (ACWA),

NSW Housing and Community Services regional representatives contributed to the development of these publications – another solid example of collaboration and working together under *Keep Them Safe* reforms.

New directions for Brighter Futures

The final evaluation of the Brighter Futures program in September 2010 resulted in a decision to shift the NGO:Community Services case management ratio of Brighter Futures cases from 50:50 to 60:40.

As well, the program settings are moving to ensure targeting to families with more complex needs, including families above the ROSH threshold.

This move should help to address the service gap between early intervention and child protection, and will include more focus on parents with drug and alcohol, mental health and domestic violence issues.

Brighter Futures lead agencies, peaks and other agencies have formed a council to provide advice on the implementation of the changes to Brighter Futures. The council met for the first time on 21 January 2011.

Reforms to Brighter Futures mean 600 more families will be able to receive services under the program. Separate to the reforms that will come from the evaluation, an additional \$8 million for NGOs provided under KTS will assist a further 200 families, bringing to 800 the number of additional families that will receive Brighter Futures services, including quality child care.

This funding includes a strong focus on reaching Aboriginal families in particular given the well-known and lamentable statistics about Aboriginal over-representation in the child protection system.

The Brighter Futures Assessment Unit (BFAU) commenced operations 25 January 2010 to handle cases from the Helpline that might be eligible for Brighter Futures and to give Child Wellbeing Units (CWUs) a contact point for families who are potentially eligible for the program.

The CWU pathway was up and running by the end of June 2010.

Calling all carers

The new *Fostering NSW* foster care recruitment drive has been a great success and shows how working together with NGOs can really make a difference.

Around 60 per cent of all new enquiries about foster care during the campaign were prompted by television, magazine, newspaper or online advertising, demonstrating that these ads really made an impact with the intended audience.

Carer recruitment teams made the most of the opportunity to spread the word at the local level, with letterbox drops, information sessions and community-based activities.

More than 12,800 posters, 39,500 brochures and 8,000 information booklets were distributed across NSW through local councils, Members of Parliament, non-government organisations and carer recruitment teams to complement the advertising campaign.

Hundreds of stories in local media showed real carers telling their stories, showing the many positive ways a caring, supportive foster family can make in a difference in a child's life.

More than 1,000 people applied to become a foster carer with Community Services in the five months from the campaign launch, and non-government foster care agencies reported an increase of nearly 14 per cent in enquiries as a direct result of the *Fostering NSW* campaign.

Targeting culturally diverse carers

Community Services has begun three trial projects to lift the number of foster carers from Arabic-speaking, Greek and African communities.

Settlement Services International won the tenders for the Arabic-speaking and Greek projects, and are partnering with the United Muslim Women's Association, Arab Council Australia and the Greek Orthodox Community of NSW to deliver a series of community information sessions in Metro Central and Metro South West, along with culturally-relevant education materials, and assisting people through their application process.

SydWest Multicultural Services is partnering with Anglicare to deliver the project with African communities.

Getting the message about foster care out to culturally diverse communities and working in partnership with multicultural agencies is important to ensure that children can maintain their cultural heritage.

Clinical Issues Unit supports caseworkers

Frontline staff work hard to counsel and comfort children and families affected by domestic violence, mental health issues, and drugs and alcohol.

It's not easy work, and the issues are becoming more complex than ever.

As part of *Keep Them Safe* reforms to improve services for families affected by these issues, Community Services staff will now be better supported to respond to these situations with cross-agency domestic violence training, and the expansion of the former Drug and Alcohol Expertise Unit to include domestic violence and mental health.

The renamed Clinical Issues Unit now has six consultants and a strategy and program development team, as well as staff in the Youth Drug and Alcohol Court program.

Caseworkers regularly consult the unit on issues that range from reading urinalysis reports, to how to sequence interventions with multiple risk factors or the effects of combinations of drugs.

They are also provided training and resources to help them to engage with families and consider the impact on parenting where clinical issues are present.

Changes to allegations against employees functions

Significant changes have been made to the allegations against employees (AAE) functions in Community Services as part of *Keep Them Safe*.

Since September 2009 the outcomes in a reportable conduct investigation were streamlined into only three possible findings; sustained, not sustained and not reportable conduct.

Assistant Director Reportable Conduct, Susan Mattick said, "We've had quite a lot of feedback from agencies supporting carers that these changes have made findings clearer for them and addressed uncertainty which was quite common with the previous range of findings."

In March 2010, the Ombudsman and Community Services implemented a new Class or Kind Agreement. This agreement changed the threshold for notifying reportable allegations to the Ombudsman so that less serious allegations, while still investigated, are exempt from being reported to the Ombudsman.

In May 2010, Community Services formally centralised AAE functions. The central unit, located in Head Office, responds to all new reportable conduct allegations. The centralisation of the unit involved the recruitment and training of new investigative and support staff.

In conjunction with Connecting Carers the unit has made presentations on the AAE process to over 20 local carer groups throughout the state.

Investigation backlog being cleared

The AAE unit has worked closely with regions to complete the investigations that had commenced before centralisation. Most cases have now been finalised and the AAE unit has developed comprehensive plans to complete the small number of outstanding matters, particularly in the Western region.

Developing a differential response model

This year the AAE unit has changed its name to the Reportable Conduct Unit as a start in implementing a differential response model that will not only address allegations of reportable conduct but will also help to identify the ongoing needs of carers and salaried employees in keeping children and young people safe.

Community Services has engaged Relationships Australia to provide free, independent counselling to carers involved in allegations and their families.

Changes to Children's Court practices

Keep Them Safe has brought about a number of changes to practice in the Children's Court in the past year, alongside changes to the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. Community Services has worked with agencies including Legal Aid, Absec, Department of Justice and Attorney General and the Court itself in relation to the changes.

A new process for initiating care applications was introduced, replacing the existing application and affidavit procedure. Accompanying this new process is the change in time for filing a care application following an emergency removal or assumption from the next day to within three working days.

The new process and changes to the filing time are aimed at enabling the Children's Court to have the most accurate and complete understanding of a family's circumstances so the decisions it makes about a child are appropriate and well informed.

Operational staff across the state have been trained in the new procedures and resources are available on the intranet. Staff have persevered with the new procedures which continue to be fine-tuned as theory is put into practice.

Another significant change to Children's Court practice is the introduction of Dispute Resolution Conferences (DRCs). DRCs have the potential to reduce the number of care applications proceeding to a contested hearing and shorten the hearing time in matters where a hearing is still required.

DRCs are currently being held for matters filed with Parramatta Children's Court and will start occurring at all other Children's Courts across the state beginning on 7 February 2011.

DRCs are part of the commitment to increasing the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution in care matters. Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms can help families to participate meaningfully in the decisions made about their child and as such can result in improved outcomes for children for whom there are care and protection concerns.

To view more *Keep Them Safe* achievements, including those of other government agencies, go to the *Keep Them Safe* Annual Report at <http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/resources/publications>