

Lessons from the field

Family relationship services in rural and remote Australia - challenges and good practice

A joint discussion paper developed by Catholic Welfare Australia
and the Department of Families, Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs
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Introduction and key messages

Background to the paper

This discussion paper is taken from a longer paper on regional, rural and remote service delivery prepared by Catholic Welfare Australia (CWA) for the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). It has been jointly published as a resource to facilitate further discussion among service providers and between the sector, FaCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD) about how services funded under the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) can better meet the needs of rural and remote communities.

Unmet need for services in rural and remote areas has been a growing concern of the service sector and the Australian Government in recent years. The Review of FRSP in 2004 and subsequent National Forums found a high level of concern about a lack of services in rural areas and the need to develop models of service that were right for rural and remote communities.

In 2005 FaCSIA invited CWA to consult with service providers and undertake a limited internet search to identify:

- characteristics of rural and remote areas that are likely to influence service design
- service approaches and programs that work well
- factors that limit the effectiveness of services
- new and emerging service models.

A survey was sent to FRSP funded organisations by CWA inviting them to provide information on rural and remote service delivery and contribute good practice case studies. 35 responses were received. These were considered together with findings from the literature search, a CWA focus group, FaCSLink program data and some other Government reports.

The work undertaken by CWA highlighted the challenges faced by service providers in rural and remote Australia and their experience of what makes for successful service delivery in a wide diversity of community settings. It also captured the views and ideas that rural service providers have on existing program arrangements.

CWA established three goals for this work:

- To promote social justice and equity for families and communities in rural Australia by giving them a fair share of resources and more choice of relationship services.
- To demonstrate the realities of service provision so that these can be better understood and showcase the practice and service models that are already achieving success.

- To develop a better evidence base to guide future directions for policy and practice in FRSP services.

Managers and practitioners working in rural and remote services had some clear messages they wanted to get across to the department and to the sector more generally:

- There is a level of consultation fatigue among rural services. Workers feel the issues facing their communities and services are well known and progress to improve access and strengthen service models is too slow.
- Rural communities have suffered disproportionately from the impact of globalisation on rural industries. Many people in the bush feel that cost efficiency and rationalisation of industry and services has been continually put before social equity goals and ongoing support for rural communities.
- Rural and remote communities are very diverse in demography, economy, social networks and the needs and issues individuals and families face.
- Rural communities differ in their capacity to respond to the rapid pace of economic and social change, and in some communities the human costs of these changes are very high.
- Many of the traditional supports that have helped people deal with personal, social and economic problems in rural communities, for example church agencies and volunteers, may no longer be available.
- The quality and effectiveness of rural services is highly dependent on the commitment and calibre of people working on the ground. Ironically, this human resource is often a scarce commodity and in the face of limited resources, stress and burnout for workers is a major issue.
- Current funding levels do not reflect the true cost of delivering services in rural communities and some aspects of program administration create uncertainty and limit effectiveness (for example, short term contracts and funding of pilot projects).
- There is more development work needed to improve the way the FRSP programs reach and respond to Indigenous Australians.
- There are many examples of incredible relationship work already happening and more could be done to capture and share the learning from this experience.

2 Recommendations

The recommendations were developed by CWA as part of the full report. They reflect the views and experience presented by services included in the survey and consultation process. FaCSIA has indicated its willingness, in conjunction with AGD, to consider the findings and recommendations in the context of future program development and as part of ongoing work with the three Industry Representative Bodies.

Building and promoting good practice in rural services

1. The Department and Industry Representative Bodies should give priority to further identification of examples of good practice in the management and

delivery of rural services and facilitate more opportunities to share information and learning about what works.

2. The good practice principles that have emerged from the CWA research should be absorbed as part of the service standards that guide practice in FRSP services.
3. Greater recognition should be given to the importance of community development approaches in the delivery of FRSP services in rural and remote areas, including community education.
4. The Department should sponsor targeted research and assist services to better use action research and evaluation in order to achieve a firmer evidence base for planning and development of rural services.
5. Assistance for communities in crisis should be well-targeted, flexible in design and delivered by service providers that have an ongoing presence in the region. Evaluation should be built in to facilitate learning about good practice.
6. Consideration should be given to holding bi-annual good practice forums that bring rural services together to share experience and promote learning.

Expanding and improving services for Indigenous people

7. The Department and FRSP service providers should give priority to expanding and improving access to services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
8. Further research and development work is needed to identify and introduce service delivery models that are meaningful to Indigenous people, respectful of their culture and driven and shaped by them.
9. The Department and FRSP service providers should call on the experience of other related service areas (e.g. health, parenting programs and family violence) where good practice principles and service models have already evolved and been documented.
10. People who have experience in working with and providing services to Indigenous people in rural and remote communities should be engaged to conduct intensive training for senior government staff and service providers. This should include a strong focus on working cross culturally.
11. Service providers need to give priority to recruiting Indigenous liaison officers and staff as a foundation for effectively engaging Indigenous communities and developing models that are culturally appropriate, responsive and effective.
12. The Department and service providers need to recognise the long-term nature of engaging and working with Indigenous communities where there are entrenched and high levels of social and economic need. Security of funding and capacity to retain Indigenous staff are critical considerations.

Workforce development

13. The Department should enter into discussions with Centrelink concerning the use of their technology and facilities to disseminate training programs for rural workers.

14. Consistent with government support of some other professions, FaCSIA should provide additional funds to sponsor attendance of rural practitioners at conferences and professional development courses.
15. A working party should be established to liaise with universities on curriculum development that can better prepare students to work in rural service delivery¹.

Improving program planning and management

16. The Department should establish a Rural Services Reference Group that draws its membership from experienced rural managers and practitioners. This group would be a sounding board for advice on planning, policy and strategy, including consideration of how the program can more successfully accommodate the regional variations in need and capacity.
17. In future program planning, priority should be given to establishing broad based generalist services ahead of funding targeted specialist services. The aim should be to achieve viable, professional and adequately funded services and to reduce the occurrence of one-off grants or pilot projects.
18. Further improvements to program planning are needed to ensure more equity in the distribution of resources based on needs. This should include ongoing mapping of services to prevent duplication in the face of scarce resources.
19. FaCSLink should be updated and expanded to collect more meaningful data on all support activity and to better reflect the complexity of needs and service responses.
20. Funding agreements need to allow for and encourage flexibility in how service providers respond to the needs and issues facing specific rural and remote communities.
21. All future FRSP funding agreements should be for a minimum of three years.
22. Future funding needs to better reflect the additional and different operational and infrastructure costs of delivering services in rural and remote areas.
23. Renewal of contracts in rural services should be performance based. Where service providers have demonstrated their effectiveness, continuity of funding should be a priority. In the event of a decision to discontinue funding, 12 months notice should be given allowing organisations to plan an exit strategy.
24. The forms and processes used for performance reporting in relation to Indigenous services need to be reviewed, so the systems used can better facilitate more accurate reporting of what these services are doing and the impact it is having.
25. Relief assistance programs for rural communities should be funded according to a transparent needs based formula and be designed to enable good practice by service providers known to the given communities.
26. Where the Department is seeking to encourage partnerships and collaboration through competitive selection processes, the criteria should recognise the

¹ This could mirror the University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) established by the Department of Health and Ageing.

foundations that are needed to achieve effective and sustainable partnerships - shared goals, common philosophy, experience of working together on the ground and capacity to value add through a partnership arrangement.

3 Snapshot of rural Australia

Defining terms

Classifying geographical locations for Australia in terms of relative remoteness has been approached by different organisations in many ways. The three most commonly used classification systems are²:

- The Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas (RRMA) Classification
- The Department of Health and Ageing's Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA)
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) Remoteness.

Each classification has strengths and weaknesses depending on what it is being used for. In broad terms, people who live outside major cities live in a range of settings that could broadly be categorised as rural, regional and remote areas. For the purposes of this paper, 'rural' is used to cover all areas outside metropolitan centres encompassing regional, rural and remote.

Recent trends in rural Australia

There is considerable documented research on the issues facing rural and remote communities, although trends in human services provision are harder to extract from national data and research.

Demographic and economic change

Drawing on research by Crockett³, Hoolahan and Vines⁴ and ABS data⁵ some of the more common trends can be captured.

- Young people are increasingly leaving rural areas for further education, training and employment opportunities, resulting in an increasing age demographic in rural towns and communities.
- Unemployment is, on average, twice the rate of metropolitan areas of Australia.
- Economic viability of rural and remote communities varies dramatically. Communities can be particularly vulnerable where the economy is reliant on one kind of industry or where employment is seasonal.

² The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) *Rural, Regional and Remote Health: A guide to remoteness classifications*, 2004

³ Crockett, J., 2003 *Rural Australia in Transition: Trouble on the Farm*, paper to Health and Wellbeing in Rural Farming Communities, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle, Orange, NSW

⁴ Hoolahan, B., & Vines, R., 2002, Rural Needs Survey Summary, in Event Report, Counselling Forum, Centre for Rural and Remote Health, University of Newcastle, Orange NSW

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, Household Income, Living Standards and Financial Stress, Income and Welfare Year Books Australia.

- Social planning relating to health, housing and community infrastructure often lags behind the establishment of new industries in rural towns. Where a town or region is dependent on a single industry and that industry closes it can have devastating social impacts in the community.
- Household incomes in rural areas are generally lower. The ABS survey found 56 per cent of families in rural Australia fall in the two lowest income brackets compared with 36 per cent in metropolitan areas.
- Access to health and other essential services has reduced as government agencies and financial institutions have rationalised or withdrawn services and sold off infrastructure.
- Unavailability of public transport exacerbates already limited access to services.
- The decline in socio-economic status, closure of services and reductions in preventive health care has led to poorer health outcomes and other personal problems.

Crockett⁶ further identified the overall declining value of rural production. In 2003 the average farm turnover was \$275,000 and average farm debt was \$252,327. There have been significant falls in farm cash income in most areas of primary production, including broad acre farming (from \$110,000 in 2001-02 to \$43,000 a year later) and dairy farming (from \$104,500 to \$21,000 in the same period).

Drought has had a major impact for many years across large parts of Australia. Many families have lived with the resulting financial uncertainty, anxiety and emotional stress. Drought affects whole regions not just local communities as the impacts pass on to local businesses and services.

While these trends are well understood, the policy and planning response is not generally keeping pace with the economic and social changes taking place. Not all communities are experiencing these issues, but living in rural and remote areas means people are more likely to be disadvantaged than their city counterparts.

Social and emotional toll

The 2002 Hoolahan and Vines survey of counsellors found that rural disadvantage is likely to be contributing to other problems such as marital and family relationship issues, mental health conditions such as depression, drug and alcohol problems, child abuse and other forms of family violence.

Against this background, there is a sense that the ‘social capital’ of rural communities, once considered one of their greatest strengths, is breaking down⁷. Tradition holds that rural people are mutually supportive and close knit, with a strong belief in family and community ties. However the changes communities are facing often lead to deterioration in relationships and satisfaction with life, confusion of roles, greater external pressures, and intergenerational and intragenerational conflict.

⁶ Crockett, J., 2003, *ibid*

⁷ Blinkhorn, S., 2003, *Thirsty Children: What are the effects on rural children of the drought?* – Paper presented to the Health and Wellbeing in Rural Farming Communities Seminar, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle, Orange NSW

In rural communities, social problems can be very public, yet asking for assistance can be seen as a source of shame. This may prevent people from seeking support, leaving families to cope with the escalating stress and crisis.

Different experience of women and men

Rural women play a pivotal role in rural community life and economy. They have always assisted in the running of farm business and played a primary role in the family. Traditionally it has been women that formed the backbone of volunteerism in their local communities.

Today rural women are often better educated than their farming husbands, although they continue to have less say in family business decisions. Changes in Australia's farming economy have seen women taking up jobs outside the farm to keep the family going. This makes them less available for their traditional roles in voluntary community work, which have in the past been critical to the fabric of community life. Women's contributions are often undervalued and taken for granted. In the face of family and community pressures, rural women are more likely than their sisters in urban areas to face domestic violence, financial hardship and stress in family relationships.

Men in rural areas experience poorer health and higher death rates than their counterparts in capital cities and compared to women generally. The AIHW (1998) found "this health differential is notable for several causes of death and hospitalisation, specifically injury, homicide and interpersonal violence and diabetes". Compared to women, men in rural and remote areas are more likely to face social isolation and less likely to seek help or visit a doctor. They are also more likely than men living in metropolitan areas to commit suicide. Depression and suicide are especially prevalent among young men in rural communities.

Indigenous communities

It is well known that Indigenous Australians are more disadvantaged than non-Indigenous Australians in relation to their health, housing, employment and economic status. They are also overrepresented in the prison and juvenile justice systems.

According to the ABS, Indigenous Australians comprised 2.4 per cent of the total population in 2001⁸, although this proportion varies from 1 per cent in major cities to 45 per cent in very remote areas. More than half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived in NSW (29 per cent) and Queensland (27 per cent) with the majority living in urban areas. In the Northern Territory 29 percent of people report as having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status. The ABS data shows one in four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in remote or very remote communities, compared with only 2 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.

Planning for future FRSP services needs to take account of some of the different population trends relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, namely:

- a higher birthrate than the rest of the Australian population
- a relatively young population

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003, *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Canberra.

- where the main concentrations of Indigenous people are
- the social, health and economic challenges facing remote Indigenous communities (low population but high need).

Diversity a central consideration

Highlighting the trends and common problems facing rural Australia risks masking the incredible diversity of the thousands of communities that make it up. The issues facing towns within reach of major cities are vastly different from communities that are very small, isolated by distance and poorly serviced. Areas that have a viable economy will face fewer economic and social problems than towns or regions with limited economic or employment potential. The lives of Indigenous people in remote communities in the top half and central Australia are very different from Indigenous people living in towns or cities in the southern states.

A further risk in highlighting the common problems is that the resourcefulness and resilience of many of these communities is underestimated.

The history, culture, resources and current day realities of communities are different and ultimately FRSP services need to be tailored to this diversity, rather than a romantic or generalised view of rural Australia.

4 Family relationship services in rural Australia

Current situation

The information available on FRSP services in rural and remote areas includes the Department's methods of calculating funding, deciding catchment areas and expectations of numbers of clients being serviced detailed through funding agreements.

The Department currently allocates recurrent funding plus indexation to services. Service providers determine how the funds are utilised in the areas being served within the parameters of the funding agreement. There are currently no loadings for rural or remote funding. The recent Cost Methodology exercise confirmed the difficulties in identifying actual costs, as each service is unique in its way of servicing its community, managing its funds and distributing funds to rural and remote services.

To support a standard approach to measuring remoteness, FaCSIA has adopted the Department of Health and Aging geographic classification tool, ARIA, to define its major catchments areas as follows:

- Major Cities of Australia,
- Inner Regional Australia,
- Outer Regional Australia
- Remote Australia and
- Very Remote Australia.

FaCSIA includes the regional classification when making decisions about rural and remote service provision. While some locations described as Inner Regional Australia may reflect a metropolitan context rather than a regional or rural experience (for example Wollongong, Gosford or Canberra), regional agencies are expected to

provide services to surrounding rural and remote areas. The numbers of clients seen across the ARIA classifications excluding Major Cities of Australia, contributes to the estimated total number of clients receiving FRSP services in regional, rural and remote Australia.

The Departments determine the catchment areas and target numbers negotiating with service providers reflecting service experience and capacity.

Challenges facing services

The CWA survey of providers established some common challenges that impact on rural service provision.

Pressure to be all things to all people

Rural practitioners and services face constant pressure to respond to an ever-growing presentation of needs and issues. When other services are lacking, FRSP services will be expected to fill the gap. Advocating for more resources and services for the community is necessary as a response but this capacity building work is not reflected in the funding model.

Lack of choice of providers

Individuals and families have very little choice of provider in rural communities. There is rarely more than one agency involved in family relationship services so it becomes very important to protect the reputation of that service and employ promotional strategies that keep the confidence of the community as well as clients.

Having a single FRSP provider can make it harder to target and engage potential clients groupings, especially men. Service providers that want to develop specialised responses to men and women need to be creative in how this is achieved in small communities.

Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries

The closeness of rural communities can make it hard for workers to maintain boundaries. Practitioners often live in the community where they work. It can be hard to separate personal relationships and contacts from one's professional role. In cases of family violence this may be exacerbated as the counsellor may know the victim and perpetrator.

Facing obvious and compelling need elicits generosity. The close relationships create a pressure to overextend as a practitioner or service. Managers need to be vigilant and wise in balancing what they can realistically do and achieve against the expectations of the community.

Maintaining privacy and confidentiality

Even with the best policy and practice around privacy and confidentiality, much that is personal is public in rural communities. Members of the community are often aware of who is using the services and the outcomes of intervention are sometimes visible to the whole community. Perceptions of the service can be coloured by alliances and relationships in the wider community rather than the fairness and quality of outcomes for the people involved. In this context practitioners will confront pressure to correct misinformation that is being passed on in social situations. However, maintaining

confidentiality is a paramount consideration if the service is to have the confidence and respect of clients, and ultimately the whole community.

Limited access to other professionals

The availability of other specialist professionals is often severely limited in rural communities. This exacerbates the service choice issue but it also means that family relationship services are picking up clients that may need another form of assistance (eg. mental health services, drug and alcohol counselling or financial counselling). In metropolitan areas it is possible to have some specialist expertise on the FRSP team or to co-work with specialists employed by other agencies. In the bush, this option is rarely available.

FRSP service providers dealing with assault and domestic violence go to extreme lengths to protect confidentiality and give support. The absence of specialist victim support services, unsympathetic community attitudes and difficulties around confidentiality in accessing counselling services create barriers to disclosure and reporting of sexual assault⁹. FRSP services may be the only support and will extend their service boundaries in an effort to get the victim access to the health, social and legal support they need.

In many communities, lack of availability of family relationship services is known to contribute to a higher medical intervention in relationship problems¹⁰. The literature tells us that people going through separation in rural areas are far more likely to be medicated for a grief response or be hospitalised for depression or mental health issues¹¹. Sadly, suicide is also more common.

Service affordability

Sensitive to the low incomes and disadvantage faced by many individuals and families, rural FRSP providers have adjusted their fees accordingly. However, despite turning no one away and having flexibility in fees, the fact that FRSP has a fee requirement can be a deterrent for some people. This reticence, together with the stigma in some communities around seeking help, can mean fees income is very low. This results in fewer funds to run the service.

Services also have to reconcile the different policies of state and federal funding bodies concerning charging fees. Explaining different policies to clients takes time and adds to management costs. An example of this is when FRSP services are contracted to deliver relief assistance to communities experiencing drought or other natural disasters. Services may be ultimately providing similar services to clients but having to explain different criteria for access to service and fees policies.

⁹ Neame, A. & Heenan, M., 2004, *Responding to Sexual Assault in Rural Communities*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Briefing No. 3, June.

¹⁰ Fuller, J., Edwards, J., Procter, N. and Moss, J., 2002, *Mental Health in Rural and Remote Australia*, in Wilkinson, D., and Blue, I., (Eds), *The New Rural Health*, Oxford University press, South Melbourne Australia.

¹¹ Britt, H., Miller, G. and Valenti, L., 2001, *It's Different in the Bush: A comparison of general practice activity in metropolitan and rural areas of Australia 1998-2000*, Joint report by the University of Sydney and the AIHW, AIHW Cat. No. GEP 6.

Recruiting and keeping skilled staff

Finding skilled staff willing to work in rural locations is a national problem. Just over half the FRSP funded organisations reported issues with recruiting staff in 2004, with rural locations having the most difficulty (FRSP Status Report, 2005).

Rural recruitment usually requires people to relocate and this can impact on all facets of life (access to family support and peer networks, finding new housing, increased living costs, pressure on personal relationships etc). Fewer people are inclined to take up the challenge of a move to areas where services are reduced, living costs are nearly always higher and salaries are non-competitive.

FRSP providers are unable to offer attractive packages because there are no extra funds to subsidise the additional costs that can be involved or offer incentives for people to move. It can take many months to find suitable recruits and this impacts at several levels:

- Unfilled positions place great stress on remaining workers and management.
- In less attractive rural settings there will be, at any given time, a number of positions unfilled and this places program continuity and funding in jeopardy.
- Advertising is expensive and may have to be repeated several times to get results.
- Use of recruitment agencies initially appears attractive because payment is made only when they are successful, but most companies are inexperienced in dealing in rural areas.
- Employing new graduates is expensive in time and investment. Graduates need intensive supervision and training to work at the level expected by FRSP. They often use rural postings as a training experience. This poses high risks and additional costs on provider organisations and often the gain is short term.

A stable workforce requires predictability. Retaining rural staff does not happen by accident. It requires good management whereby each and every staff member is valued and supported and has access to the training they need for professional development. In the past one-year funding contracts presented many barriers to staff retention. The move to three-year funding cycles will allow for longer term planning and should reduce uncertainty and help to minimise staff turnover.

Isolation of workers on the ground

Practitioners and service managers in rural communities can become isolated and cut off from their wider peer network, professional bodies and education providers. The three Industry Representative Bodies have all taken steps through their conferences, phone and video link-ups and use of the internet to keep people in contact. However opportunities for collegiate support and shared learning are fewer for people working in rural FRSP services.

Distance and the cost of outreach

Distance is a vital factor to consider in relation to rural service delivery. The distances travelled to provide or attend FRSP services in rural Australia vary greatly, but often cover vast areas.

For clients, access to vehicles and the high cost of travel in terms of time, petrol and other associated expenses often prohibit client attendance at centres. Limited or non-existent public transport increases the difficulty. Travelling long distances to get help places additional emotional strain on clients, particularly where family members in conflict have to travel to and from therapeutic sessions in the same car, bus or train for several hours. Working out safe, practical and affordable travel can become an intervention in its own right.

Rather than depend on client ability to access town based service delivery outlets, there is a growing trend to take FRSP services closer to the people. This is generally achieved by having visiting practitioners travel in “circuits” around a designated area. Circuits are a viable solution to scattered populations and they reduce burden of travel for clients. However providing a visiting service is costly and funding formulas do not yet reflect the true costs of making rural services accessible through outreach, including added infrastructure costs.

Cultural diversity in small populations

Small communities can be culturally and linguistically diverse. Promoting and providing services in a way that is responsive to different groups within a small community can be highly challenging when the service has a small staff complement.

Vulnerability of smaller services

In some towns or regional centres inadequate funding may lead management to co-locate services in order to reduce overheads and gain some economies of scale. This arrangement works well provided the funding for all the services is stable and assured. However, this is often not the case as state and federal governments, and different sections of the same department, can have shifting priorities and objectives. These arrangements can be high risk. If one service is lost, the viability of the auspice arrangement is affected and other services become vulnerable.

Rural services provided by Church agencies have traditionally relied on the Church for financial support when such crises occur. With Church attendance across the country decreasing, the capacity to draw funds from this source is severely constrained.

In many communities, co-location of services is not an option because there are few services on the ground or no suitable accommodation. In these situations very small services may face high overhead costs, relative to their service delivery capacity.

Merits and limitations of new technologies

Increasingly, use of new technologies is being seen as the answer to reducing isolation and getting information and advice out to people in remote locations. However rural people cannot afford and do not embrace technological solutions as rapidly as service designers, nor is it a panacea in all circumstances. Areas where it can potentially have value are:

- linking practitioners and managers to their peers (information sharing and learning)
- access to training and professional development for isolated workers
- getting information out to people and agencies
- using video conferencing in mediation and counselling.

Managers of rural services highlight the high cost of initial set-up and maintenance of basic technologies such as networked computers and broad banding. Even where government agencies contribute to the basic infrastructure costs, there is little provision for ongoing maintenance, upgrading and accessing the skills to expand use of the newer technologies.

Services for Indigenous families and communities

Working with Indigenous families and communities has presented special challenges for FRSP services. Conventional therapeutic practices are not seen to be culturally appropriate or sensitive, so new models of service delivery need to be developed. To be successful, these have to take place in culturally appropriate settings and use mediums that are meaningful to, and respectful of, the people involved.

Progress has been slow in the extent to which the FRSP has made itself relevant and accessible to Indigenous people, although there are some good programs and strategies beginning to emerge across the sector. The normal challenges faced by rural and remote communities are made more complex when agencies are seeking to engage and assist Indigenous families and communities.

The final section of this paper presents a conceptual model for working with Indigenous communities that provides a basis for thinking about different ways of working and some of the success factors that can be identified from the experience of FRSP providers. It also identifies some principles drawn from other recent reviews of Indigenous programs.

Recruiting skilled Indigenous staff and non-Indigenous staff who have experience in working with Indigenous communities presents major challenges. The CWA survey identified the following issues:

- a shortage of Indigenous staff with formal qualifications or project management skills
- difficulty in retaining Indigenous workers due to a 'burn out' factor, particularly where there is only one Indigenous staff member in an organisation.
- the current credential requirements required by funding bodies can pose significant barriers to Indigenous workers
- family feuds and kinship arrangements can further limit the potential employee recruitment pool
- Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff need to be competent and comfortable to work cross culturally
- opportunities to hear about and learn from what is working are too limited at this stage.

Experience shows that employing Indigenous staff is a key success factor in service models that engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However the pressures on these workers can often render them overwhelmed and ineffective due to the high expectations of their community, feelings of being isolated in a white service,

lack of support by their employer and the pressures of cultural and kinship obligations.

Many demands are placed on organisations running successful Indigenous programs, as there is keen sector interest and a genuine desire to develop Indigenous services that deliver results. Once successful programs are discovered, requests to inform and help the wider sector understand can become demanding of Indigenous staff time. Sharing learning with others can quickly overtake the capacity to run the program.

Program management issues

Service agreements support flexibility

Rural services need to have a high level of flexibility to respond to issues when they present and in ways that work for that group in a given community. If funding agreements are too specific regarding who should be seen (for example, men) and how their need is met (for instance through counselling) it severely limits the potential effectiveness and impact of the service provider. Services in rural communities need a high degree of flexibility to be both specialist in relation to specific target groups and generalist in being able to respond in a wide range of ways.

Sustainability – people and infrastructure

Rural services feel under constant pressure. Managers spend much of their time juggling the tensions that arise from competing priorities, attracting and maintaining a skilled workforce, securing adequate funding and getting the best possible outcomes for their clients and the community. They tirelessly advocate the needs of rural people in order to give them a higher profile on the public policy and planning agenda. They piece together sometimes small grants from different program buckets in the interest of being able to establish a viable and sustainable service. These pressures may face any service manager but for rural services it is often taking place in an operating environment where the community is in crisis or social problems of a disadvantaged population are escalating.

Higher costs of rural service provision

The higher cost of service provision in rural and remote areas is well known. The main contributing factors are petrol costs, car purchase and maintenance, staff recruitment, attendance at training and professional development, attendance at meetings and conferences and providing access to clinical supervision. There are also additional costs in ongoing communication, especially with the cost of mobile phone services and, for remote locations, increasing use of satellite phones.

With smaller budgets and fewer staff, the impact of staff absences and turnover can increase costs and reduce income, thereby placing further strain on agency resources.

Limitations of pilot and seed funding

The practice of offering pilot funding for innovative practice or seed funding to establish new service models has grown in recent years. These arrangements do not sit well with rural communities. They are suspicious of services that start up with great fanfare and then are forced to shut down after a demand has been created.

It can take from six to twelve months to truly establish a viable service and several years to establish trust and credibility with the community. Feedback from the survey suggests pilot or seed funding should only be offered within a funding policy that:

- takes account of the importance of staging introduction of a new service
- allows adequate time for establishment
- rewards excellence – that is, if a service delivers on its purpose and produces good outcomes there should be a mechanism to grant ongoing funding
- identifies how ongoing funding will be provided for successful pilots
- reflects the true costs of making rural services accessible, including infrastructure costs.

Such a policy rewards good management and practice and ensures that money is well targeted.

Some FRSP programs are the direct result of successful pilot projects for example, the Children's Contact Services and Contact Orders Programs. These programs have received continued funding and have been expanded in the 2005-2006 Federal Budget. However this is not always the case and a more planned approach is warranted.

Relief Assistance Schemes

Communities in rural Australia are very vulnerable to factors over which they have no control. Climate change, such as flood or drought, business decisions to close an abattoir or mine, or international trade agreements that impact on whole industries create additional pressures that have a major impact on the communities and on people's lives and relationships. In an attempt to provide support to communities in crisis there has been a growing trend for government to seek FRSP providers assistance in delivering relief assistance schemes.

Rural attitudes to help seeking can limit the uptake of this support. Potential recipients often feel fearful and powerless and find their self-sufficiency compromised. They only seek help as a last resort. The successful delivery of relief assistance schemes to assist communities in crisis, relies on programs and projects that are well targeted and flexible and delivered by service providers that have an ongoing and trusted presence in the region. More evaluation of these programs is needed so the learning can be shared and issues with access and responsiveness can be addressed.

Impact of short term funding agreements

Short-term funding agreements create significant uncertainty in terms of staffing and add to management costs. Experience of providers shows that staff on fixed-term contracts linked to funding agreements start looking for employment six months before the completion of their contract. High staff turnover causes disruption to

service, loss of expertise, low morale among other staff and a reduction in capability to deliver good outcomes.

Management of multiple funding agreements

Rural services are often reliant on both state and federal government funding sources. Managers have become experts in juggling small funding amounts and staff straddling several programs, all with different accountabilities, is commonplace. While it makes sense that government resources are channelled through established providers on the ground, managing multiple funding sources can be challenging because funding bodies have different expectations and requirements. The transaction costs of competing, negotiating and accounting for a number of funding agreements can be high for service providers and government agencies.

When service closure becomes the only option

Closure of services in the bush has serious repercussions and costs¹². Already tired of withdrawal of services, country people react strongly to closures, particularly when services are started and closed within a short time frame. It takes discernment and integrity to refuse small or time-limited funding allocations when the need is so obvious. It takes courage to close a service once it has started. However, service providers make this difficult decision in the interest of being just to their community and refusing to commit a program to failure because it is not sustainable.

Development of partnerships

Service providers and funding bodies are both increasingly emphasising the importance of collaboration and partnerships as key ingredients for success in service delivery and community development. Through the good practice case studies gathered by CWA¹³, service providers emphasise that partnerships need to evolve out of common goals, shared values, joint commitment and working the issues out on the ground over time.

Managers of rural FRSP services have raised concerns about pressure from funding bodies to enter into partnerships or consortiums as part of a generic push to streamline services or bring about better collaboration. Competitive selection processes that seek consortia or partnerships based on a prescribed separation of roles can lead to service and management arrangements that are formed for the purpose of attracting funding rather than creating a response that is right in a given community setting. In time, difficulties can arise if the foundations of shared goals, common philosophy and clearly negotiated roles and processes are not there.

Tensions between national priorities and local needs

To be effective FRSP services need to remain responsive to local needs and priorities and leverage off the community's current strengths and capacities. This can sometimes be at odds with national priority setting that results in new funds being tied to a certain service type or target group. Attaching growth to specific target groups or service responses means that rural services cannot grow in terms of viability and effectiveness of the core FRSP service.

¹² NCOSS, 2004, Counting the Cost: *What future for human services in rural NSW* available on line at <http://www.ncoss.org.au>

¹³ Organisations submitting good practice case studies are identified in the acknowledgments.

Fair and equitable distribution of services across Australia

It remains a challenge within the FRSP program and across related health and human service programs to achieve equitable access to services across Australia. Circuits and outreach go some way to extending coverage, but at this point in time rural people have fewer options and less access to services than their city counterparts.

This paper highlights the fluid state of social and economic change impacting on communities. A more robust program planning framework is needed to ensure targeting of resources to address existing gaps and shortfalls and respond to changing needs and conditions in communities.

Respondents to the CWA survey believe that the Government is not applying risk assessment to policy and funding decisions to gauge the impact on rural services. They believe funding and support for rural and remote services should have a higher priority than is currently the case.

The 30 per cent general increase in FRSP funding, granted in July 2004, was gratefully accepted by all funded services. However, the increase was applied across the board and therefore reinforced any existing historical anomalies in funding levels and distribution. The cost methodology project currently underway should provide a more informed framework for costing FRSP services and a firmer basis for more equitable targeting of future funding to regional, rural and remote service providers.

5 Good practice in rural FRSP services

The original CWA paper included rural service case studies that demonstrate some common factors that enhance the chance of positive outcomes for clients and communities. These are summarised here as principles for good practice in service delivery and management of rural services. Most of these principles are applicable to any FRSP service, but the context in which they apply is very different. The need to understand, engage and inform the wider community is one of the major differences. Another is the necessary focus on community capacity building. The challenges identified earlier are of concern to the extent that they limit the capacity of service providers to deliver what they know to be good practice.

Principles for good practice in service delivery

Relevance and responsiveness – tailoring service responses to specific community needs and context

Flexibility and creativity – having courage to design new approaches that may challenge conventional practice approaches and to change direction when needed

Well-developed and cooperative referral networks – building and maintaining close relationships with other services, especially health

Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries – paying close attention to the boundaries between personal and professional communication and relationships that can be a particular challenge in small communities.

Privacy and confidentiality – respecting and protecting the privacy and confidentiality of clients in service delivery and management.

Incorporating community development approaches – adopting a strengths-based approach and working in ways that build the capacity of individuals and communities to find their own solutions.

Making access and participation easy - providing services in venues that are familiar and non-threatening and encourage openness in program participation

Strong networking and collaboration - Engaging the wider community in being part of the solution and mobilising available resources.

Shaping community attitudes and public opinion – using positive promotional strategies that reduce the stigma associated with seeking help.

Principles for good practice in management of rural services

Leadership – recognising and investing in the development of local community leadership as well as demonstrating leadership in service management and practice.

Adequate management capacity and infrastructure – putting in place adequate human resources, equipment, systems and technologies to assure effectiveness.

Skilled, committed and stable staffing – understanding that people are the key resource and managing in ways that attract and retain good staff

Access to training, professional development and clinical supervision – being committed to the development and supervision of staff as a prerequisite for service quality and using creative ways to gain access to the best that is available.

Employment of Indigenous staff – giving priority to the employment of Aboriginal staff as a stepping stone in effective and culturally appropriate engagement and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Flexible use of resources – service innovation and responsiveness is contingent on being able to use staff and funding in flexible ways.

Planning linked to action research and evaluation – getting good results and knowing what works in rural communities depends on an ongoing cycle of sound planning, action research, data collection and evaluation.

Effective risk management – management needs to be aware of and actively managing the different and sometimes greater risks facing rural services.

Active and inclusive governance – the board of management needs to comprise committed people with skills, knowledge and local influence who can be advocates and govern in the interests of clients and the community.

Good practice in services to Indigenous people

The good practice principles above are highly relevant to the provision of Indigenous services by FRSP providers. However some different emphasis appears in good practice principles that have emerged from reviews and evaluation of services and programs specifically targeting Indigenous communities.

In a recent review of the Indigenous Parenting and Family Wellbeing program administered by FaCSIA, a literature search undertaken by RPR Consulting identified the following common principles for providing services in Indigenous communities:

- Responsiveness to local needs and context

- Services shaped and driven by the local Indigenous community
- Holistic, integrated approaches to meeting complex needs
- A focus on cultural affirmation and healing
- Service responses and ways of working with communities are culturally appropriate
- Recognition of gender related issues as part of cultural sensitivity
- Supporting capacity and sustainability through:
 - a strengths based approach, and
 - building the skills of individuals, families and communities.
- Effective coordination and inter-sectoral collaboration
- Recruitment and development of an appropriate and skilled workforce
- Ongoing review, evaluation and dissemination of results, using culturally appropriate processes.

These immediately show the applicability of the general principles of good practice in rural service provision to services for Indigenous people. However experience on the ground and the literature suggests there are other important principles that need to be observed. These stem from a history of oppression, the need to understand and take account of culture, the importance of Indigenous people having ownership and responsibility in the process and the fact that relationship services that work for non-Indigenous people may not fit in the family and cultural context of Indigenous communities.

Working with Indigenous communities requires a different paradigm that allows for a holistic and integrated response at the individual, family, community and societal levels. To generate effective and sustainable change attention must be focused in each of these four spheres. Directing interventions to individuals and families will have limited chance of success without tending to core concerns and capacity at the community level. Community change will be hard to achieve without addressing wider societal issues such as dispossession, inequalities in resources and opportunity and the need for reconciliation.

Historically, government strategies, with good intentions, have provided services and programs to individuals and localities (e.g. health clinics, suicide prevention, welfare support, drug and alcohol interventions) and have overlooked some of the foundational issues – economic viability of communities, the importance of cultural and family connection and reconciliation.

There have been gaps in the response at all levels. Perhaps the biggest failure of many programs has been a lack of understanding and knowledge of Indigenous family structure. Individuals are located in communities that have strong family and kinship bonds and connections that seem complex to non-Indigenous people. Pervading all this is a deep lack of trust generated from a history, since white settlement.

The Australian Government is currently implementing a raft of reforms in Indigenous affairs, including the way services are provided to Indigenous people and communities. It is early days and these reforms are not yet well understood at the

community level. Further development of FRSP needs to give priority to improving access to FRSP-type services by Indigenous people and to promoting the models of service and ways of engaging Indigenous communities that work. There is experience to draw on in other health and human service programs and service providers and we should avoid reinventing the wheel. The directions taken at a program and service level need to be shaped by Indigenous people and service providers that already have experience in this area.

6 The need for dynamism in rural service models

To be effective, rural service providers need to operate along a range of continuums and balance different elements in a continually changing environment.

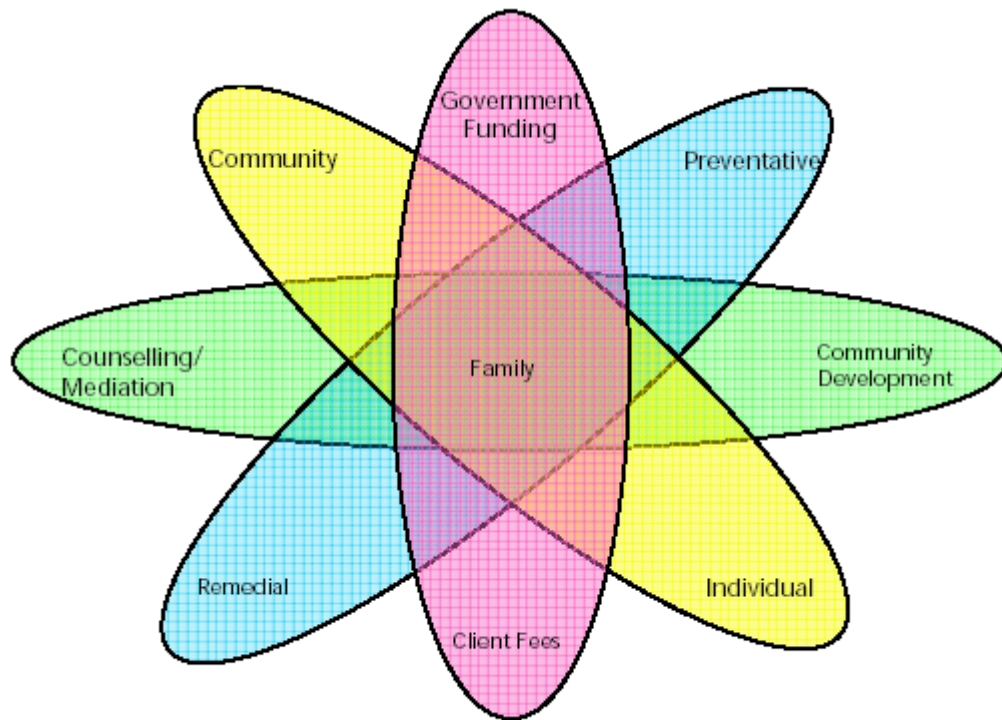
The model on the following page conceptualises the different service elements in terms of:

- what the services do (from prevention to remedial work)
- who they work with (individuals, families and communities)
- how they work (from counselling and individual interventions through to groupwork and community development)
- who pays (government or client).

The good practice principles included in this paper establish the importance of flexibility, relevance and responsiveness. The model attempts to show the importance of operating within a fluid and adaptive service paradigm. It also demonstrates that individual therapies can and should coexist with community development approaches and that FRSP services can be across the continuum from prevention, early intervention, crisis responses and remedial support. At the centre of the model are families and the social capital that hold rural communities together.

Most of the case studies that informed the thinking on good practice principles also demonstrate that what is most needed in rural communities is a strong, broad-based generalist service, with infrastructure, expertise and strong links to the community that allow it to support extension into more specialist services over time. The practice of funding a specific service type or target group, without having first established generalist services, means that in the face of no other option, practitioners are continually required to extend their parameters without adequate resources. Consequently, specialist services very often turn into generalist ones as they find ways to accommodate the community need.

Figure 1: Dynamic model for rural services¹⁴



¹⁴ Taken from original CWA report, *Regional, rural and remote service delivery*, March 2005

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* Good practice case studies provided to CWA that could be considered in future resource development.