

**Joint Submission to the Special Commission of Inquiry
into Child Protection Services in NSW
regarding the aims of the
Community Services Grants Program**

May 2008

**Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS)
Local Community Services Association (LCSA)
NSW Family Services Inc (FamS)
Youth Action and Policy Association NSW (YAPA)
Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF)
Local Government and Shires Association (LG&SA)
Illawarra Forum**



1. About this submission

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Council of Social Service of NSW, the Local Community Services Association, NSW Family Services Inc, the Youth Action and Policy Association NSW, and the Western Sydney Community Forum.

Together these bodies represent non-government organisations that receive the majority of funding from the Department of Community Services under the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP).

This submission arises from the Early Intervention Forum conducted by the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales held on 16 May 2008. The forum ran out of time before consideration of the final question:

“What should be the aims of the Community Services Grants Program?”

The Commissioner indicated that those wishing to respond to this question could do so in writing.

2. The aim of the Community Service Grants Program

The current aim of the CSGP is *“to assist people in NSW to live in a just society and to participate in strong communities that cope effectively with change and promote safety, welfare and wellbeing”*.

The CSGP includes funding for individual and family support services, community development services, neighbourhood and community centres, youth development and support services and some child protection services, as well as services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Through the most recent CSGP Review, the aim of the Program was refined to the headline result:

Disadvantaged children, young people and families and disadvantaged communities are safe and resilient.

This proposed headline result was subject to considerable debate within the sector and was subsequently accepted by the sector peak bodies which meet with DoCS as the CSGP Roundtable.

In the context of child protection, the CSGP develops protective communities through universal community based services and targeted early intervention services.

There is broad support and a strong evidence base for such an approach:

- In their submission on Early Intervention and Prevention, DoCS highlighted the continental European approach to child protection and family support with the emphasis and resources placed in prevention and early intervention (p.6). Prevention is provided in universal services, e.g. parenting skills, playgroups, and social support systems.
- The DoCS submission stated that:

“We also know that stronger and well connected communities can be a significant protective factor in relation to child abuse and neglect. Social connectedness assists in building individual and family resilience, as well as a general sense of belonging.” (p.10).
- The guide *Protecting Children is Everyone’s Business* by the Paediatrics and Child Health Division of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians Health Policy Unit pointed to the social/structural factors associated with child abuse and the importance of children’s social needs alongside physical, emotional and behavioural needs.
- The NAPCAN report *Towards a Better Future for Children* emphasised an ecological perspective which recognises the role of community, community building and development in the initial prevention stage of child protection:
 - “the safety and well being of children is a function of a complex range of interacting individual, family, community and societal factors” (p5),
 - “The context and impact of community has been well documented in relation to child development” (p6),
 - “Child abuse and neglect may be as much a function of community and social organisation and accompanying community resources, social control and solidarity, as it is a lack of adequate parenting and family resources” (p.6).
- Vinson and Baldry (1999) also reported that in areas with high rates of child abuse, residents were significantly more likely to entertain negative perceptions of their neighbourhood. In particular they:
 - were less likely to feel they belonged to their neighbourhood,
 - did not value friendships and associations with other people in their neighbourhood, and
 - wanted to move out of the neighbourhood, believing that it was a poor place to bring up children, partly because of the ‘dangerous’ environment and ‘unacceptable’ lifestyles of residents.
- A speech by the Hon. Candy Broad MLC, then Victorian Minister for Local Government and Minister for Housing, on 9 September 2003 demonstrated the Victorian Government’s commitment to building stronger communities and its understanding of the importance of this in the context of issues such as child protection. Similarly, the NSW Government has indicated its commitment to

community building and community capacity building through the State Plan: A New Direction for NSW.

However, the Victorian Government's commitment has been demonstrated by funding initiatives through its Department for Victorian Communities, such as the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program, while the vital community building role of CSGP funded services has been neglected by the NSW Government for the past 20 years. New South Wales lags behind other states in Australia in commitment of funding to community capacity building and community development.

If a new approach is to reflect the importance of prevention and early intervention it is important that the community capacity building role of the CSGP is not ignored or neglected.

3. The CSGP is effective and efficient in delivering prevention and early intervention services

CSGP funded services are locally based and work to involve their communities in identifying local issues and in developing local solutions. The role of CSGP funded services is important in delivering a broad range of prevention and early intervention services that overcome disadvantage in local communities. However this role is often unrecognised and undervalued.

For example, family support services funded under the CSGP provide similar services to a similar client group as the Brighter Futures program and are the main providers of many of these services to vulnerable families in most communities in NSW.

- In 2007 a census of family support services conducted by NSW Family Services Inc found that 73% of children from families receiving services were aged 0-8 years.
- Both programs address the same vulnerabilities including lack of family support, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse and mental health problems.
- Family support services funded through CSGP operate on a much lower budget than the Brighter Futures Program. For example, in 2006/07 total CSGP funding for family support services was \$25 million for around 190 funded projects and the Better Futures budget was \$48 million (*Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protections Services in NSW Early Intervention Facts Sheet 16 May 2008, pp7&11*)
- DoCS has acknowledged that there has been no growth funding to expand the capacity of the program for nearly two decades, and the capacity of CSGP funded projects to deliver services to the target group has been reduced over time. Accordingly, further investment in these services, through an overall increase in CSGP funding, would substantially enhance the capacity of the service system to meet the needs of substantially more vulnerable children and families.

Neighbourhood and community centres, youth support/development services and community development services funded from the CSGP provide a key element in the broader protection of children agenda through:

- building relationships between people,
- offering ways that isolated people can 'belong' within a community,
- having a practice based on participation and community and self-direction,
- providing opportunities for intergenerational connections, and
- delivering programs that increase the well-being of young people and children.

Essentially they provide services that:

- Reduce risk
- Prevent crises
- Support clients and communities.

For the coordination of the service system to be effective, the actual system needs to include and strengthen its community building sites / social infrastructure so that agencies, in particular neighbourhood and community centres, are able to provide:

- soft entry points into the service system,
- social support opportunities to allow families to gain self-esteem, connections with their community, intergenerational relationships and a sense of belonging to a group/community,
- ability for communities to develop informal as well as formal support structures for people/families experiencing social exclusion,
- ongoing, long-term supports and relationships.

These services have the ability to provide whole of community / whole of family / whole of person approaches. They provide the 'support' level needed in the service system. They play a crucial role in providing preventative as well as early intervention services that address the social exclusion factors associated with families at risk.

4. Additional funding tends towards crisis interventions

Despite the recognition of the importance of prevention, the pressure at the statutory child protection intervention end of the spectrum pushes every focus towards this end so the focus is on crisis intervention or, at best, early intervention rather than prevention. The early intervention focus, as evident in Brighter Futures, is not always that early and creeps towards crisis interventions. The CSGP should not lose its community capacity building role under pressure from the current needs of the child protection end of the spectrum. To do so is to ensure that child protection intervention needs will continue to rise in a fresh generation.

5. Measuring the value of the CSGP

Historically, DoCS has struggled to argue the value of CSGP services to government central agencies because of:

- the broad range of services offered; and
- inadequate analysis of outcomes reported by CSGP services.

The result has been that there has not been an enhancement to the program despite five reviews over the past 20 years.

The latest review has run over two years and has produced:

- agreed headline result “Disadvantaged children, young people and families and disadvantaged communities are safe and resilient”,
- reform process to develop service alignment with this result,
- proposals to fund “maintenance of effort” and to strengthen the program.

Alongside the review process and feeding into it, the sector has, with the encouragement and support of DoCS, engaged the results based accountability process (RBA) to demonstrate service contribution to program results. This work, which has been carried by two pilot projects, will be disseminated across the sector in the next 18 months, providing a more rigorous and accurate reporting mechanism to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the program.

6. Conclusion

The review process should be supported and allowed to develop along the lines of the original submission prepared for NSW Treasury by DoCS in consultation with and supported by CSGP peaks. Additional funding to the CSGP is required so that it can maintain services to meet current demand and realign services to meet the new program vision.

The CSGP, while retaining a broad focus on communities, should be recognised as a key way to support communities and to provide “soft” entry points for children, young people and families seeking support.

CSGP services should not be pushed further into the “narrow end” of the child protection system, given the importance of prevention and the already limited amount of resources focused in local communities toward this end.

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