Submission to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory 2010

Relationships Australia Northern Territory is grateful for the opportunity to submit information to the inquiry. We are an organization made up of a range of practitioners some of whom have extensive backgrounds and experience in the field of child protection and the OOHC system, counselling with parents and children and family support initiatives across a broad range of areas. We are the auspicing agency for the Family Relationship Centre.

Our staff includes qualified psychologists, social workers, counsellors and lawyers. While it is the case that the practice wisdom and experience of our staff might inform the inquiry across all the key terms of reference you outline, it is our intention to limit our submission to feedback based on our organization’s collective experiences in the context of the programs we deliver.

The areas we would like to highlight include;

OUR REPORTING EXPERIENCE

We are able to identify most of our anecdotal experience in the notifying or reporting of child concerns to NTFC as unsatisfactory.

Our concerns are twofold;

1) The difficulty staff has experienced in concerns reaching what must be a “threshold” assessment by the person managing the intake. At times the notifier has been a practitioner with a history of child protection work, has a good understanding of the systems in place and still is unable to understand the assessment and screening outcome when it has been assessed as not meeting the threshold.

2) The unavailability of a local intake system. Being able to discuss ongoing concerns around the intake process face to face would be useful. On some occasions there has been a sense that the Darwin based system is not familiar with our geographical remoteness and there is a sense of disconnectedness as opposed to partnering us in our work.
Requests for feedback in relation to the screening process are also often promised, but generally not forthcoming over time.

**FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES**

In particular we would like to highlight our experience where families we are working with, have previously been involved with NTFC. For example we have received referrals for family mediation between grandparents and parents where NTFC have initially funded the placement of the child with extended family (family way placements) in order to keep a child safe and out of the formal OOHC system; only to withdraw prematurely placing the arrangement at risk.

We understand the need to prioritize resources in a child protection system and appreciate those high risk situations for children will frequently result in “the lions share” of resource distribution. However the resulting imbalance in service provision and the lack of resources targeting the primary or even secondary preventative end has come at the cost of valuable family support programs.

We applaud initiatives like the differential response and the resulting targeted family support service at Congress in Alice Springs; it is programs of this nature that will go towards making a difference. It is important that the enquiry consider recommendations that ensure additional programs are funded across the Territory. These programs need an enhanced capacity to accept community referrals both in an urban and remote setting.
YOUTH DIVERSION EXPERIENCE

In Alice Springs we deliver the case management part of the NTPES Youth Diversion Scheme. (NTFC funds us to deliver this service) We regularly support between forty and sixty young people to complete their diversion programs each quarter. Not surprisingly there is an over representation of young people who have been in the past, or who are subject to Guardianship or Care Orders via NTFC interventions. Some of these young people have been in OOHC for many years.

Relationships Australia continues to advocate for a higher level of engagement with NTFC around the case management of these particular young people. In some instances NTFC are required to assume responsibility as the “parent or responsible adult” in the diversion agreements.

Regularly the Youth Team services at NTFC Alice Springs lack availability to be effectively supportive of these processes. Our staff at times is not able to identify NTFC case managers to consult with or invite to meetings. On a small number of occasions young people have been at risk of failing their diversion due to the lack of NTFC involvement. Having said this there are individual case managers at NTFC who are highly responsive and impressive in their level of engagement with young people.

We are hopeful of highlighting the specific needs of young people in care, involved in the criminal justice system and the potential lack of resources directed to this end. Relationships Australia would be interested in identifying strategies with NTFC that might support better outcomes for this at risk group of young people.

NETWORKING AND ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

Relationships Australia seeks to highlight a desire to work more closely with NTFC in the context of community networks and stakeholder groups. Relationships Australia auspices the Family Pathways Network in Alice Springs.
This Network is made up of over thirty service providers and more than eighty individual practitioners.

The Network aims to promote collaboration amongst services working with families who have separated. Ideally NTFC would have an interest in participating as an active player in this Network; however over the past six years identifying key NTFC stakeholders has been difficult.

The Network is an example of a strategic opportunity to work with a large range of organizations who deal with vulnerable national initiative and other States report families. Family Pathways Networks are a effective engagement with the equivalent
child protection authorities.

IN RELATION TO THE FUNCTIONING OF THE SYSTEM

In the experience of Relationships Australia staff, we are aware that the NTFC workers appear to be significantly overloaded in their workloads. An example reported by our staff exists where a client is receiving intensive support but is unable to leave a violent relationship for cultural reasons.

A counsellor was asked by a separated parent to telephone NTFC and report neglect occurring while the child was with the other parent where reportedly young children were left alone in dirty nappies with a lack of adequate food.

BELIEF IN THE COMMUNITY

Counsellors report that there is a belief in communities, both urban and remote that third party information about childhood abuse and neglect is not reliable enough to report, and therefore no action is taken in relation to it. For example, a school was reluctant to make a report about suspected neglect for fear that the father would remove all of his children from the school.

Counsellors also report that there is a view that neglect of children is regarded by NTFC workers as less serious or concerning than sexual or physical abuse. Parents are reportedly saying "why bother ringing NTFC". A remote clinic nurse intended to report a baby with continual illness and infected scabies but for whatever reason did not report this.

Further a remote family was reported and investigated but the follow up only occurs fortnightly, and the perpetrator is still living in the house with the children.

When reports are made against the wishes of victims or family members, this affects the rapport professionals have with clients and can eliminate the possibility of an ongoing therapeutic relationship between the professional and the client.

A counsellor gives the example of a father who is making it difficult for the counsellor to continue to provide effective therapeutic support due to his continuing non-compliant behaviour and fear of having further reports made against him.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT AGENCIES SUCH AS RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA

Our experience is that this relationship is improving. It is experienced by some Relationships Australia staff as respectful and good. Warm referral systems between agencies seem to work well.
INFORMATION SHARING

Information sharing as to past history of involvement by NTFC workers would assist Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners to gain a clear understanding of the existence of Orders and informal placement arrangements so as to ensure service is appropriate in the circumstances.

Development of a referral protocol might be considered with the input of NTFC workers and Relationships Australia staff to enhance the capacity of both agencies to support families in the midst of family breakdown.

When a practitioner reports suspected or alleged child abuse or neglect to NTFC in the course of their duties, the practitioner would be assisted by notification as to the outcome of the investigation in a timely manner. This information may assist in ensuring the safety of staff members who may make alternate arrangements (such as a phone appointment) in planning client visits to the agency.

Where a Domestic Violence Order naming children is current, information sharing between NTFC and NGO’s can ensure appropriate arrangements are made to protect clients and staff. We would suggest that this should occur routinely, within established privacy principles.

PARENTING PLANS

Where a Parenting Plan has been agreed by parents, the information contained may be of assistance to the FACS worker. Information sharing arrangements could assist in the workers having access to this information in a timely way.

CONTACT OFFICER

The appointment of a Contact Officer for inquiries by agencies and practitioners as to the status of matters in the NTFC system may assist. In this way a consent form could be developed and provided for the exchange of information between NTFC and NGO’s such as Relationships Australia. This person would be invited to regular meetings with personnel from Relationships Australia to ensure the smooth exchange of information and ideas between agencies.

FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS

Consideration might be given to a formal counselling partnership arrangement between Relationships Australia and Families and Children’s Services to support children experiencing loss, grief and trauma around family separation and breakdown.
DIVERSION OF NON HIGH-RISK FAMILIES TO COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

It is suggested that consideration be given to diverting (as occurs in other States) non high risk families to community based services such as Relationships Australia. Such services have significant expertise in working with vulnerable children and families and can assist in linking these families to a range of supports in the community.

We thank the Board for the opportunity to put forward our submission.