

Dr Jenny Higgins (National Child Protection Clearinghouse*) and Robyn Parker (AFRC) visited Family Life Chief Executive Officer Jo Cavanagh and members of her team, Judy Latta (Community Relations Manager) and Alison Normanton (Family Services Coordinator) to talk about the agency and the services they provide. This article presents a summary of their conversation.

About Family Life

Family Life was established in 1970 to provide services to families primarily in the southern suburbs of Melbourne. The agency's catchment area includes around 1,200 low-income households that may be under stress and at risk of family breakdown. It is a community owned and managed Family and Youth Service agency directing its services towards individuals in the context of their family and the community, and to families within the context of the community.

The agency takes a whole-of-community approach and its work is grounded in the core values of respect, empowerment, inclusion, and community. Rather than working from a program model per se, the agency seeks to build a culture and philosophy of support. The architect of one of their core programs, the Creating Capable Communities© (CCC) Program, turned to Indigenous understandings of culture and kinship relationships because, with a diverse range of cultures represented in the community, ... "we needed to do things differently". Programs are offered to the broader community as well as to those with specific needs, drawing on the connections and compassion of members of the wider community and a pool of 250 volunteers. Residents and volunteers work closely with the 50 agency staff to ensure programs and services are offered that are achievable as well as desirable, and are responsive to the changing needs of the individuals and families they serve.

Creating Capable Communities

The Creating Capable Communities (CCC) Program embodies the vision and values of the Family Life agency—to use a holistic and integrated approach to building the resourcefulness and capacities of the residents to create a safe, healthy and supportive community. The CCC Program was designed as a consequence of a number of tragic deaths on one of the housing estates in the area in 1998. Family Life workers were involved in the ensuing debriefing of children in the locale and through this work they learned that few of the families with which they came into contact knew of the agency and their services, and that the children's environment was perceived as unsafe and threatening. A process of consultation followed in which Family Life staff learned from residents and volunteers already working in the neighbourhood the sorts of things they needed to help them to not only cope with crises but to improve their own and their children's wellbeing in more proactive ways.

Working with the parents, the Family Life team initially developed the Creating Capable Kids Program, a strengths-based parenting program. Over time, the accumulated learning and experiences of the Family Life staff and the volunteers and residents involved in the services and programs provided by Family Life grew into the Creating Capable Communities Program. CCC received funding from the Commonwealth Government in 2001 for an initial three years and then—supported by many submissions from residents—secured subsequent funding for another two years. While targeted programs are developed within the CCC framework to address the needs of specific members of the community, and other programs are aimed at the community in general, all programs arise in response to needs identified by residents who then work with the Family Life staff and volunteers to enact a suitable and effective response. The participation of local organisations such as the Rotary Club, library, local businesses, and members of the local police force in these activities helps to foster positive relationships across all levels of the community.

Building on the success of the CCC program in engaging residents in community programs and activities, Family Life has recently developed a Creating Capable Leaders program through which residents are trained to become volunteers and leaders in their neighbourhood. Some residents have enrolled in TAFE courses, and programs such as YouthWorx and PeopleWorx assist residents in securing training and employment. A Breakfast Club, a Sing & Grow program, the After School program, and Community BBQ days all contribute to fostering a sense of connectedness among adults and children in the neighbourhood. The Men's Outreach Program focuses on supporting, celebrating, and engaging men in their role as fathers through less traditional methods, such as arranging sporting events for dads and their children.

One of the more targeted programs, Community Bubs, is a research-based, intensive program of support for vulnerable families, aiming to keep children in the care of their families and prevent the need for child protection involvement. The 12-month program works on developing parenting skills as well as building relationships between the family and their neighbours and community so that the family becomes more self-sufficient and less reliant on the service providers. An evaluation of the Community Bubs program by Monash University has found it to be highly successful in terms of families meeting their goals and objectives. (Check the Family Life website www.familylife.com.au for details regarding the release of the Monash University evaluation report.)

The success of the CCC program is reflected in a number of ways. The CCC framework functions such that residents are gradually trained to take on more of the responsibility for running activities and programs, while Family Life staff move towards a more facilitative role, becoming a resource for residents to call on as needed. Residents now feel sufficiently empowered to contact staff of the local Council and the Office of Housing directly, rather than having a Family Life staff member make the call. They have taken over the running of some of the programs, including the After School and Breakfast Clubs, and the Coffee and Chat Group. As problems arise, the residents work together to find ways to resolve them and call on Family Life staff for assistance only when they are needed. The CCC program has created a pathway for residents, facilitating their progression from being a client of the agency to a participant in the program(s), through volunteer, student and, ultimately, employee. As their neighbourhood network expands, residents are more likely to turn to each other for help in a crisis. In 2005, for the first time in 15 years, there were no police callouts to one of the housing estates over a two-month period. Involvement in community activities by members of different cultures is increasing, with some members becoming advocates for their culture.

Final word

The guiding principle underlying Family Life activities is one of sustainable change. As Family Life Chief Executive Officer, Jo Cavanagh says, "It's not just about going in and fixing people. It's about a theory of change, a legacy of sustainability, and self-sufficiency at the end of that...because people can do things for themselves, and let us know when we're needed."

Contact details for Family Life

197 Bluff Road
Sandringham
Victoria, Australia 3191
Tel: +61 3 9598 2133
Fax: +61 3 9598 8820

Email: webinfo@familylife.com.au
Website: www.familylife.com.au

Further discussion of the Community Bubs program appears in the *National Child Protection Clearinghouse Newsletter*, 15(1), 2007. www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/newsletters/nl2007/summer.html

* The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is funded by the Australian Government's Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of the government's response to the problem of child abuse. The National Child Protection Clearinghouse, which has operated from the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995, collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection and associated violence.

Robyn Parker is a Senior Research Officer with the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.

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