

28 January 2021

The Hon Michael Sukkar MP  
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Housing

Submitted: online

Dear Minister

### **Budget 2021-2022 – public consultation – pre-Budget submissions**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2021-2022 Federal Budget.

### **The work of Relationships Australia**

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia provides a range of family services to Australian families, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others.

Relationships Australia has provided family relationships services for over 70 years. Our State and Territory organisations, along with our consortium partners, operate around one third of the 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) across the country. In addition, Relationships Australia Queensland operates the national Family Relationships Advice Line and the Telephone Dispute Resolution Service.

The core of our work is relationships – through our programs, we work with people to enhance not only family relationships, but also relationships with friends, colleagues, and across communities. Relationships Australia believes that violence, coercion, control and inequality are unacceptable.

We respect the rights of all people to live life fully within their families and communities with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships. These principles underpin our work.

Relationships Australia is committed to:

- Working in rural, regional and remote areas, recognising that there are fewer resources available to people in these areas, and that they live with pressures, complexities and uncertainties not experienced by those living in cities.
- Collaboration. We work collectively with local and peak body organisations to deliver a spectrum of prevention, early and tertiary intervention programs across generations and

with men, women, young people and children. We recognise that often a complex suite of supports (for example, family support programs, mental health services, gambling services, drug and alcohol services, and public housing) is needed by people affected by family violence and other complexities in relationships.

- Enriching family relationships, including providing support to parents, and encouraging good and respectful communication.
- Ensuring that social and financial disadvantage is not a barrier to accessing services.
- Contributing practice evidence and skills to research projects, to the development of public policy and to the provision of effective supports to families.

This submission draws upon:

- our lengthy experience in delivering diverse programs
- evidence-based programs and research, and
- our leadership and policy development experience.

The Commonwealth funds Relationships Australia to deliver a range of support services. These funds are administered by the Department of Social Services and the Attorney-General's Department, through the Family and Relationship Services and Family Law Services programs. The priorities identified by Relationships Australia in this submission relate to these programs.

### **The impacts of COVID on families**

The impacts of COVID-19 are, and will continue to be, felt across all sections of society; and the challenges for Australian families, individuals and the community more broadly have never been greater.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors, including for families affected by family and domestic violence. Relationships Australia recognises this, and the resulting need to ensure ongoing universal services as well as tailored and specialised services for those at risk.

In addition, and prior to COVID-19, Australia was experiencing a loneliness epidemic.<sup>1</sup> Commentators and service providers alike are rightly concerned about the risk of increased loneliness and social isolation, and the significant physical and mental health consequences associated, including a potential rise in suicidality among the Australian population. While it is vital that we continue as a society to adhere to physical distancing rules, we must also prioritise maintaining healthy social connection as a key to good mental and physical health.

Our relationships will be a crucial foundation from which society is able to withstand this challenging time, and importantly, to rebuild over the coming years.

In order to ensure support for healthy and safe relationships, it is essential that due attention be paid to the ongoing needs of individuals, families and communities more broadly. As we begin

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<sup>1</sup> See Relationships Australia's 2018 report *Is Australia Experiencing an Epidemic of Loneliness?* here: <https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/is-australia-experiencing-an-epidemic-of-loneliness>

to emerge from the initial phase of responses to COVID-19, healthy and safe relationships assist people to manage the uncertainty that continues to surround the pandemic, and focus on rebuilding.

For this to occur, secure and adequate funding must be maintained for the dedicated community service organisations that work tirelessly across the country. This requires an ongoing commitment from government to the programs that support community.

In light of this, we welcome and appreciate the Commonwealth's commitment, as part of the October 2020 Budget, to increase base funding of services affected by the Fair Work Commission's 2012 Equal Remuneration Order. This commitment, together with the recent announcement of a five-year extension to the majority of services funded under the Department of Social Services' Families and Children Activity, is more crucial than ever and places the sector in a strong position to continue to support Australia's most vulnerable.

### **Priority funding areas for Family Law**

Relationships Australia acknowledges the Commonwealth's ongoing focus on enhancing the family law system over the past year; noting, in particular:

- establishment of the Lighthouse Project with committed funding of \$13.5million over three years
- additional resourcing of the Family Court in response to COVID-19
- extensive work to prevent and respond to abuse of older people
- the Joint Select Inquiry into Australia's Family Law System, and
- the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence.

Notwithstanding these promising developments, we note, with some regret, the cessation in July 2020 of the Legally Assisted and Culturally Appropriate (LACA) FDR project pilot, which provided crucial services to clients of diverse backgrounds, who were affected by family violence. The project received positive feedback from clients and service providers but ceased at the end of the pilot period, resulting in a termination of services to clients and the loss of crucial staff and expertise. No evaluation report appears to have been made public, although the Crawford School of Public Policy was engaged to undertake the evaluation.<sup>2</sup> Relationships Australia sees clear benefits in having CALD-specific services that are rolled out on an ongoing basis, and recommends such services be funded nationally.

Consistent with the findings made by the Australian Law Reform Commission in its final report on the family law system, and ongoing expressions of concern about that system's fitness for purpose, Relationships Australia takes this opportunity to suggest the following funding priorities for the upcoming Federal Budget.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://read.crawford.anu.edu.au/research/impact/15579/providing-legally-assisted-culturally-appropriate-family-dispute-resolution>.

## **Children's Contact Services (administered through the Family Law Services Program)**

Children's Contact Services are critical facilities that, when well-designed and resourced, support healthy relationships between children and their parents. Properly-resourced, they can offer support in response to a crisis (eg by providing supervised contact opportunities in circumstances of high family conflict) and, as families stabilise, support parents to (re-)establish healthy relationships with their children (eg with education and referrals to appropriate support services). There is general agreement among providers and users that existing CCSs are desperately underfunded. This severe shortfall:

- causes unacceptable delays in accessing services, often to the point of preventing parents from spending time with their children, despite the courts having ordered that contact be facilitated – this is a source of deep pain and frustration and undermines the courts
- prevents Commonwealth-funded CCSs from realising their full potential as enablers of healthy parenting, and
- incentivises the use of unsupervised providers of uncertain quality and safety.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on CCS across the country. By its very nature, this service requires face-to-face contact with families and as such, service providers faced a reduction in appointments that could be offered due to cleaning requirements, physical distancing, etc. While families were, for the most part, understanding and patient in the face of the pandemic and the limitations it brought about, it is apparent that additional resourcing is essential to ensure future CCS has sufficient capacity to meet client need.

We vigorously urge the Commonwealth, as a matter of urgency, to fund these services to not only provide timely supervised contact, but also to offer parenting education and other support services, as needed. This would better support, over time, reductions in services to families as parenting capability grows. Properly funded CCSs would:

- proactively transition families from high to lower need and, ultimately, to self-management, and
- offer longer-term support for higher needs families with complex needs (something not addressed by current CCSs operating as standalone services).

Relationships Australia recognises that this would involve considerable expenditure. However, the current pattern of spending money on short-term crisis responses is unsustainable, and only guarantees an ongoing need for recurrent spend. It deprives society of the opportunities to reap the benefits of healthy families and to enjoy the downstream savings delivered by lower expenditure on health and intergenerational social welfare dependency.

## **ALRC recommendations 57-60 (inclusive)**

Relationships Australia looks forward to working with the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System. Pending the Committee's report in 2020, we consider that enhancements

are urgently needed to expand the functions of the Family Advocacy and Support Services and Family Relationships Centres, as recommended by the Australian Law Reform Commission.

### **Abuse of older people – funding for essential services**

Relationships Australia acknowledges that in recent years we have seen an increase in awareness and understanding of the scourge of elder abuse in our communities. The report by the ALRC, *Elder Abuse – A National Legal Response*,<sup>3</sup> was launched on 15 June 2017, and made 43 recommendations. The Commonwealth, with support from States and Territories, has embarked on a range of service pilots and other policy initiatives, such as a National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians and the launch of COMPASS, a comprehensive website providing accessible information to the public. We also have an ongoing Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, which has brought to light a range of other situations in which older members of our community are abused and exploited.

We know that elder abuse is a significant issue in our society. It is unacceptable.

Relationships Australia is therefore proud of its involvement in the Commonwealth's Elder Abuse Service Trials, funded by the Attorney-General's Department. These Service Trials have seen the establishment of pilot services across three service streams in various locations across the country. As the only provider under the "Case Management and Mediation" stream, Relationships Australia offers case management, counselling and mediation services through our offices in Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland and Canberra & Region.

Amplifying the voice of an older person in a volatile family requires a sophisticated and integrated response to engage all family members. Our experience confirms the value of a holistic model that is tailored to our clients' unique circumstances, including complex co-morbidities experienced by the older person, their carer/s and other family members. Such co-morbidities include past trauma, mental ill-health, a history of family and domestic violence and substance misuse.

In delivering these services, it has become evident that complexity and high level of need is common, and that effective responses require a combination of case coordination, mediation and counselling to reduce the risk and impact of elder abuse. Further, our experience suggests that healthy ongoing relationships are as important for the older person's safety and well-being as the immediate response to the circumstances leading to their abuse. Accordingly, effective resolution of these matters requires a focus on relationships, with a view to exploring and resetting relationship dynamics, and empowering individuals with the necessary skills.

The Elder Abuse Service Trials are currently funded to 30 June 2022 and are subject to an evaluation process. It is our view that, as a result of disruption in access arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be appropriate to extend the trial so that those in need can continue to access these vital services in a safe and private way. We do not feel that the trial has operated sufficiently, in light of the pandemic, to allow a robust collection of data and analysis to inform future policy.

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<sup>3</sup> ALRC Report 131, *Elder Abuse – A National Legal Response*.

We therefore urge the Commonwealth to dedicate a specific appropriation in the forward estimates, to take effect from 1 July 2022, to secure an extension of the pilot trial of these services.

We also urge the Commonwealth to consider an immediate expansion of these pilots to additional sites across the country. Our experience has revealed, unsurprisingly, that the need is as great in all states and territories and to delay the expansion of services is to deny vulnerable Australians at a time of great need.

### **Abuse of older people – data collection and analysis**

Relationships Australia notes that the Commonwealth has commissioned the Australian Institute of Family Studies to carry out a prevalence study into abuse of older people in the community. This will address a critical data gap and will be indispensable to the formulation of high quality service, law and policy responses. We would encourage Commonwealth to commission a further study to explicitly include abuse of older people in residential aged care facilities, and to ensure that the study includes the experiences of people with cognitive impairment. The vast majority of data that is currently held about prevalence of abuse of older people, both in Australia and internationally, has been collected using methodologies that explicitly *exclude* the experiences of people with cognitive impairment. The Office of the Public Advocate in Victoria has put forward a possible approach to undertaking an inclusive prevalence study.<sup>4</sup> A more comprehensive prevalence study would complement the work of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, as well as the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, and be of great value to the Commonwealth in its consideration of the Royal Commissions' findings and recommendations.

### **Concluding remarks**

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this pre-Budget submission. Should you require any clarification of any aspect of this submission, or would like further information on the services that Relationships Australia provides, please contact me or Dr Susan Cochrane, National Policy Manager, Relationships Australia, on (02) 6162 9301.

Yours sincerely,



Nick Tebbey  
National Executive Officer

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<sup>4</sup> Lois Bedson, *Are national elder abuse prevalence studies inclusive of the experiences of people with cognitive impairment? Findings and recommendations for future research*, Office of the Public Advocate, 2017.