

**2009**

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**ACT GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE  
STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON HEALTH AND DISABILITY  
REPORT 8**

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**THE EARLY INTERVENTION AND CARE  
OF VULNERABLE INFANTS**

**Presented by  
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Minister for Children and Young People**

*Tabled 26 Feb 2009*

## INTRODUCTION

The ACT Government welcomes the Standing Committee report into *The Early Intervention and Care of Vulnerable Infants*. The Report supports the ACT Government's commitment to the children of the ACT and the need to support parents in undertaking their care and responsibilities.

The ACT Government provides a response to each recommendation made in the Standing Committee report. The responses outline that much work is already underway and is complemented by the recommendations of the report. The ACT Government has supported, supported in principle or noted 17 of the 18 recommendations. The ACT Government has not supported one recommendation as it is of the view that to effect significant cultural change regarding domestic violence, broad based and sustained strategies are required, both nationally and locally, and that the current suite of strategies employed effectively supports this goal at the local level.

Service provision for children and families requires a flexible approach, responsive to individual needs. Services provided at universal, secondary and tertiary levels offer families opportunities to access services when they need them and in appropriate settings. Interventions and supports to children and their families need to occur as early as possible in the life of a problem and in the life of the child.

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Compelling evidence-based research on brain development has demonstrated that trauma before birth, in infancy and early childhood, including the experience of poor nutrition, violence, poverty and separation may seriously impede brain development. The most rapid and important period for physical brain development occurs up to the age of three years. Children's development is influenced by a number of factors including: pre-birth and birth experiences; health; cognition and disability status; the physical, social and emotional environment they live in; and the skills and well being of their parents or carers. The extent to which a child is able to develop optimally in the early years has a critical impact on their ability to thrive, learn and participate in future years.

A significant body of research has been also established that demonstrates the significant individual and community benefits to be gained from investment in the early years. These benefits include: greater social and economic participation; higher educational attainment; reduced rates of crime; and lower levels of child abuse and neglect. Studies further demonstrate the reduced costs to society through investment in early intervention in areas such as disability, health, out of home care, special educational provision, family breakdown, law and justice.

Findings such as these have motivated governments across Australia and internationally to build service systems that can better and earlier respond to the needs of children and families through the provision of both universal and targeted interventions. In this context, while support to parents is an essential component of

the provision of the effective care of children, the best interests of children must be the paramount consideration.

## ACT GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The ACT government is committed to children in the ACT having the best possible start in life, by ensuring that services and communities are inclusive of all children and families, especially those who are vulnerable or at risk.

Australian and overseas governments are responding to the present and growing demand for services to support vulnerable families by continuing to invest and strengthen early intervention and prevention approaches.

Under the recently released *The Canberra Plan: Towards our Second Century*, early intervention for children at risk and families is identified by Government as a priority issue for ongoing policy development and integrated service responses. This will include the formulation of the ACT Government's comprehensive approach to early childhood services that invest in the health, development, education and well-being of young children, recognising the effectiveness of early intervention programs that focus on young children and responsive support to their families.

In addition, the ACT Government, as part of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform agenda is progressing a number of initiatives which have a particular focus on the development and wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families.

The ACT Government commenced a process of reform of services to children in 2003-2004. Strategically, the development of the *ACT Children's Plan* and the *ACT Young People's Plan* provided a common policy framework and direction for service delivery and reflected the ACT Government's commitment to children and families.

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The *ACT Children's Plan* encompasses antenatal, infancy, the early school years and middle childhood and addresses both universal and targeted services provided to address the needs of specific groups for children between 0-12 years.

The review and implementation of recommendations of *The Territory's Children* report (2004) and the Murray Mackie review (2006), provided systemic and specific recommendations for improvement in services to promote children's safety and well being. These initiatives underpinned the further development of programs within and across Government and with the non-Government sector that focus on universal, secondary and tertiary interventions and supports to children and families designed to enhance the safety and well being of children within our community.

The range of initiatives has continued to expand and engage with services across the ACT. For example, the Child and Family Centres, are a flagship initiative arising from The Canberra Plan (2004-2008). The Centres provide an integrated one-stop shop model of service, delivering universal and targeted services to families and the community through purpose built Centres at Gungahlin and Tuggeranong. A third Child and Family Centre in West Belconnen is in the initial consultative stage of planning and when progressed, will strengthen the geographic coverage and range of options available across the ACT.

A range of services operate from the Child and Family Centres with a focus on early intervention and prevention including:

- Maternal and Child Health (MACH) services and other allied health services providing support to children and their families.
- A community based child protection worker located at each Centre works with families, connecting families with prevention and early intervention services and other support services.
- Four universal Play Groups (paint and Play) run from local parks provide a basis where families may access information, advice and services, breaking down social isolation and building stronger community connections. These programs are delivered in partnership with community and government agencies including child care students from the CIT, Children's Policy and Regulation Unit, Kids At Play Bus, the mobile library service, Regional Community Services, Uniting Care, ACT Health and a number of small businesses in the local areas. Targeted playgroups, for families with complex issues (e.g. a parent with a diagnosed mental illness) are also available to families.
- The Smith Family's Learning for Life program offers financial assistance to families for the duration of their children's school life, in partnership with the Child and Family Centres.
- The Integrated Family Support Project, a joint initiative of the ACT Government, the Commonwealth and community family support agencies, assists vulnerable families with children aged 0-8, by providing a coordinated and integrated case management response which supports and prevents, where possible, the involvement of the statutory child protection system. This program includes a wide variety of agencies such as the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, ACT Health, Department of Education and Training, Belconnen Community Service, Woden Community Service, Barnardos, Communities@Work, Marymead, Relationships Australia and Parentline.
- The YWCA Young Parents Group provides young parents in the Tuggeranong region with a semi-structured parent group, to increase their social network and supports and share their positive parenting experiences. The first group of parents have continued to meet for almost two years and have recently decided they no longer need the formal support of services, although they continue to support each other. The Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre will be seeking to establish a new group in the near future.
- The Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre and the Canberra Region Attachment Network (CRAN) facilitated the delivery of training in the Parent and Infant Relationship Support Group (PAIRS) to practitioners in the ACT who were interested in delivering this program. PAIRS provides families in the ACT with an effective way to improve parent/infant interaction and optimise infant development. This program is run in partnership with ACT Health, Marymead, the community child protection worker and the Tuggeranong Child and Family Centre.
- The Canberra Hospital Midwifery Program provides outreach services from Child and Family Centres, providing antenatal clinics and connecting parents to other services based at the Centres.

- ParentLink is community education prevention program that provides parenting information within the ACT. Families and service providers are able to access the Parent tip Sheets and other publications through the website and at over 160 locations across the ACT including schools, GPs, hospitals, child care centres and shop fronts.
- The Triple P Positive Parenting Program targets parents who are identifying difficulties in managing their children's behaviour. Additional Child and Family Centre workers, Schools as Communities workers and school counselors deliver this evidence based program, enabling the expansion of the program across Centers and school sites in the ACT.
- The Children's Behavioural and Development Clinic and the Children's Emotional Wellbeing Clinic promote early help-seeking behaviours for parents and provides professionals in the area with additional skills.
- The Venus Program, an initiative of Fernwood Women's Health Clubs is a program for women who have experienced challenging life circumstances. The program seeks to empower women to use new opportunities and exchange information to improve their lifestyle, health and wellbeing.
- Relationships Australia, in partnership with the Centres, provide outreach access to relationship counseling for families with young children, enabling families to enhance their capacities to jointly parent their children.
- The Parents as Teachers program provides information and hands on support to assist parents understand their child's developmental needs and learn positive parent-child interactions through a home visiting that may be provided for up to three years.

Additionally, a range of targeted and specific services have been developed across the ACT to meet the needs of specific children and families. Major initiatives include:

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- *The Integrated Multi-Agencies for Parents and Children Together (IMPACT)* program provides a cross-agency system response to pregnant women and their families with children up to 2 years of age who are clients of Mental Health ACT and/or who are receiving opioid replacement therapy and whose complex needs require the need for a multi service response. This is an ACT Health led initiative undertaken in partnership with the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, General Practice and Community Pharmacy.
  - The *Parenting Enhancement Program (PEPS)* provides early intervention, support and health promotion for families who need individualised support to achieve good health outcomes for infants during the first 12 months of life.
  - The Blue Star Clinic, at The Canberra Hospital, is an outpatient Clinic that works with the IMPACT and the Perinatal programs providing ongoing support for babies up to 12 months after discharge from hospital after delivery to parents where drug misuse occurred during pregnancy.
  - The COPMI program (Children of Parents with a Mental Illness) supports children and young people who have a parent affected by a mental illness, in conjunction with Carers ACT- Young Carers, Cyclops, Litmus, Student Counselors, Marymead, Horizons and the Child and Family Centres.
  - The Canberra College Association in partnership with CYCLOPS ACT, ACT Health and community agencies provides an educational support program for

young carers, pregnant and parenting students in the ACT and surrounding districts.

- Five Koori preschools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 3-5 years, focusing on the development of literacy and numeracy skills and the children's capacity to engage with school, have been established by the Department of Education and Training. The programs provide a safe culturally inclusive environment for Indigenous children. Children under three years can attend the Koori preschool program with a parent or adult carer. The program is supported by Home Liaison Officers located at each site who provide cultural support to children and liaise with families and community members. The Officers also visit local preschool settings and provide cultural advice and support to local preschool teaching staff. Children attending a Koori Preschool may concurrently apply for early entry to a local preschool. Attendance at both preschools enables Indigenous children to access up to 21 hours preschool per week.
- The Department of Education and Training offers early entry placements to preschool for children who are non-English speakers and have few opportunities to learn English and for children who are hearing or vision impaired.
- The Support at Preschool Program established by the Department of Education and Training offers support and access to a local preschool program to children who have a physical disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, chronic medical conditions, challenging behaviours, developmental delay, intellectual disability, communication and social awareness delay.
- U-Turn Youth Services provides a young parents group on a weekly basis, emergency relief and case management support to young parents.
- Karinya House for Mothers and Babies provides a supported accommodation and parenting service for pregnant young women and young women with infants.
- Access to emergency and casual child care placements primarily for vulnerable children and their families, support families at times of crisis. In future, access to child care at the four new Early Childhood Schools will be available for vulnerable children.
- Barnardos, in partnership with ACT Health, operates the Circles of Support Program, a network of volunteers who work together to provide support to young parents, targeting young parents with alcohol and drug issues.
- The Department of Education and Training's Early Intervention Program provides a developmentally appropriate, play based program to support children aged 2-6 years who are at risk of a developmental delay or disability. The Program offers 37 groups each week at sites across the ACT and works in conjunction with parents and carers.
- Education Home Support is offered by the Department of Education and Training for children from birth with a sensory impairment.
- Universal first home visits are made by Maternal and Child Health nurses to parents following the birth of their child. Additional support from Maternal and Child Health continues in clinical settings. Should more intensive support be required, this is provided within the Parenting Enhancement Program.
- An integrated service delivery model is provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families across health, education and family support services

involving the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, ACT Health and the Department of Education and Training.

- The ACT Government, through the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, funds community-based Indigenous family support services through the Gugan Gulwan Family Support Worker and the Jumbby Mulla Program in North Canberra.
- The Growing Healthy Families project to support Indigenous families supported by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Development Worker operates from the Gungahlin Child and Family Centre and involves the Ngunnawal and Kingsford Smith Koori preschools.
- The Schools as Communities program operates at targeted primary schools and provides early intervention support for vulnerable children and families and links families with community support services.
- The ACT Government through the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services continues to provide funding in excess of \$2.7 million for 23 family support programs provided by the non-government sector. These services include One Parent Family Support Service; Refugee and Migrant children, young people and families who have experienced war trauma, Human Rights violations and/or Torture; Family Skills for Men and the Grandparents Support Network.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### **Legislative changes**

The ACT is the first jurisdiction in Australia to review child welfare legislation in the context of a Human Rights Act. The new *Children and Young People Act 2008* has also introduced provisions that enable early intervention and prevention of harm to children though:

- pre-natal reporting, to provide early and voluntary support and assistance to mothers, parents and families;
- a differential response to children at risk and a response early in the life of the child or in the life of the problem;
- drug testing provisions and stronger stability pathways for children in care, as a means to improve the long term social, emotional and learning outcomes of children; and
- regard to the protection and promotion of the cultural and spiritual needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people through cultural care planning and connections to family and community.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Attached are the specific ACT Government responses to the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Health and Disability Report – *The Early Intervention and Care of Vulnerable Infants*.

## **Standing Committee on Health and Disability - Report 8**

### **The Early Intervention and Care of Vulnerable Infants**

#### **ACT Government Response to Recommendations**

##### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the promotion of Care and Protection Services through a public education campaign that aims to improve its status, by explaining the service and educating the community about the appropriate use of the service.

##### **NOTED**

##### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government is of the view that the current education strategies promoting Care and Protection Services provided through regular training and education to Government, non-government agencies, professionals working with children and families and the community achieves this outcome. In addition there are other strategies including the provision of fact sheets, membership and information exchange through committees and information available on the website to further inform the sector and the community.

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At an individual level, the relationship between Care and Protection Services with a family will be determined by the nature of their engagement and needs and unlikely to be significantly impacted by a public education campaign. The engagement process relies on the professional skills of workers and the capacities of parents to work with the service to achieve outcomes that ensure the safety and care of their children.

Training provided by the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services aims to clarify and promote the role and practices of Care and Protection Services. For example, it is compulsory for all new ACT Health staff to attend orientation where their responsibilities under the *Children and Young People Act 2008* are addressed. All continuing ACT Health staff must also complete level 1, 2 or 3 of child protection training depending on their level of direct contact with children and families. This training includes information relating to the Care and Protection Services.

In addition, the Child Protection Advisory Committee, a cross agency group including representatives from the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) and the Australian Federal Police also plays an important role in overseeing the coordination, implementation and evaluation of the ACT Health Child Protection Education & Training Program. This is a joint training program that provides child protection education to ACT Health and DHCS staff as well as non-government organizations funded by these agencies.



Additional training has been provided to the community and the sector resulting from the implementation of the new *Children and Young People Act 2008*. Care and Protection Services are also developing publications for children, families and agencies involved with Care and Protection Services to clarify and inform on current policies, practices and processes. Further, ongoing and intensive training and supervision of staff promotes and develops the engagement skills required to work and engage with families.

Additional opportunities exist for information exchange through Regional Forums with government and non-government agencies, a range of meetings with the Out of Home Care sector, the ongoing work undertaken by Care and Protection Services with the Department of Education and Training School Principals and the IMPACT program for vulnerable families, work led by ACT Health in conjunction with Care and Protection Services.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop a targeted antenatal education program for high-risk expectant mothers in consultation with Child and Family Centres and relevant community organisations, in particular Women's Information and Resources on Drugs of Dependency (WIREDDD), Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) and Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM).

## **SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

### **Government Response:**

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The ACT Government has, through the Integrated Multi-agencies for Parents and Children Together (IMPACT) Program conducted by ACT Health, is providing a coordinated service to high risk mothers where the mother and/or their partner are in the opiate replacement program or are clients of Mental Health ACT. This program is a partnership between ACT Health, the OCYFS, the ACT Division of General Practice and community pharmacy.

This program is dependant on the voluntary consent of the woman to participate and engage with supports of her choice. In addition, safe sleeping programs promoted through ACT Health and Sids and Kids provide targeted ante-natal and postnatal information to all parents and to those in high risk categories. The ACT Government is also working with WIREDDD in relation to high risk expectant mothers and supporting joint clients. A liaison position working with the IMPACT program facilitates regular and ongoing interactions.

In addition, the ACT Government, through the Substance Using Pregnancy Support (SUPS) program provides one-to-one antenatal education to high risk mothers. These mothers often will not access mainstream antenatal education. A Step Ahead Program which targets very young mothers is also conducted from the Junction Youth Health Centre.

Currently, Child and Family Centres are working in cooperation with ACT Health to provide supports to expectant mothers including high risk expectant mothers.

Midwives attend Child and Family Centres regularly attend and will co-jointly facilitate an educational program for first time parents, preparing them for the changes when becoming a parent and advising and engaging with them for suitable supports.

Child and Family Centres, through the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, assist parents, through centre based and outreach services, to understand their child's early learning (0-3 years) needs and link them with Maternal and Child Health Services and other targeted and universal services offering support, referrals and advice.

The Child and Family Centre, through the Parents and Infant Relationships Support Group (PAIRS) program, support families for whom the experience of pregnancy, birth and parenting has been more difficult than expected. This 10 week program aims to increase the parents enjoyment of parenting and support the growth and development of babies through access to a wide range of professionals.

Specialist programs jointly run by Child and Family Centre staff in conjunction with community child protection workers or the Domestic Violence Crisis Service are provided to at risk families. Research is currently being undertaken to explore programs targeting young parents who themselves have had experiences in the child protection system or whose children are known to the child protection system.

A number of these programs or are being extended to other agencies. The implementation of the new *Children and Young People Act 2008* and strengthened information sharing provisions will also serve to facilitate relationships across the government and the non-government sector working with at risk families. Program development which complements current programs and service delivery platforms would be undertaken in consultation with relevant community organisations, within existing resources.

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### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

The Committee recommends that ACT Health develop a risk assessment tool, with guidelines and training, to screen for domestic violence for pregnant women who access antenatal services through ACT Government institutions.

### **SUPPORTED**

#### **Government Response:**

A common assessment tool for use across government and the non-government sector is currently under consideration.

Risk assessment tools under a common assessment tool for use by the many points of contact with expectant women, new parents and parents of young children is desirable. Such a focus would provide a child centered focus to service delivery across a broader range of services and support the shared responsibility principles of responsibility for the protection of vulnerable and at risk children. The development and implementation of such tools would occur within existing resources.

ACT Health has noted support for the development of a risk assessment screening tool for domestic violence. ACT Health established a Working Party to develop an

ACT Health Domestic Violence policy, which is now being finalised. At the last meeting of the Working Party, support was given to pursue the development of such a tool for ACT Health, which will be linked to the domains of the broader common assessment tool.

#### ***RECOMMENDATION 4***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with the Domestic Violence Crisis Service and women's refuges in the ACT, to develop mechanisms that would enable women and children to continue to be supported once they leave the care of the refuge and go back into the community.

#### **SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

##### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government works in partnership with the Domestic Violence Crisis Service to address the safety issues concerning children and parents providing them with safe care. When children are considered to be at risk, there are various mechanisms to support children and their parents regardless of their location. In addition, the differential response and assessment and support roles of Care and Protection Services to child protection reports enable Care and Protection Services to engage with and provide referral to supports for children and families. Care and Protection Services and the Domestic Violence Crisis Service hold regular meetings to discuss specific interventions with families where there exists a perceived need for individual or joint intervention. In such instances, agreed interventions and supports to families are planned and undertaken. The continued development of strong working relationships between the Domestic Violence Crisis Service and the ACT Government is an ongoing priority.

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The ACT Government, through Child and Family Centres, provides established partnerships to support families who have experienced family violence and a targeted group program is provided jointly by both agencies to improve parenting capacities. The Parent as Teachers program operating from the Child and Family Centres provides a home visiting service of ongoing support to parents with young children. A number of funded non-government family support agencies also have the capacity to support children and families in this situation. Parents and children who have experienced or witness domestic violence often require and benefit from ongoing supports and the slow development of trusting relationships. Further, ACT Health provides Maternal and Child Health services to women while in refuges as well as ongoing care when these mothers return to their community. Continued improvement to services for women and children is an ongoing priority.

Relevant Government and non-Government agencies including Housing ACT are in a good position to explore additional opportunities for partnership in this area.

#### ***RECOMMENDATION 5***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop an ACT specific domestic violence campaign for local television and radio.

## **NOT SUPPORTED**

### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government is of the view that to effect significant cultural change regarding domestic violence, strategies must be broad and ongoing and that the current suite of strategies employed effectively supports this goal at a local level.

The ACT Government supports the resourcing of Australia wide campaigns concerning domestic violence by the Commonwealth Government, a strategy which ensures a broad and universal approach to this issue. Such initiatives provide local contact points for the ACT community to access.

The ACT, through the ParentLink website, provides parents and the community access to highly regarded Parent Tip Sheets, including specific information on Domestic Violence. These are available on line and in more than 160 locations across the ACT. Access points to the Parent Tip Sheets includes schools, health centres, shopfronts, hospitals, Magistrate and Children's Court, other government and community agencies, and child care centres. Government funding of the YPOW program (Young People's Outreach Worker) undertaken with the Domestic Violence Crisis Service provides further information and support to young people and their families regarding domestic violence.

The ACT Government also provides training to Government and non-government agencies about the incidence, impact and interventions to address domestic violence. This strategy aims to inform and skill professionals and those working with families to identify the issues and address them appropriately.

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## ***RECOMMENDATION 6***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate ways of utilising the Victorian Government resource Parenting Support Toolkit for Alcohol and Other Drug Workers in the ACT.

## **SUPPORTED**

### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government will investigate the capacity to utilise or adopt the Victorian Government Resource Parenting Support Toolkit for Alcohol and Other Drug Workers in the ACT through ACT Health. This will be undertaken utilising existing resources.

## ***RECOMMENDATION 7***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate ways of assisting Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service with the transport needs of patients.

## **SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

**Government Response:**

The ACT Government will consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and related health services to investigate ways this issue may be addressed. This will be undertaken utilising existing resources.

***RECOMMENDATION 8***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government resource Carers ACT to enable delivery of the Service Provider Education Program on an ongoing basis.

**NOTED****Government Response:**

The resources required to implement this recommendation need to be considered within the context of competing priorities and programs for finite Government resources. The allocation for funding to an organisation to deliver such a service would need to be subject to an open procurement process.

***RECOMMENDATION 9***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government support Carers ACT to develop strategies to assist in the early identification and support of young carers.

**SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE****Government Response:**

The ACT Government currently provides funding to CYCLOPS to provide early identification and support services to young carers in the ACT. The Consumer and Carer Participation Coordinator and the Children of Parents with Mental Illness (COPMI) officer are working with Carers ACT to establish support for young carers. The ACT Government will continue to work with the Carers ACT to identify and address the needs of young carers.

***RECOMMENDATION 10***

The Committee recommends that the programs available for post natal depression be better advertised and if necessary be further resourced to meet demand for services.

**SUPPORTED****Government Response:**

The ACT Government, with the Commonwealth and other State Governments, is implementing the National Perinatal Depression Initiative. This Initiative, due to commence in early 2009, includes increased resources from both a national and territory level for the ACT population. The initiative targets; workforce training, universal screening of women both pre and postnatally, increased interventions through the Commonwealth funded ATAPS (Access to Allied Psychological Services) program, and nationally consistent data collection and research.

It is expected that the universal screening will identify additional cases of perinatal depression for the specialist mental health service. Mental Health ACT will require additional resources to adequately respond to the increased demand. However, until the Initiative is commenced, the demand for tertiary services is difficult to estimate.

Any additional resources required to implement this recommendation need to be considered within the context of competing priorities and programs.

### ***RECOMMENDATION 11***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate ways of better resourcing early intervention services for community based child and family services.

### **NOTED**

#### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government currently provides significant resources for early intervention services for community based child and family services. In recent years, the ACT Government established two Child and Family Centres as key service hubs across the ACT, with a third Child and Family Centre currently being planned. Services from the Centres are both Centre based and outreach to families in communities where there are high needs. In addition, the Government has provided \$2.5million for family support services as well as a range of health and educational services with an early intervention focus. ACT Health through the universal home visiting program, the dedicated maternal and child health clinics, the IMPACT program and the Early Childhood Schools project - an integrated services approach, with access to education, child care, and health and community services also provides additional early intervention services for children and their families.

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A key forward challenge is developing and strengthening the service system in line with best practice in order to deliver the optimal mix of high quality universal and targeted programs and support across the service continuum.

Current work is occurring with community groups funded to provide services to children and their families, examining the capacity to enhance early intervention and prevention services across the ACT.

### ***RECOMMENDATION 12***

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government conduct an evaluation of its early intervention services to ensure that these services are adequately and appropriately meeting the needs of parents of vulnerable infants, and potentially vulnerable infants.

### **SUPPORTED**

#### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government regularly undertakes surveys and evaluation of services in determining the future development of service needs and models and to provide services in accordance with current best practice.

For example, Child and Family Centres undertake satisfaction surveys to ascertain families satisfaction with the services provided at the Centres or identify needs for additional services. In 2006, the University of Canberra undertook an evaluation of the Child and Family Centre model and the outcomes identified positive gains from the range of initiatives established at the Centres and the satisfaction of families, community partners and staff. It is proposed that a further evaluation of the Child and Family Centres be undertaken during 2009-2010 with a focus on the model of service delivery in the geographically identified areas of need.

The Schools as Communities program provided by the ACT Government is another early intervention program for children and families in primary school. This program was evaluated in 2005 by the Institute of Child Protection Studies and the recommendations implemented during the future development of the program.

An evaluation of the ACT Health Integrated Multi-agencies for Parents And Children Together (IMPACT) Program is currently being developed for completion by the end of February 2009.

The Australian Catholic University through the Institute of Child Protection Studies is currently undertaking a review of evaluations of early intervention programs and models in the ACT. This project will enable the ACT government to consolidate existing data and other research on good practice, and apply a more strategic approach to development of early intervention systems, policies and practices across the ACT.

### ***RECOMMENDATION 13***

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The Committee recommends that the ACT Government further enhance the development of collaborative practices across services and sectors.

### **SUPPORTED**

#### **Government Response:**

The ACT Government currently supports and promotes many initiatives that enhance the development of collaborative practices across services and sectors and is committed to continuing to develop collaborative partnerships.

This has been a strong driver in the establishment of working partnerships between Government, non-government and voluntary agencies in the community arising from reforms implemented since 2004 in the area of early childhood and child protection.

The ACT Children's Plan Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) comprises senior representatives from each ACT Government agencies and aims to improve coordination and collaboration across government of policies, programs and initiatives that impact on children, their parents and their families. In addition, the Children and Young People Sharing Responsibilities Framework Steering Committee, chaired by the Chief Executive of the Department of Housing, Disability and Community Services continues to promote the ongoing collaborative relationships established during the development and Government commitment to the *Sharing responsibility: A Framework for Service Collaboration for the Care, Protection and*

*Well Being of Children and Young People in the ACT.* This Committee has also engaged representatives of the broader non-government sector including the Youth Coalition of the ACT, Gudan Gulwan, Communities @Work, Domestic Violence Crisis Service and St Vincent de Paul.

At an educative level, the ACT Government, through the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, provides Collaborative Practice Workshops, open to government and non-government services involved in service delivery to children and their families which are designed to enhance agencies understanding of the benefits of collaboration and to address potential barriers to collaborative practice.

The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services has undertaken considerable work to develop methods of cross agency training between a broad cross-section of the Department, ACT Health and the alcohol and drug sector. A series of workshops are provided that specifically address issues for children in families that misuse alcohol and drugs, involving trainers from the drug and alcohol sector and Care and Protection Services. Discussions are underway for ongoing training between Care and Protection Services, ACT Directions and WIRRED to improve the mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities and relevant drug and alcohol issues when working with children and families.

The ACT Government, in partnership between the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services and ACT Health, provides training programs which seek to strengthen partnerships and better inform community agencies about the needs of vulnerable children and families and build a stronger understanding amongst community agencies of the role they play in protecting vulnerable children.

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The development of the Integrated Family Support Program, operating from the Child and Family Centres is another example of a collaborative approach. This program harnesses the involvement and integration of government, non-government and community services to vulnerable families, providing services ranging from early intervention and prevention to crisis services for children and their families. Through family engagement strategies, families and agencies commence to work together towards agreed goals and outcomes to benefit children and families. This model is supported through evaluation and ongoing training and development of staff and services involved. Governance and leadership arrangements have provided the direction and ongoing focus on collaboration and shared responsibility in assisting and improving outcomes for vulnerable families.

Child and Family Centres have a range of services that are provided from the Centres in collaboration with other government and community based services. The partnerships are developed from identification of need and engagement with appropriate services to meet these needs. Key partnerships include services provided by ACT Health including the Maternal and Child Health Services, antenatal clinics, Child Health Medical Officer, Nutritionist and Orthoptist. Other services working with Child and Family Centres include Care and Protection Services, Housing ACT, Relationships Australia, The Smith Family, the Domestic Violence and Crisis Service and Therapy ACT. A range of regional community services across the ACT offer programs in collaboration from various locations including schools, child care centres



and the Child and Family Centres. This model of co-operation will also be a feature of the four new early childhood schools to open in 2009.

A specific Indigenous Integrated Family Support Program provides vulnerable Indigenous families an integrated service response involving Care and Protection Services, family support services, educational and health services. Additional Indigenous specific services are provided in the community through the Aboriginal Community Development Program. Engagement of Indigenous communities and families through Child and Family Centres, Ngunnawal and Kingsford Smith Koori Preschools and other mainstream services have provided culturally appropriate services to Indigenous families and addressed barriers to cooperative and collaborative service delivery. The program is being expanded further across the ACT and to include additional partners such as the Smith Family and the Commonwealth Government.

ACT Health has developed and continues to develop collaborative practices around service delivery. One example is through participation in the Child Protection Advisory Committee (CPAC). CPAC is a cross-agency group with representation from ACT Health, the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support and the Australian Federal Police. CPAC considers improved management of child protection matters through positive and open communication and collaboration. CPAC also shares information and advice from other forums with those that have an interest in issues surrounding the protection of children and young people. Another example is the Integrated Multi-agencies for Parents and Children Together (IMPACT) program conducted by ACT Health, providing a coordinated service to high risk mothers who are in the opiate replacement program or are clients of Mental Health ACT.

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The ACT Children's Plan Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) comprises senior representatives from each ACT Government agencies, and aims to improve coordination and collaboration across government of policies, programs and initiatives that impact on children, their parents and their families.

The new *Children and Young People Act 2008* also promotes the development of collaborative practices between agencies with a focus on the care and well being of vulnerable children and their families. This will further enhance and strengthen the working relationship across the service sector in their provision of services to children, young people and their families.

In addition, the new information sharing provisions in the *Children and Young People Act 2008* will enable further development of collaborative practices across services and sectors, particularly with the establishment of declared Care Teams.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 14**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consult with men's support organisations and Regional Community Services to develop early intervention programs for fathers with complex needs.

#### **SUPPORTED IN PRINCIPLE**

**Government Response:**

The ACT Government is aware of the need to consult with and consider the development of additional early intervention programs for fathers with complex needs. Current early intervention programs do not exclude fathers from engaging and participating in the programs.

**RECOMMENDATION 15**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the principles of the Father Inclusive Practice Framework in future service planning.

**SUPPORTED****Government Response:**

The ACT is considering the principles of the Father Inclusive Practice Framework and other initiatives involving the parents of children in future service planning. Current service delivery does not discriminate against the involvement of fathers in the delivery of services to support families.

ACT Government services engage with fathers through universal and targeted service provision, through Child and Family Centres and ACT Health services such as Maternal Child Health. During 2008, Child and Family Centres have focused on engaging and strengthening the participation of fathers in parenting and other programs for children and in formalising the implementation of the principles of the Father Inclusive Practice Framework. Such initiatives have included improved access by fathers to specific programs such as Paint and Play, Triple P Parenting programs and social activities. This focus will continue in 2009 and the feedback provided by fathers in surveys being undertaken will inform future service development.

In developing programs, consideration of the need to apply and promote the principles of the Father Inclusive Practice Framework will be undertaken. The consideration of these service delivery principles will occur within existing resources.

**RECOMMENDATION 16**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate the level of unmet need of support services for young fathers post the age of 26.

**NOTED****Government Response:**

The ACT Government considers the needs of all fathers in establishing service development priorities.

**RECOMMENDATION 17**

The Committee recommends that the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services consult with the drug and alcohol sector to develop cross-sector

training to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise between drug and alcohol and care and protection workers.

## **SUPPORTED**

### **Government Response:**

The Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services has undertaken considerable work to develop methods of cross agency training between a broad cross-section of the Department, ACT Health and the alcohol and drug sector. A series of workshops continue to be provided that specifically address issues for children in families that misuse alcohol and drugs, involving trainers from the drug and alcohol sector and Care and Protection Services. Discussions are underway for ongoing training between Care and Protection Services, ACT Directions and WIRRED to improve the mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities and relevant drug and alcohol issues when working with children and families. A review of the current target audience with a view towards expansion to a broader sector of the community is supported and will occur within existing resources.

## **RECOMMENDATION 18**

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate the feasibility of resourcing a group specifically for mothers who have children in the care and protection system, similar to the NEWPIN model.

## **SUPPORTED**

### **Government Response:**

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The ACT Government, through the Child and Family Centres, provides services for high risk expectant mothers and for vulnerable parents. Programs such as Parents as Teachers program provides parents with a Centre based or outreach home visiting program to improve parents understanding of parenting and their child's development. The Parents and Infant Relationships Support Group (PAIRS) program supports families for whom the experience of pregnancy, birth and parenting has been more difficult than expected. Specialist programs jointly run by Child and Family Centre staff in conjunction with community child protection workers or the Domestic Violence Crisis Service are provided to at risk families. In addition, research is currently being undertaken by the Child and Family Centres to explore programs targeting young parents who themselves have had experiences in the child protection system or whose children are known to the child protection system as this is identified as an area of high risk parenting.

During 2006-2007 ACT Government funded a pilot program delivered by the Belconnen Community Services. The program was called "My Family First" and assisted vulnerable children and their parents. The ACT Government has continued to provide funding to enable this program to be delivered by Belconnen Community Services within their suite of family support programs.

Additionally, the ACT Government provided funding in the budget for the development of additional family support services in West Belconnen through Uniting Care at Kippax for disadvantaged families experiencing family breakdown, domestic

violence, poor child development and educational attainment and poor health. It is envisaged this will allow consideration of proposals to provide services for parents with children in the child protection system similar to the NEWPIN program provided by Uniting Care in other States and Territories. Any resources required to implement this recommendation need to be considered within the context of competing priorities and programs.