

SUMMARY OF THE FINAL EVALUATION REPORT MATER FAMILY AND YOUTH COUNSELLING SERVICE IN BRISBANE

Strategic Evaluation and Research Branch
and Office for Youth

QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document summarises key findings from the final evaluation report (May 2009) on the Mater Family and Youth Counselling Service (MF&YCS) in Brisbane. It includes:

- an introduction, describing the initiative and the evaluation methodology, and
- key evaluation findings and issues relevant to the implementation of the model in Queensland.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Young people who commit sexual offences are a high profile target group requiring specialist intervention and treatment services. Before the development of the MF&YCS, previously known as the Mater Face Up Service, no funded services existed for young people who commit offences of a sexual nature and are referred to diversionary justice options such as Youth Justice Conferencing (YJC). It is the Department of Communities policy that young people referred to YJC for offences of a sexual nature must also attend specialist counselling.

MF&YCS aimed to contribute to the diversion of young people from the formal youth justice system by providing follow-up therapeutic interventions for both young people who commit offences of a sexual nature and referred to YJC, young people harmed by those offences, particularly when involving intra-familial offending and the families of both groups of young people. Specifically the service aimed to:

- assist young people who had sexually offended to change their behaviour and to develop and maintain a healthy and safe lifestyle
- assist the family to contribute to these changes and to deal with their own issues relating to the offending behaviours
- provide offence-specific and non-offence specific counselling to young people who have sexually offended and their families, and
- support young people who have been harmed and their families throughout the Youth Justice Conference process.

Interventions include an initial assessment phase to assess risk factors including risk of sexually re-offending, to identify predisposing and precipitating factors as well as to ensure participant's capacity to attend and their readiness for YJC. During the assessment phase there is a focus on improving safety awareness and developing Safety Plans. Post-assessment interventions include, addressing treatment goals which may include reducing cognitive distortions and rationalisations, relapse prevention work and increasing level of empathy. There may also be a focus in treatment goals on other areas identified in the assessment such as anger management, self-esteem improvement and improving social skills.

The MF&YCS service agreement lists the following as Funded Activities (using the National Classifications of Community Services, 2003), general service information, advice and referral; individual advocacy; needs assessment, management of case/service plans, incest/sexual abuse counselling, family therapy, mediation and other counselling.

The Department of Communities commenced funding the MF&YCS on 1 January 2007 and allocated a one-off funding of \$385 000 in 2006-07 to pilot the MF&YCS over an 18 month period. The Mater Health Services provides auspice for the MF&YCS and it remains part of the Mater Children's Hospital Child Protection Unit. Over the 18 month period, the service has accepted referrals for 22 young people who have perpetrated offences of a sexual nature and their families. Of the 22 referrals, all were males and the average age of the young people was 14 years. Nine of the 22 young people had diagnosed medical developmental conditions. 10 of the 22 young people were known to have suffered child abuse.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- contribute to future policy and program development around youth issues, and
- promote continuous improvement and best practice in service delivery.

Evaluation Methodology

The Department of Communities appointed Ms Gwenn Murray, of Gwenn Murray Consulting, to undertake the evaluation, which considered the history, implementation, evolution and operation of the MF&YCS. The evaluation examined literature, qualitative and quantitative data, such as crime statistics, matters referred to YJC and MF&YCS service data on key outcome measures. Consultation with MF&YCS staff and relevant stakeholders was also undertaken and clients' families were interviewed. The evaluation also considered the intersection between the MF&YCS and the YJC process and whether it provides a restorative justice response to sexual offences. It considered the core benefits and outcomes achieved by the service and the critical link between therapeutic family-focused intervention and restorative justice approaches to juvenile sex offending. Ethics approval for the evaluation was provided by the Mater Health Services Human Research Ethics Committee.

The evaluation considered a range of quantitative and qualitative data:

- The Office for Youth, Department of Communities prepared a literature review on 'Program responses and services for young people who sexually offend' in September 2008.
- The MF&YCS service database was used to compile client and activity data on client demographics, date of referral, date of completion, referrals to other services, medical history, developmental/learning issues, child protection history, living arrangements, assessment/outcome data, occasions of assistance, case hours and staff activity statistics.
- Consultations were conducted with staff from the MF&YCS, Department of Communities, Queensland Police Service officers and community organisations to seek information regarding the implementation and operation of the service model and partnerships and linkages.
- The MF&YCS administered surveys to assess satisfaction feedback from service users.
- Data on key outcome measures was collected, including the Juvenile Sexual Offender Assessment Protocol-II¹.
- Important to the evaluation were interviews conducted with MF&YCS clients (young people and their parents or caregivers) to hear directly from them on how they have found the services. One young person and 10 families were interviewed from a cohort of 19 families. Children harmed by the juvenile at the initial focus of the referral were not approached to participate.

¹ Juvenile Sexual Offender Assessment Protocol-II is an internationally tested and validated assessment tool/checklist providing a measure of sexual drive/preoccupation, impulsive/antisocial behaviour, support structures and level of risk.

- Ten case studies were also constructed through case files and interviews with case workers to build a snapshot or an overview of presenting issues, outcomes achieved and lessons learned from the case management of each case.

Key questions for the evaluation concerned the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service. Essentially the evaluation was asked to address the questions of whether the MF&YCS model is the right model, whether it is consistent with best practice within a diversionary restorative justice framework and whether it is effective and efficient. The evidence gathered supports answering these questions, at the outset, in the affirmative.

Limitations of the Evaluation

A key limitation of the evaluation was the small sample size. To date there have been approximately 13 cases/referrals awaiting a conference, five cases where a conference has been completed and two cases that have exited the service. There have been 22 young people referred to the service and 19 were assisted, since its establishment in January 2007. This restricted the quantitative analysis that could be undertaken (that is, pre- and post-intervention comparisons). To accommodate this, the evaluation focused upon qualitative analysis and the exploration of outcomes through case studies developed from client interviews.

Another limitation was the relatively short period of time in which the MF&YCS has been operating under the department's funding. However, important observations could still be made about the effectiveness and efficiency of the Service, its intersection with YJC, collaborative relationships with relevant stakeholders in working with its clients and outcomes achieved.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Broad findings from the evaluation are summarised below:

- The literature review explored a range of approaches and found the model that uses a multi-worker approach to deliver services concurrently to the victim, young offender and their families is the most effective for delivering restorative justice and therapeutic outcomes.
- The holistic, multi-dimensional service delivery model of MF&YCS is consistent with national and international best practice criteria for program development and service delivery to young people who have sexually offended as well as the young people harmed and their families within a diversionary restorative justice framework.
- The MF&YCS has achieved positive outcomes for its client groups.
- A consideration of the efficiency of MF&YCS must take into account not only the time taken and the investment of specialist counselling required to achieve its client outcomes, but also the complexities of addressing youth sexual offending within a family context. The MF&YCS is arguably a resource intensive model. However it has achieved positive outcomes decreasing the risk of further serious offending by supported young people.
- Most victims are known to the offender, the three worker model was useful to address any issues arising from interventions that incorporate offenders known to victims.

Service model and its appropriateness

There was clear and consistent evidence that the MF&YCS model is the right approach. It is multi-dimensional and there are some particular aspects that set it apart from other services working with juvenile sex offenders. First, the model contains a rigorous assessment process. Second, the therapeutic responses are family-focused within a restorative justice framework where separate counsellors are assigned to work with the individual family members. Third, service staff work closely with YJC staff in developing the conference plan, informing YJC staff of the therapeutic intervention progress and working towards conference readiness. Fourth, individual MF&YCS staff play an important role in supporting the young offender, the harmed child/ren and their family members during the conference.

There is strong evidence that the combination of counselling and YJC is essential in achieving therapeutic benefits and restorative justice for this target group. Families themselves reported that one without the other would be inadequate and could not be separated.

Effectiveness and efficiency

High levels of satisfaction with the MF&YCS were expressed by the clients interviewed and notable achievements were made in accomplishing case plan goals.

Interviews and service data confirmed a range of positive client outcomes such as changed behaviour within children, young people and within their families. Importantly, these data also showed a reduction or likely reduction in Juvenile Sexual Offender Assessment Protocol-II dynamic scores, reductions in risk and relapse, loss of suicide ideation in particular young people, improvements in confidence, mood, attitude and self esteem. Even for those young people with various learning and developmental conditions, the counsellors reported a range of improvements and achievements by them.

The value of the diversionary pathway was further demonstrated through the increased confidence and willingness of police officers to make referrals to conferencing. Queensland Police Service officers reported being better informed of the expected benefits of YJC and the MF&YCS – the outcomes achieved for victims and the deterrent affect on offenders.

The evaluation also found that the MF&YCS is achieving intended outcomes for its clients in spite of the relatively short period in which it has been operating and with only 2.7 FTE staff.

Addressing questions of efficiency and effectiveness must also take into account the complexities of the nature of youthful sexual offending within a family context. It is well recognised in the literature that young people who sexually offend typically have a higher risk of further committing an offence than the wider young offender population (Caldwell 2002; Hunter et al. 2003 in Grant, Thornton and Chamarette 2006). Further, there are limitations within the criminal justice system to appropriately respond to sexual offences and victim needs within the family setting. Evidence shows that conference outcomes lead to a greater focus on rehabilitation than court outcomes and that in some studies recidivism was higher for offenders dealt with by the court than for those who attended conferences (Daly 2004).

Only 1.9% of all referrals to YJC across Queensland concern sex offences. However, counsellors, conference convenors, police officers and family members consulted as part of the evaluation, reported it is worth the time and investment of restorative justice programs as the outcomes for the 'victim' child and the 'offending' child that are achieved through combining therapeutic intervention and conferencing are significant.

The evaluation found the adversities in families, the nature of sexual offending and treatment responses for children and young people are very complex and therefore require specialised and some times lengthy intervention. The investment of specialist counselling around the conferencing process is worthwhile, given the quality outcomes achieved by MF&YCS.

The evaluation concluded that the MF&YCS is a unique and effective service that works collaboratively with its YJC partners. It is highly regarded by those who use it and by those who refer clients to it. The work of the staff is delivered in a compassionate and committed way.

References

Caldwell, M. (2002) What we do not know about juvenile sexual re-offence risk? In *Child Maltreatment* 7:291.

Daly, K. (2004) *Restorative Justice and Sexual Assault: An archival study of court and conference cases*. Griffith University, Brisbane.

Grant, J., Thornton, J., & Chamarette, C. (2006) *Residential Placement of Intra-familial sex offenders*. Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.