

# Volunteer Family Connect

Australia's **first evidence-based** volunteer home visiting service for children and families

## Overview

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Commonwealth Government's 2020-21 pre-Budget process. Through this proposal, The Benevolent Society, Karitane and Save the Children are seeking \$2.55M over two years to extend the successful Volunteer Family Connect support model across the eastern seaboard, servicing up to 170 families per annum.

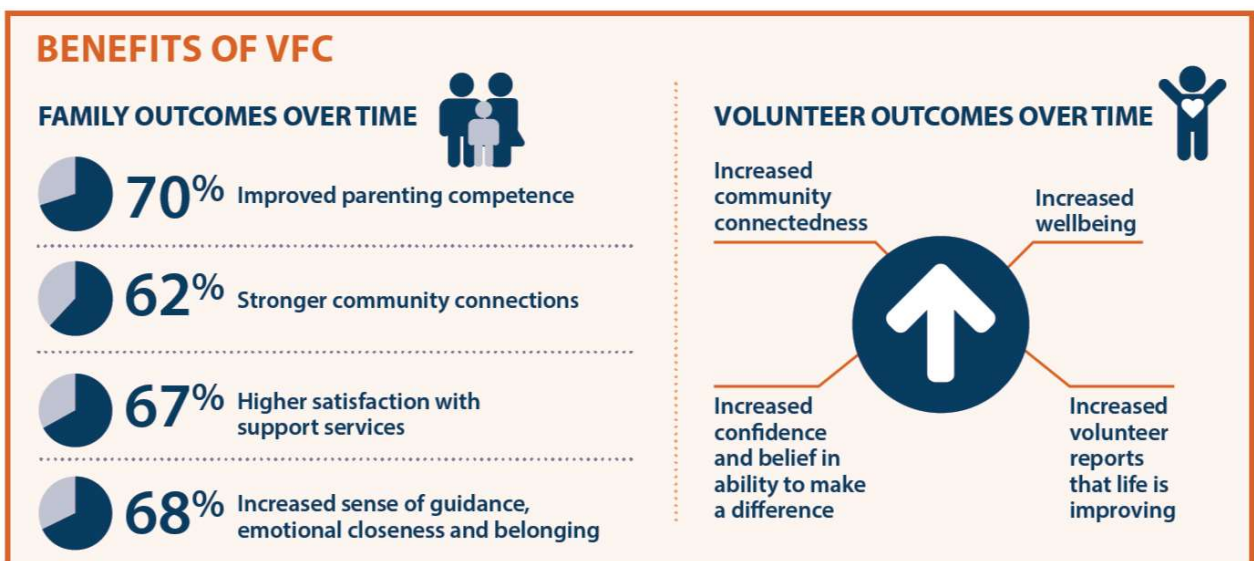
Volunteer Family Connect (VFC) is a community-based early intervention service that mobilises trained volunteers to provide targeted 1-1 in home support for parents and carers who are feeling overwhelmed or isolated, before they hit a crisis point. Based on rigorous research and significant practice experience, VFC sits at the front end of the child and family service system and offers a cost-effective and community-driven model of early support for vulnerable families – getting in early, before need escalates for more intensive and expensive services.

Trained VFC volunteers provide practical and emotional support for parents, foster parent-child bonding, and help families connect with their local communities and support services. VFC targets vulnerable families with one or more children aged 0-5 who have not been screened into the child protection system or are not eligible for other funded one-one intensive family support – bridging a critical service gap.

Built and tested with the generous support of philanthropy and university partners, VFC is delivered across all eastern states by a consortium comprising The Benevolent Society, Karitane and Save the Children. Since 2012, around 1,600 families have benefited from VFC across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.

## Largest RCT for volunteer home visiting world-wide

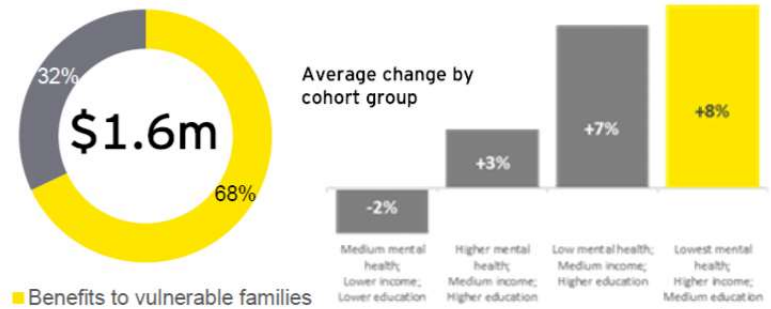
A 2018 randomised control trial (RCT) conducted by Western Sydney University (WSU) confirms that VFC is highly effective in supporting vulnerable families with moderate needs that are too complex for universal services, but below the threshold for specialist or intensive services.



## Value for money

In 2019, VFC partners commissioned Ernst and Young to undertake a Social Impact Evaluation, which found VFC has an SROI of \$1.78 for every \$1 invested. This demonstrates strong value for money, with nearly \$1.6 million (present value) in social benefits over ten years against a cost of \$900,000 in the same time. This includes almost \$800,000 in avoided costs to governments, and the same again in quantifiable benefits for parents and carers.

Almost 30% per cent of the RCT cohort was highly vulnerable and returned an increased value of almost \$5.50 for every \$1 invested. This was also the RCT cohort that experienced the most improvement over time as a result of VFC participation.



## Service model

The evidence is unequivocal that safe, responsive relationships with parents and caregivers is critical to healthy child development as are strong relationships between support workers and their adult clients<sup>1</sup>. Parental social isolation is also recognised in research as a significant risk factor for poor child outcomes – and as many as 1 in 4 report low levels of social support.

That is why VFC works with vulnerable families in the early years to achieve and measure change in three key activity areas:

1. Increased parenting skills, competence and confidence, through practical and emotional support, modelling positive interactions and establishing meaningful family routines;
2. Reduced parental social isolation through structured social relationships, helping families connect with local community networks, and referrals as required to wider services; and
3. Increased community connectedness by mobilising and training local volunteers to support the most vulnerable in their suburb or town.

VFC volunteers are recruited, assessed, trained and supported by trained VFC Program Coordinators who are employed by each of the three founding partners in the service consortium.

The VFC training package is comprehensive and standardised, available to all current and future service providers.

Families can access the program themselves, or be referred by services, including GPs, maternal health nurses and social workers.

On intake, families are connected and matched with local trained volunteers who typically visit for two to three hours per week over a period of six to twelve months, assisting parents to build their resilience and confidence as caregivers, and wider connections to community. Volunteers also facilitate interagency support and referrals as required.

*“My home visitor has been well matched to my personality, is great with my kids and I look forward to my weekly visit. It has got me out of the house more and provided me with resources that cater to my family’s needs”*

<sup>1</sup> Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>



## Ongoing commitment to collaboration and impact

Consortium partners have successfully collaborated through a joint alliance and lead agency model since 2012. A VFC Governance Committee oversees service delivery and is responsible for performance reporting against funder KPIs/reporting agreements. All partners operate according to consistent service guidelines, policies, and operating procedures. This ensures the robust and consistent application of the VFC model, no matter the service location.

VFC outcomes are monitored by WSU using fidelity and quality evaluation measures that are standardised across the program and reported quarterly. This is core to our implementation architecture and drives continuous quality improvement, problem solving and data-informed decision-making at the local, organisational and consortium level.

## Opportunity for scale

VFC is a scalable model for early intervention with vulnerable families. The service has proven success in lifting parent and carer capabilities and strengthening community connections for isolated parents and volunteers.

This proposal seeks funding of \$2.55M over two years to continue delivery in the existing seven sites, maintaining early support for up to 170 families and 90 volunteers. A seamless transition from philanthropic funding (expiring end 2020) would minimise inefficiencies from volunteer attrition, ensure continuity of service and maintain strong governance and quality arrangements.

VFC consortium partners would also welcome an opportunity to engage with the Commonwealth Government on the emerging family policy reform agenda, to explore ways to scale this low-cost, high impact model into further sites across the country and connect more systemically into the service continuum. Existing providers have demonstrated experience in successfully scaling up evidence-based services, and the VFC training package is comprehensive and standardised, ready for expansion by any future service delivery partner.

## VFC service providers

VFC's delivery partners are highly experienced child and family services providers who have been collaborating successfully since 2012 to develop, test and continuously improve VFC across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.



Karitane has over 97 years of experience providing help and advice to parents and families during the early years of parenting. Karitane delivers VFC in Fairfield and Macarthur in NSW and supported more than 40 clients in 2018-19.



The Benevolent Society (TBS) is Australia's first charity, founded over 200 years ago with a vision of a just society where all Australians can live their best life. TBS delivers VFC in South East Sydney and the Gold Coast, with 66 clients in 2018-19.



Save the Children (SCA) has been working in Australia for 100 years to make sure all children and young people are set up for success, servicing over 200 remote, regional and metropolitan areas in 2019. SCA delivers VFC in Inner Sydney, East Gippsland, and Hobart and supported around 90 clients in 2018-19.