



Foundations for Connection

Australia's **first evidence-based** volunteer support model for vulnerable communities

Karitane Submission 2

Pre budget Submission for Commonwealth funding January 2022



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Australia's first evidence-based volunteer support model for vulnerable communities

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Commonwealth Government's 2022-23 pre-Budget process. Through this proposal, The Benevolent Society, Karitane, Save The Children and Western Sydney University are seeking \$3.2M in total over two years to extend the successful Foundations for Connection model across the eastern seaboard, servicing up to 350 families per annum.

We know from research that there are high and rising levels of isolation and social disconnection for families in Australia and the industrialised world more broadly. This is largely credited to the increased rates of divorce, separation and single parenthood, geographic mobility, long work hours, and the decline in extended families living together [ABS, 2009]. Families of young children are amongst the most at risk of experiencing social disconnection (Baker, 2019; Hawthorne, 2008), particularly those who have a child with a disability (Grace et al., 2008), are new arrivals to Australia (McMichael et al., 2004), or experience cognitive or mental health challenges [Llewellyn et al., 2009]. Social disconnection poses a serious risk to the mental and physical health and wellbeing of parents and their children (Santini et al., 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). There is a critical need for innovative services that facilitate structured social relationships that mobilise community members to support those who are isolated, and that build stronger communities. If we have learned anything from the challenges we are currently facing as a nation in the form of fires and pandemic, it is that we all need each other and social cohesion in order to thrive.

Foundations for Connection (FfC) is a community-based early intervention service that mobilises trained volunteers to provide targeted 1-1 home support for communities that are feeling overwhelmed or isolated, before they hit a crisis point. Based on rigorous research and significant practice experience, FfC sits at the forefront of early intervention support services, providing a practical and cost-effective support model for vulnerable communities – getting in early before need escalates for more intensive and expensive services.

Trained Volunteers provide practical and emotional support for community members and help families connect with their local communities and support services. The Foundation for Connection model is available to be linked with various cohorts that cover all stages of the life cycle.

An example of FfC and its rigor and flexibility is best demonstrated by the trailblazer cohort program - Volunteer Family Connect. Volunteer Family Connect offers an early intervention

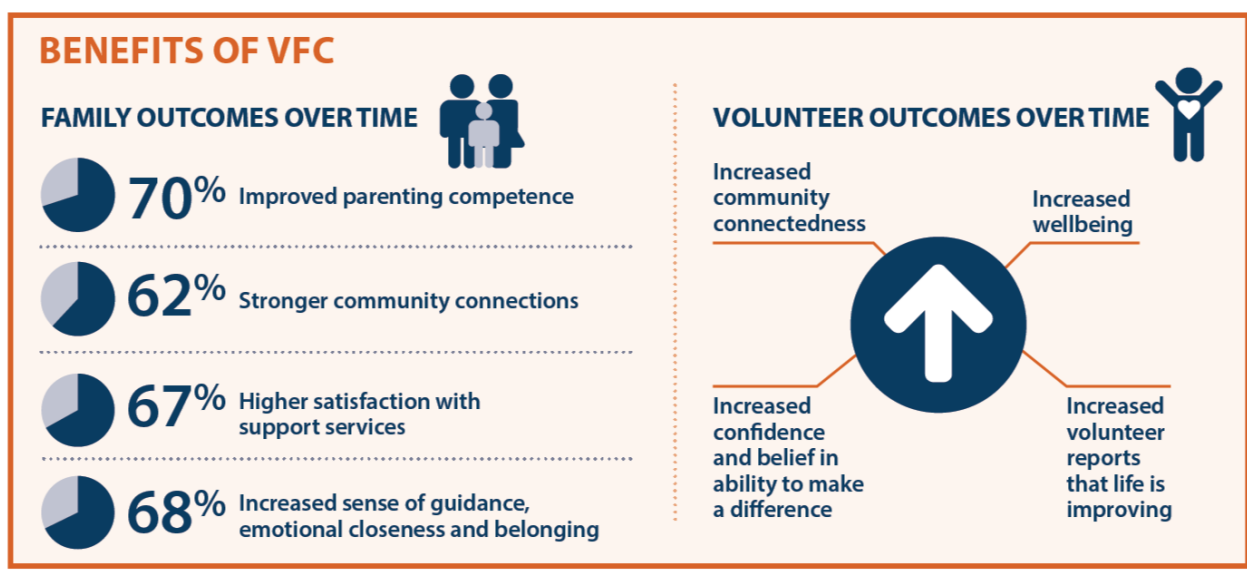


service which provides practical and emotional support for parents and carers, and supports parent-child bonding and the establishment of bridges between families and their local communities. The Volunteer Family Connect Program targets families that are not currently eligible for professional support, but who need more help than mainstream family services such as playgroups are able to offer.

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, over 1,900 families have benefited from Volunteer Family Connect across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.

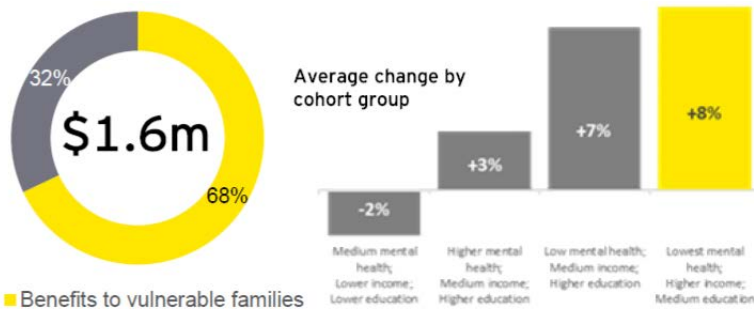
Evidence Based: Largest RCT for volunteer home visiting world-wide

A 2018 randomised control trial (RCT) conducted by Western Sydney University (WSU) confirmed that Volunteer Family Connect 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, FfC partners commissioned Ernst and Young to undertake a Social Impact Evaluation on the Volunteer Family Connect program, which found 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 with the intervention cohort returning an increased value of almost **\$5.50** for every \$1 invested. It was also the RCT intervention cohort that experienced the most improvement over time as a result of the participation in the VFC program.



Service model

The evidence is unequivocal that safe, responsive relationships with parents and caregivers is critical to healthy child development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). 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 Volunteer Family Connect 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

“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”

Evidence Based Training Program

Volunteers are recruited, assessed, trained and supported by trained Foundations for Connection Co-ordinators, who are employed by each of the three founding partners in the service continuum.

The FfC training package is comprehensive and standardised, available to all current and future service providers. It has been designed to act as a core program for any person considering volunteering, providing them with evidence informed base of knowledge which can then be enhanced by specific training relative to their chosen cohort.

In the case of the trailblazer cohort – Volunteer Family Connect (home support vulnerable families with one or more children aged 0-5) – volunteers were provided with additional training relevant to the early years. Training is available as a blend of face to face and online modules and has also been culturally adapted for First Nations families and volunteers.

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



Ongoing commitment to collaboration and impact

Consortium partners have successfully collaborated through a joint alliance and lead agency model since 2012. A Foundations for Connection 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. Taking leads on specific new cohorts as opportunities have arisen, this ensures the robust and consistent application of the Foundations for Connection model, no matter the cohort or service location.

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

Opportunity for scale

FfC is a scalable model for enabling social cohesion and reducing social isolation. The trailblazer program, Volunteer Family Connect for the parenting/early year's cohort has proven successful in lifting parent and carer capabilities and strengthening community connections for isolated parents and volunteers.

Funding of \$2.75m over two years is sought to continue delivery in the existing seven sites across Australia, maintaining early support for up to 350 families and 90 volunteers. A seamless transition from philanthropic funding (expiring June 2022) would minimise inefficiencies from volunteer attrition, staff attrition, ensure continuity of service and maintain strong governance and quality arrangements.

As part of the Thrive By Five campaign the FfC 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 systematically into the service continuum. Existing providers have demonstrated experience in successfully scaling up evidence-based services, and the FfC is comprehensive and standardised, ready for expansion across other cohorts of the life cycle and by any future service delivery partner.

Foundation for Connection service providers



Karitane has over 97 years of experience providing help and advice to parents and families during the early years of parenting. Karitane's healthcare professionals guide, support and educate families to ensure a safe and nurturing environment for their children. Karitane delivers VFC in Fairfield and Macarthur in NSW.



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 has a strong history in collaborating with and across sectors to deliver positive outcomes to vulnerable individuals, children and families. TBS delivers VFC in Southeast Sydney and the Gold Coast.



Save the Children has been working in Australia for 100 years to make sure all children and young people are set up for success, wherever they are and whatever their circumstances. Save the Children delivers VFC in Inner West Sydney, East Gippsland, and Greater Hobart.



Western Sydney University (TRESI/TeEACH)

Western Sydney University is home to two leading research centres that bring expertise in implementation science and applied research to address social inequity, The Transforming early Education and Child Health (TeEACH) Research Centre conducts research that seeks to improve life outcomes for children and their families with a focus on the early years for those who experience adversity. The Centre for Translational Research and Social Innovation (TReSI) conducts translational research that develops and supports the implementation of social and system innovation.

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