

CEO looks back on Families Australia's recent achievements

In 2008, Families Australia celebrates its seventh year. It is pleasing to look back on considerable achievements in such a relatively short time.

If we look at the Families Australia mandate – to promote the interests of families at the national level – we are now positioned as an influential, independent policy voice in political, public and sectoral arenas. The past 1-2 years have seen us successfully take a leading role in policy areas, such as grandparenting and child protection, where the Commonwealth had previously been reluctant to play a dominant role. We are now regularly contacted by the media.

We have achieved a reputation among many politicians for even-handedness and independence. Our '100 Policy Ideas' were widely read across the political spectrum, and some of the suggestions that we and others advanced were adopted – principally, for a National Child Protection Strategy, a 'State of the Family' Report and the creation of an office for work and family.

Families Australia's catalytic role in the creation of the child protection coalition in late 2007 saw us use our networks in the community and academic sectors effectively to help form the country's largest NGO grouping in the area of child protection. This may well prove to be one of Families Australia's greatest contributions in its first decade of operation.

Our work on the independent Carer Payment (Child) Taskforce helped to influence the direction of a major report to Government which, if adopted, will see an increase in the number of carers of children with profound or severe disability who receive this payment and an overhaul of the way in which Centrelink handles these supremely difficult cases. The new Rudd Government has publicly released the Taskforce's report.

Families Australia has been successful in leading on "horizon" issues – issues that are not part of current political debate but are visionary and long-term in nature. Our National Family Wellbeing Symposium in June 2007 was the first gathering of its type in Australia to bring together people to consider the more precise meaning and measurement of family wellbeing. This ground-breaking event signified that Families Australia had the capacity, networks and high level influence to advance this important topic on the national stage. It has catalysed efforts in New Zealand to promote discussion of family wellbeing as a policy tool and has stimulated Australian Government thinking on the issue.

It is especially pleasing that, in the past year, Families Australia has drilled down deeply into issues facing marginalised and vulnerable families. There is a potential danger that Families Australia might only speak in general terms about families based on limited understandings from a Canberra filing cabinet. The growth in the scope and professionalism of our qualitative focus group work and

in the expert forums which brought sector representatives together, as well as the selection of topical issues, meant that Families Australia's policy work was unique, well-targeted and insightful. The policies we advanced on grandparenting, substance abuse, and work and family were well received across stakeholder groups. Media attention was high; the Senate passed a motion urging Government to do more on grandparenting and commending Families Australia's work; and, in relation to substance abuse, we were, for the first time ever, invited to give evidence before a Parliamentary Committee.

Our leadership in assisting the Forgotten Australians - the estimated 500,000 people who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as children in the last century and who suffered physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse - may also prove to be another of the most defining achievements in Families Australia's first decade. Because of our independence and proficiency in understanding the workings of government, the Forgotten Australians entrusted to Families Australia their faith that we would assist them. In just one year, with our assistance, the Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA) has achieved remarkable results: it has been publicly launched at Parliament House, Canberra; it has a website; and it has well-functioning steering and advisory groups. The resource booklet for health and welfare professionals has been a wonderful accomplishment: the first edition will be of the order of 100,000 copies, with a guaranteed distribution of a significant proportion through Centrelink, Medicare, rural doctors and many others.

We have assisted AFA in its formal representations to obtain further Federal and State/Territory government funding. While there are looming constraints in terms of Families Australia's being able to provide ongoing high-level auspicing support, Families Australia will continue its assistance, in low-key, over the next year or two or until the Alliance receives sufficient funding to incorporate and operate independently. Families Australia should be very proud of the compassionate and practical assistance it has given to these people.

Families Australia's connection to the real lives of people further deepened through National Families Week. In May 2007, a record number of around 120,000 people participated in community events. On average, one National Families Week event was held somewhere in Australia every 10 minutes during the Week. The media coverage has grown exponentially over the five years we have run the Week. The Week is now an established part of the national calendar. More than ever, it is a vehicle for providing people with simple and practical tips for building stronger families.

Our methodical and often behind-the-scenes committee work with organisations such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Taxation Office, Medicare and Centrelink has also enabled us to contribute practical ideas to help these organisations deliver better services. To give two examples, we were able to influence Medicare to signpost their front-of-office services in different languages,

and we were assertive enough in our dealings with Medicare to be sought out by the then Minister for Human Services for detailed one-on-one discussions about our objections to the (now defunct) National Access Card. Our voice on the former Government's welfare payment diversion proposal in late 2006 was based on extensive consultation with our members.

Our professional networks have multiplied exponentially in the past three years as a result of careful planning and effort. We have strong relationships with the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and have expanded our links with other agencies. In particular, our relationship with the Australian Institute of Family Studies is important and strong. We have forged new ties with the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare and deepened those with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We have also intensified our links with universities in several States, such as with the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at The Australian National University and with academics in the area of child protection.

Another signifier of Families Australia's role and independence has been the appointments to the Australian Council for Children and Parenting and its successor, the Australian Families and Children Council.

In the past year, we have forged new and productive overseas relationships. Through staff visits, we now have ongoing relationships with the OECD (Paris), UNICEF (Florence), the UN Division for Economic and Social Affairs (New York), Child Trends (Washington DC) and the New Zealand Families Commission.

Families Australia continues to be financially viable due in large part to the ongoing support of the Australian Government as well the Families Australia members. Our membership numbers remain strong and are on a gentle upward incline – approaching 400 across Australia. The membership base continues to be diverse in terms of areas of activity and geography. The feedback we get is strongly positive about our member services, especially in the areas of information dissemination (*National Family News*, *Family* magazine and email updates). Our increased effort to consult members about policy has paid dividends in terms of the quality of our policies and our relationships with members.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the unstinting support and assistance of the Chair, Board and staff as well as the input of members – thank you to everyone.