

Overview of the 2009 Family Forum



Families & Friends
of Missing Persons
Attorney General & Justice

PURPOSE OF THE DAY

The Forum for Families and Friends of Missing Persons was held at Parramatta on 4 April 2009 to provide practical and emotional support to those people living with the ambiguous loss of a loved one.

Two hundred invites were circulated via NSW Police Missing Persons Unit in March 2009 inviting families with missing person's investigations that exceeded three months.

OUTCOMES OF THE FORUM

The day was divided into two sections. The first half of the day included guest speakers from Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) and the Department of Attorney General and Justice media spokesperson.

Families were given an opportunity to ask questions of the guest speakers with the majority of questions asked to Inspector Mark McCallum, NSW Police Missing Persons Unit. A number of families left the room during discussions about unidentified bodies, as the reality of such a traumatic enquiry was an issue that some had not contemplated whilst living with the loss of a missing person.

Families also enquired about the seemingly inconsistent timing of referrals to the NSW State Coroners Office and the training of police officers in responding to missing persons enquiries.

In response, NSW Police indicated that missing persons investigations were now being referred in a timely manner to the NSW State Coroners Office to assist in gaining the input of other professionals on the status of a case. NSW Police also discussed their attendance at Goulburn Police College on a quarterly basis and that the NMPCC (within the Australian Federal Police) is currently developing case studies to train police in a number of jurisdictions.

The morning session ended with two presentations from family members currently living with the ambiguous loss of their adult children. In feedback, from families in attendance, these two conversations about the ways in which families develop resilience were the most poignant and useful support mechanism for those in attendance.

Key points from these presentations have been uploaded to the FFMPU website and can be found on the publications page.

The second half of the day provided families with an opportunity to engage with representatives from the following service providers:

- ♦ Alzheimer's Australia NSW
- ♦ Legal Aid NSW
- ♦ Law Access NSW
- ♦ National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police
- ♦ NSW Police Missing Persons Unit
- ♦ NSW State Coroners Office
- ♦ NSW Missing Persons Committee Inc
- ♦ Mental Health Association NSW
- ♦ Red Cross Tracing Services
- ♦ Salvation Army Family Tracing Service

Families were free to speak either to agencies or professionals in an open domain as well as in private spaces set aside for particular agencies.

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

Forty-five individuals RSVP'd to the event with 27 people attending on the day. In FFMPU's experience, events arranged for families of missing people often have low attendance and the unit believes this is for a number of reasons. Some families have shared that they feel confronted in meeting with others who have been waiting for years for news, some decide on the day that they cannot face the emotional turmoil of their loss, while others are inhibited by geographic or financial boundaries.

A number of attendees raised concerns about the amount of families in attendance given the large number of missing persons reports made each year. It is difficult to quantify why attendance is sometimes not reflective of the issue, however, of those in attendance almost all found both the guest speakers and expo useful in assisting them in their experiences.

The majority of families indicated that the event needed to be held regularly and that the location may need to be in a more central location (other than Parramatta).

Families also expressed that more 'question and answer' time would have been useful in helping them understand the ways in which cases are investigated. Families also wanted more opportunities for smaller group discussions with other people experiencing similar traumas to them.

One attendee raised concerns about questions asked in the forum from a non-family member about unidentified bodies, the attendee believed that the forum was organised to support families and that this enquiry was not in line with the purpose of the day.

Overall families felt empowered by their attendance and the majority provided their contact details to the unit to ensure they were kept up to date with issues within the missing persons sector and upcoming events. FFMPU received encouraging support from families who expressed their gratitude for the organisation of the day, who felt stronger by attending and who felt that the day made them feel 'connected'.



At the forum, from left: FFMPU Coordinator Sarah Wayland, Denise and Bruce Morcombe, of the Daniel Morcombe Foundation and Inspector Mark McCallum of the NSW Police Force's Missing Persons Unit.

WHAT ABOUT NEXT YEAR'S FORUM?

The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit will commit to hosting a yearly forum for families and friends of missing persons. The feedback provided by those in attendance (both from a personal and professional capacity) has been taken on board for when we begin to plan the 2010 event.

It is envisaged that the 2010 forum will focus on providing families with a better understanding about the ways in which cases are investigated, enhancing families self-care strategies and providing people with private areas to discuss their concerns with specific agencies or to generate more conversation amongst families.

If you have additional suggestions please contact ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au or (02) 8688 5414.

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