

# Overview of the 2010 Family Forum



Families & Friends  
of Missing Persons  
Attorney General & Justice

## PURPOSE OF THE DAY

The 2010 Forum for Families and Friends of Missing Persons was held at Parramatta on 10 April. Following on from the 2009 Forum, the aim of the day was to provide families with a better understanding of the ways in which cases are investigated; an opportunity to discuss concerns with specific agencies, generate conversation amongst participants and a chance to increase support networks and enhance self-care strategies.

## OUTCOMES

Twenty-one family members and friends attended the day, along with seven professionals and seven representatives from the FFMPU/ Victims Services.

## GUEST SPEAKERS

The first part of the day included guest speakers, including the Manager of NSW Police Missing Persons Unit (NSWPMPU); a member of the Behavioural Science Team, NSW Police; and a Counsellor from FFMPU.

The Manager, NSWPMPU, Inspector Kelly Kortlepel, spoke about the new policing procedures in responding to missing persons' investigations and the changing nature of police responsibility. Kelly responded to questions and difficulties people had encountered, including:

- ♦ making a police missing persons report and believing they were taken seriously,
- ♦ the timing and reasons for police referral to the Coroner's Court,
- ♦ police involvement in coordinating national and international assistance in missing persons cases, and
- ♦ police communication between homicide and missing persons units.

A member of the Behavioural Science Team, NSW Police, spoke about relatively new psychological services and techniques used to assist in the progression of missing person's investigations. She talked about the work of her team and insights that can be provided in relation to personality assessment, mental health considerations, and providing a psychological perspective into new lines of enquiry or opinion as to the most likely cause for an individual's disappearance. She also discussed her Churchill Fellowship findings in relation to importance of data gathering for psychological and investigative

purposes but also to further inform prevention strategies and risk assessment. Awareness was raised of the types of cases more relevant for psychological input, and the growing police awareness of the team's services.

FFMPU Counsellor, Manny Kassiotis spoke about the introduction of group work to assist and support families of missing persons. The group work on the day aimed to provide FFMPU with an understanding of people's ideas and thoughts around the direction of group work.

## SMALL GROUPS

The second part of the day involved separating attendees into three groups. The aim of these groups was to provide a space where people could access mutual support whilst exploring ideas about the implementation of groups for families and friends of missing persons. Participants on the day acknowledged the value of group work, as it allowed people to come together and share their experiences (*see Feedback Section*).

## FAMILY PANEL

The final part of the day was a family panel, in which four family members shared their experiences and individual tips on resilience.

The family panel was comprised of four family members – the parents of a missing person, a father and a sibling. Each spoke about the ways they had survived someone missing in their lives. One mother spoke about the experience of her son being located deceased and what this meant for her. She expressed her feelings regarding other people's inability to understand her grief, stating "... *our emotions continued to see-saw, much as they did within his period of missing, but this time without any hope, as we grappled with the reality of never being able to see him again and never being able to find answers to these troubling questions*". However, she spoke about finding strength over time, in being in a supportive family environment and recognising the impact of her son's disappearance on other family members.

Other members of the panel emphasised individual styles of coping and the importance of allowing family members to cope in their own ways. Panel members expressed that by talking about the missing person in everyday conversation, they are recognising how the missing person continues to play a part in their life.

One father spoke of the importance of being able to talk about feelings as they arose throughout the 'missing' process and how they were able to negotiate the changes that occurred in their lives.

Through an open discussion family members spoke of the difficulties they experienced with the lack of acknowledgment and rituals in the community when someone goes missing. They spoke of how they cope with this silence from the community and ways in which they continue to stay connected to their loved one. One father shared how his family came together and each contributed a significant memory of the missing person, through songs and stories. Another participant recognised their loved one by commemorating the missing person's birthday and sharing memories with younger members of the family.

## FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

Discussion in the smaller groups provided the opportunity for feedback. Individuals provided positive feedback about the discussions and content of the Forum.

Participants were very interested in hearing more information about the FFMPU group established in May 2010.

Some thoughts in relation to the group included:

- ♦ Participants expressed a preference for an 'open' group that they could come in and out of as they needed. It was felt that there might be certain times of the year, for example, birthdays, anniversaries or Christmas that would be more difficult to cope with than others.
- ♦ Agreement that it was important to be open and honest about their situation and the person that is missing.
- ♦ The potential to invite guest speakers to some groups, including asking families to attend who had different outcomes and experiences, for example, people who have experienced the coronial process or had the missing person located. It was recognised that this may be confronting for some so the group would need warning about any specific activities that were planned.

- ♦ There was some concern raised about those living outside of Sydney being able to attend the group. However, the general consensus was that there would be enough notice to make arrangements to attend the group if people really wanted to participate.

## SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES:

The majority of participants agreed that in the initial stages of their loved one being missing, there was an overwhelming amount of support/contact from family and friends. They all expressed the wish for ongoing/regular contact with police involved with their missing person.

Some expressed the thought that time does not make a difference. No matter how long the timeframe in relation to the person being missing, the feelings and emotions remain the same. It was agreed that coping after five years is not very different to coping after five months.

Many agreed that they felt guilty about life events in relation to being happy (with weddings, births of children, etc) and struggling with the missing person not being part of those life events.

One of the participants had been part of the sibling's roundtable hosted by FFMPU in 2005, and felt that this was a valuable experience and should be something to consider doing on an ongoing basis.

There was a general feeling of not knowing where to go and who to turn to for support, with appreciation being expressed towards FFMPU.

Many reported negative experiences with individual counsellors they had approached for individual counselling and support. There was general recognition that counsellors needed to have specialist knowledge in the area of 'missing'.

## THE FORUM AS AN ANNUAL EVENT

The FFMPU is committed to holding an annual forum for the families and friends of missing persons. From the feedback provided by those in attendance on the day the FFMPU will be able to plan the 2011 Family Forum based on these identified needs. If you have additional feedback or suggestions please contact FFMPU on 1800 227 772 or [ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au).

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