

Overview of the 2012 Family Forum



Families & Friends
of Missing Persons
Attorney General & Justice

SUMMARY AND FEEDBACK

The 2012 Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Family Forum was held on 14 April 2012 in the Parramatta Justice Precinct. The Forum brought together 32 family members and friends – the parents, partners, children (adult and young people), siblings, nephews, nieces, brothers and sisters in law and friends of missing people. Families and friends came from the Sydney area, regional NSW and interstate, with one person travelling from the Northern Territory and two from Victoria.

The Forum was the fourth event of its kind to be held in the Justice Precinct in Parramatta. For some, this was their first missing persons event, whilst for others it was one of a number they have attended over the time their loved one has been missing. Several people have attended every Forum.

The Family Forum provides the opportunity to share information about the experience of living with the loss of a missing person. Meeting others in a similar situation helps to reduce feelings of isolation and provides reassurance for those living with 'missing'. There were a number of "I did that too" moments shared at the Forum. Others acknowledged that within families there may be differences in the way individuals live with 'not knowing'.

Some who attended have only recently experienced a loved one going missing whilst others have the experience of living with missing for a longer period, some for many years. Whilst there is no expectation that people share personal details, some chose to do that while others preferred not to. Some gravitated towards others with similar stories and circumstances of 'missing'.

Families identified differences and similarities in their individual experiences and the circumstances surrounding their loved one's disappearance. Similar circumstances included missing through misadventure and missing after experiencing mental health difficulties. For some families there is little information available to help to explain their loved one's disappearance. For a number of families the available evidence suggests foul play. Where this experience was shared those present expressed the desire to reconnect outside of the Forum.

TOPICS AND ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Five members of the **NSW Police Missing Persons Unit (MPU)** attended the Forum. Chief Inspector Paul Roussos spoke to families and friends about the work of the Unit and missing persons investigations. Several family members and friends had the opportunity to speak with police after Chief Inspector Roussos's presentation.

FFMPU team members facilitated two 40-minute Roundtable discussions on:

- ♦ the experience of the coronial process for the families and friends of missing people; and
- ♦ the needs of children and young people when someone is missing.

Concurrent sessions on each topic allowed those present the opportunity to attend one or both sessions or to stay to participate in the same Roundtable discussion twice.

The **Coronial Process Roundtable** allowed participants to share their thoughts and experiences of the coronial process, to ask questions about the role of the Coroner and what happens during coronial investigations. A representative from the **Coronial Information and Support Program (CISP)** was present to answer specific questions about the process. Other family members shared their experiences before, during and after an inquest. FFMPU is hoping to support the recommendations of families and will follow up on the possibility of developing a resource book about the coronial process.

The **Needs of Children and Young People Roundtable** benefited from the presence of young people who provided a valuable insight into their personal experience of having a loved one disappear. FFMPU is working on a resource book for children and young people and a guide for those who support them.

FFMPU continues to explore ways of linking-up young people who have expressed a wish to meet others in a similar situation.

At the conclusion of the day, participants completed a questionnaire. Twenty-five questionnaires were returned. Some who responded combined their feedback on one form. Attendees who left early are still able to complete a questionnaire if they wish to do so. (*Contact FFMPU on 1800 227 772 to obtain a questionnaire*).

Below is a summary of the responses received.

1. Have you attended an FFMPU Family Forum in the past?

Yes – 9

No – 16

2. What was the most useful and/or interesting part of the day?

- ♦ Meeting other family members with the same feelings.
- ♦ Talking to people who are in the same/similar situation.
- ♦ Opportunity to ask questions and learn from families.
- ♦ Networking with others.
- ♦ Knowing this support group exists.
- ♦ Hearing from “experts.”
- ♦ Breaking the group into two and talking at the roundtables.
- ♦ Roundtable discussions and information from police.
- ♦ The information about the NSW Police MPU and how the Unit is meant to work.
- ♦ Information on the coronial process and what to expect in the process.
- ♦ It was helpful to hear from others who have been through the coronial process.
- ♦ Reassurance that you are doing the right things re children.⁺⁺
- ♦ The “children’s group.”
- ♦ All in its place – good.
- ♦ Overall very informative in all areas.
- ♦ The whole day was fantastic.

3. What was the least useful part of the day?

Twenty-one respondents did not identify a part of the day they found least useful.

Four respondents provided the following comments:

- ♦ Coronial process – had read the information from FFMPU.
- ♦ Everything was quite useful ... perhaps too much break time when other conversations could have gone longer.
- ♦ Easy to get focussed on the negative side of things in free discussion time.
- ♦ Being a homicide case, some of the information and discussions weren’t relevant.

4. Did you find the topics/speakers relevant to your needs?

- ♦ 23 respondents replied with “yes.”
- ♦ 2 replied “not really” and “some.”
- ♦ 1 respondent stated the children’s roundtable was not relevant and did not attend the session.
- ♦ Good to speak with police on a one-on-one basis about our specific circumstances.
- ♦ I learned more about young people’s issues.

5. Can you suggest any improvements or issues you’d like covered at future Forums?

- ♦ More detail from the Coroner’s Office.
- ♦ Perhaps a little more on the role of NSW Police MPU.
- ♦ Insight into police investigations (processes, stages, what to expect).
- ♦ Explore the concept of ambiguous loss as it applies to missing people; unresolved grief (research from UNSW).
- ♦ Further information re children and missing persons.
- ♦ Explanation of the court process.
- ♦ I think it is always useful to have speakers to give information which may be relevant, but it is just as important to have the chance to mingle with others who are in similar position.
- ♦ The going home program – of relevance for missing people who return home.

6. Did you take part in the roundtable discussions?

- ♦ 19 respondents attended both roundtable discussions.
- ♦ 5 attended the 'coronial process roundtable' only.
- ♦ 3 attended the 'children and young people roundtable' only.

7. Would you like to provide further comment about the Roundtable discussions?

- ♦ Very interesting / useful / relevant and informative.
- ♦ Excellent topics.
- ♦ Discussions were good and felt comfortable.
- ♦ Families seemed free to talk openly and support each other.
- ♦ Could have been longer.
- ♦ More time needed, but do we ever have enough time?
- ♦ Hope the ideas and petitions put forward will make a difference in the future.
- ♦ Was great to hear from (the young person-name removed) about her experience with someone missing and what was helpful.
- ♦ Take turns around the table so we all get a chance ... then "open house."
- ♦ Coronial process perhaps got a little off track. Much more info re this would have been good.

8. Any other comments

- ♦ Several families discussed the pros and cons of memorial services while the person is still missing. Agreed this is a very individual decision.
- ♦ Having a support group / Forum / chat room link for children and young people to discuss their situation, emotions, etc.
- ♦ Meeting people with "like lives" was good; we're not alone and this helps with all sorts of feelings.
- ♦ These supports should exist in all states.
- ♦ Information should be shared state / nationally / internationally.
- ♦ Cases should not be "closed" and death certificates should not be "forced on missing persons at Coroner's discretion alone."
- ♦ Possibly longer round table meeting.
- ♦ Beginning to see the Forum as a "useful" process.
- ♦ Like to hear more ideas on coping strategies, choices, for example meditation.
- ♦ There is a "subset" of families of missing persons where there is also a homicide investigation, so it might be interesting to have a discussion (roundtable) of the issues that apply to that group.

Please note:

The feedback received has been recorded as written by respondents. It reflects the individual opinions of the family members and friends present on the day.

CONTACT DETAILS

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

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