

2015 Overview

The 7th annual Family Forum for families and friends of missing people was held at the Parramatta Justice Precinct on Saturday 18th April 2015. The Forum was attended by 16 family members and friends along with a speaker from the Black Dog Institute, officers from the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, NSW Coroner's Court, Charles Sturt University School of Policing, the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), and Victims Services. The day was an opportunity for families to come together, to share ideas, provide mutual support, and hear about updates in the missing persons' sector.

The FFMPU team delivered a presentation about the work, values, and aims of the unit, reporting on a number of achievements over the previous 12 months. Information was provided about:

- the range of support offered to families;
- FFMPU's social media outreach through Facebook;
- FFMPU lectures, training and professional development events that focus on ambiguous loss and missing persons' issues; provided to tertiary students, community members, and service providers, including police, throughout the year;
- FFMPU's group work program and the development of a group work manual;
- The international collaborations that FFMPU has engaged in over the past year.

Following the FFMPU presentation, community presenter for the Black Dog Institute, and bipolar sufferer David Westgate, provided insights gained from 30 years of mental illness.



The Deputy State Coroner Magistrate Paul MacMahon, spoke to those present about coronial practices and the role of the Coroners Court in delivering services and support to families with missing loved ones.

Superintendent Jodie Shepherd, Commander of the Operational Information Agency, gave a brief presentation on the role of the Missing Persons Unit. During this presentation she provided a broad overview of the risk assessments conducted when a missing person is reported to police in NSW.

Mark McDonald from the Australian Graduate School of Policing spoke about the specific training policing students receive in the area of missing persons, at several stages within their undergraduate studies.

Feedback

At the conclusion of the day, participants completed a feedback form. Eleven (11) forms were returned. The majority of respondents were new to the Forum experience, with seven of 11 respondents (64%) indicating they had not been to an FFMPU Family Forum in the past.



David Westgate

All of the 11 respondents provided one or more comments about the most useful part of the 2015 Forum.

Below is a summary of the responses provided by family members about the day:

- Three respondents stated that all parts of the day were useful.
- Three responded that the most useful aspect of the day was the FFMPU presentation and discussion, commenting:
An overview of what FFMPU does, who the people are, and the agencies they liaise with.
Liz's discussion about unresolved and ambiguous loss.
Hearing the progress being made in supporting families and friends of missing people.
- Four noted the coronial presentation and insight into the coronial process as a valuable part of the day.
- Two commented on the usefulness of the police presentation and information about police processes.
- Two commented on the helpfulness of the mental health presentation for themselves and their family members.
- Two commented on the usefulness of talking to other families and being able to connect with others:

Coming here and being together, a sense of place? And not just floating around in the ether lost in the maze of the missing person's trail.

When asked to comment on the least useful part of the 2014 Forum, four did not comment and one respondent indicated this question was not applicable. A further six people provided comments:

- Two commented that all parts of the Forum were good or of equal interest, commenting that:
...topics less relevant were still very interesting and may become relevant.
- Three felt the session about police training:
...basically reaffirmed that police are too bombarded with other matters, (which was) discouraging to hear.
- Another felt that being escorted into and out of the building was the least useful part of the day.
- One responded that the coronial talk was the least useful aspect for them.

Participants were asked to rate (in terms of personal relevance) and comment on the various presentations. Here are their responses:

FFMPU presentation

Eight respondents indicated the FFMPU presentation was 'very relevant', two rated it as 'somewhat relevant', one rated it as 'not applicable', and one person commented:

FFMPU presentation was very interesting and important to understand your role and how well you do it.

Police presentation

Eight respondents indicated the police presentation was 'very relevant', two rated it as 'somewhat relevant', and one rated it as 'not applicable'.

The following comments were made:

Information is invaluable. Opportunity to ask questions face to face is great. Well informed speaker.

Concise without going overboard on the fine detail.

Good off-the-cuff discussion and answers to questions.

Need good detective specialising (in) missing persons.

NSW State Coroner presentation

Five respondents indicated the coronial presentation was 'very relevant', five rated it as 'somewhat relevant', and one did not provide a response. The following comments were made:

Need proof for death certificate.

Excellent, very helpful.

Great opportunity to ask questions with senior of Coroner's office.

Black Dog Institute presentation

Six respondents indicated the presentation was 'very relevant', four rated it as 'somewhat relevant', and one did not provide a response. The following comments were made:

Raised feelings- maybe a bit confronting for some but still very worthwhile

Very good presentation from the heart. Honest and very grateful for the insights

Police Studies presentation

Four respondents indicated the presentation was 'very relevant', four rated it as 'somewhat relevant', one rated it between 'very and somewhat relevant', one felt it was 'not very relevant', and one did not provide a response. The following comments were made:

Give some police insights would be good.

Good to know that there is a good focus in the Police School Curriculum on missing persons.

Very interesting insight.

Interesting to get an idea what police are taught and therefore what one can expect from them, like when making a first report...

Provide good info and helped to understand about police training.

Other activities

When asked to comment on 'other activities' during the forum, four provided comments, primary focusing on the value of connecting with other family members:

Connecting with other families is the most important part.

Good that there were times we could talk to other families.

Well run, good information format. Lots of chances to ask questions.

Food great. Good to meet others in similar situation in a supportive, caring and understanding environment.

When asked to suggest improvements or issues for future Forums, six respondents provided comments:

Encourage a post-Forum (or separate event) that's more informal (for example, drinks etc).

Might be difficult to do- however, what about some workshops where we, the members, can discuss and share certain aspects of our stories?

Impress on newcomers importance of documenting [the] case. Keep clear records.

Too much restriction on privacy for investigation.

Maybe a little more info on victims' families, rights or compensation eligibility.

The Commander (right) and two officers from the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit





Aircon! But rooms and space otherwise lovely. No suggestions, everything presented very interesting and so many topics and bits of info are unexpected – in a good way – things I didn't know about, things I didn't realise.

Five respondents provided 'additional comments':

Thank you very much for providing the service and for advancing the cause. It is good to be able to have open discussion that can involve humour despite it being such a difficult topic.

FFMPU team rocks! Because you're understanding and respectful, and interested genuinely in the plight of missing people and families and focus on the needs of families/ loved ones.

Centralise all activity on police for missing persons.

Thanks for all your hard work and effort. Much appreciated.

Excellent day; will be looking for the next meeting to share with others. Well done. Really important to keep this going.

Please note: The feedback 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:

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