

Roundtable meeting for siblings of missing people - 30 April 2005

1. Introduction

A roundtable meeting of siblings of missing people was held on the 30 April 2005, hosted by the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) Interagency Forum. Five siblings and one guest of a sibling attended the meeting. Of these, there was one man and five women, ranging in age from 19 to 37 years. Siblings had been missing for a minimum of nine weeks to a maximum of almost 12 years.

Also in attendance at the roundtable were:

- Leonie Jacques and Sarah Wayland, FFMPU in the NSW Attorney General's Department.
- Alex Faraguna, Mental Health Association NSW.
- Ann Porcino, RPR Consulting who facilitated the meeting and is the author of this report.

The roundtable had the following objectives:

- To give siblings the opportunity to come together, to talk and to listen to each other's experiences.
- To provide information to the FFMPU about the needs of siblings so that they can develop and tailor services to siblings in the future.
- To inform services within the missing persons' sector regarding the unique needs of siblings and the most appropriate forms of future intervention.

Whilst this report attempts to summarise some of the key findings from the roundtable, it cannot do justice to the wide-ranging, significant and at times emotional discussions that were held in this six hour meeting. The siblings who attended were generous in providing their time on a beautiful Saturday, open in retelling their experiences and thoughtful in listening to one another.

2. Common issues for siblings of missing people

The first session of the meeting was an opportunity for each sibling to share aspects of his/her experiences with the group as a whole. The session

started with each person 'mapping the journey so far' – the highs and lows, where they got help, where they didn't – on a piece of cardboard. People were then invited to share any aspect of what they had written or drawn with the rest of the group.

What emerged were moving stories of individuals and their struggles. Whilst each story was unique, there were significant common elements between the stories. The group talked about these common elements and agreed that their collective experiences could be useful for others to understand, particularly those seeking to provide improved services to siblings of missing people. The following were described.

Dependence of parents on sibling(s)

A key issue and hardship for most people at the meeting was that their parents had, and in most cases continued to, relied heavily on them for support. People at the meeting explained how parents regularly and repeatedly sought solace from them and how they had to act as a counsellor, without any skills to do so, to help their parents cope and continue to function.

The impact on the sibling of this dependence is substantial. People described how they were unable to deal with their own complex array of emotions associated with the loss of their sibling; that they had to 'keep it together', so that their parents wouldn't have to worry about them too. In a kind of role reversal, the siblings became protectors and confidants of their parents. Even when siblings were able to show their own emotions, parents often simply did not have any energy left to assist them and in the absence of any other supports, this left the sibling with limited outlets for themselves.

Siblings at the meeting described the sense of fatigue and despair associated with always being available to a parent, even many years after the sibling has gone missing.

Struggling between parents differing needs

A number of people at the meeting described how they felt torn by competing emotional responses from each of their parents. In all situations described, the mother was the more outwardly emotional and needy of support, with the desire to keep talking about the situation and the missing sibling. During the roundtable there was less discussion about the role of fathers and some suggestions that many remained quiet and withdrawn during the process or primarily focused on the practicalities of searching. There was also some concern about siblings noticing the deteriorating physical and mental health of fathers which was attributed to the stress of 'not knowing'.

In these situations people described how they felt pulled between their parents, with an overt focus going to the mother whilst the father, usually not able to easily verbalise, was left on his own, potentially falling apart inside.

Support people focus on the parents

Siblings of missing people are often overlooked by friends and a service system focusing their care and support to parents. This was a common experience of everyone who attended the meeting. Even the friends of the sibling may focus on parents, asking regularly after the wellbeing of the parent, without understanding the grief and loss being experienced by the sibling.

Overall there is a complete underestimation of the importance of the relationship between siblings and of the pain that a brother or sister might feel when a sibling goes missing.

Continual grief and loss

Everyone present at the meeting described how the loss of their sibling became the ongoing focus of the families' attentions, with little opportunity for the family unit to joyfully meet for life events. They described how every festive occasion is difficult, as people pretend to be happy, but were not; of the guilt that surfaces whenever anyone is having a good time; of the constant reminder of the missing sibling ('If only s/he were here').

Often families have failed to notice or are simply not able to freely celebrate the significant events of the sibling left behind – events such as graduations, marriage, pregnancy - without a reminder of the

missing siblings. Siblings described how they have felt invisible and unimportant in the family which continues to focus on the loss of the sibling rather than on the significant life events of the people still connected to the family.

Sibling guilt

A common theme was of sibling guilt. Siblings feel guilty for many things: because they didn't see the signs and take action to prevent their sibling leaving; because they haven't been able to locate their sibling and bring him/her home; because they can't make everything right for their parents; because they are rebuilding their own life and enjoying life again, and their sibling is still missing.

Escape

Every person at the meeting whose sibling had been missing for more than a short while described how they had eventually had to escape from the situation, to find the space and time to look after themselves and get some perspective on the situation. All went travelling – for periods of five weeks to years – and described this as a welcome reprieve; like pressing a 'pause button' on the intensity of the experience and the needs of parents.

Travel wasn't problem-free however. A number described how it seemed to restimulate fears – their own or their parents – that something could happen to them too. The return after a period of travel was not very satisfactory either for most people – having changed themselves (to varying degrees) but finding their parents and the situation exactly as they left them.

Learning to live again

Most of the roundtable participants had rebuilt their own lives to a greater or lesser extent, but all talked about how their sibling would always remain with them in some way. Sometimes, a renewed determination to live their own life to the fullest was not really about the sibling left behind; it was to honour the sibling that had gone missing. Real healing was evident where people had been able to have their own life again – a good and productive life – for themselves and not for anyone else.

3. Stages of the journey

Participants were asked to consider whether there were any stages that they could see in their journey. They described a distinct initial stage,

happening in the first months surrounding the time when their sibling went missing. This early stage is characterised by:

- intense shock and disbelief.
- an obsession with detail - details that might shed light on what happened and lead to finding their sibling ('what was he wearing'; 'what did he say to his friends'; 'where are the places she loved', 'what was he doing in the days, hours, minutes before disappearing', etc.)
- an all consuming focus on trying to find their sibling – regularly searching places they used to go; an obsession with never missing a phone call, in case it might be them; meeting with friends to search for clues; following up any leads
- an attempt to try to keep their normal routine going in the midst of a totally abnormal situation, just in case their sibling might make contact with them at school, work, on their normal walk.
- the gut wrenching experience of 'seeing' their missing sibling everywhere
- expectation that services will really kick in and help to find the sibling (for example, police) and then disappointment when it becomes clear how little help there really is
- constant consoling of other people and putting people at ease.

Just how long this stage lasts is not clear, but the unanimity of the above experiences in this early stage were clear from our discussion.

The traits of subsequent stage(s) were not as easy to define. People described gradually coming to the realisation that there wasn't anything more they could do, beginning to get tired of dealing with friends and families issues and an emerging interest in their own life again as the key signs that they were moving into a new phase of dealing with the loss of their missing brother or sister.

4. What can the service system do better?

Participants to the workshop were asked to consider the following question: If you could have the world exactly right for siblings of missing persons, what would it look like to you? Working with a tool called 'photo language' they selected one or more photographs to help them describe what they hoped for. Their responses were evocative, describing a

world in which:

- siblings grief was not forgotten and there were many different avenues of support for them
- siblings had time to reflect on their own as well as opportunities to share their experiences with others
- Services, particularly the police, were actively looking for their sibling
- siblings left behind could find out easily what to do and follow some kind of process that would ensure they did not lose valuable time or exhaust themselves in a lonely pursuit of their loved one
- there were clear roles for everyone, and people were working together to find their sibling and support those left behind
- siblings were not forgotten and could more easily find a way to get their life back.

Further discussion was then held to pinpoint ways in which the service system could more adequately support siblings of missing people. There were common views about the need for change in a number of areas, summarised below.

Information for parents about the impact on siblings

Participants identified opportunities for parents to be informed about the impact on siblings of having a sister or brother go missing. They felt that if parents knew the impacts, they would be less likely to inappropriately use their child as a 'counsellor' and more likely to direct their child to services that might assist.

Information could be provided to parents wherever they contact the service system, but in particular could be included in written material or on web sites that parents of missing children access or provided by counsellors that parents access for assistance.

There was also the suggestion that all publications for parents or general audiences should have a section that prompts information sharing to all family members; perhaps a statement such as "This booklet may also be important to ...".

Information for siblings ... separate from parents

All participants felt that siblings needed to be able to access information that would help them cope with the loss of their brother or sister. Even if the information was very similar to the information provided to parents, it needed to be packaged appropriately for siblings and directed towards them.

Materials developed for siblings – web-based and written – could describe the stages siblings may go through after a brother or sister goes missing and indicate where the sibling can go for assistance.

Information to families and friends about how the service system works

Fact sheets need to be available to families of missing people at all agencies that they may access for assistance that help family members to understand:

- what the agency will do
- what other agencies can do
- what the family could be doing
- who the family can contact for different types of assistance
- common experiences that the family may confront and how to handle these, for example how to handle private investigators and media and what to consider if putting up a poster about their missing family member.

General community service announcements that help family members to identify agencies that may be able to assist them were also supported. One participant, for example, suggested that there could be a referral to a service at the end of the television program *Without a Trace*.

Information to other family and friends

There was also a call for information to be available to people who may want or need to help the family (e.g. grandparents or friends) about what the family is going through and how they may be able to be of the greatest assistance.

Because of the difficulty of accessing information and supports, participants were very enthusiastic about the possibility of a central library of information located somewhere easily accessible to siblings, other family members and friends of missing people. This would hold copies of brochures and fact sheets as well as other resources like television and radio interviews that are appropriate.

Opportunities for siblings to talk with other siblings

There was a strong message that the roundtable had been really useful to the siblings who participated and that there should be more opportunities for siblings of missing people to have more contact with one another.

The idea of regular support groups was not widely supported, because of the logistical issues of getting people together regularly. Instead participants felt that it would be useful for there to be a system of peer support, where siblings could contact other siblings by telephone or email to ask questions, talk about their experiences, etc. This would need to be well coordinated and peers would need to have some training, but might be useful for both the person needing to make contact and the peer offering assistance.

National register of missing people

Participants supported the need for a national register of missing people that would assist in a coordinated effort across Australia to find a missing sibling.

Counsellor training

Several participants had had very poor experiences with counsellors who they had turned to for support and so it was agreed that it is important for training and information to be provided to counsellors who may have contact with family members of missing people. Another option is that an experienced agency such as FFMPU could provide a consulting service to counsellors working with a family member of a missing person. A key point for training is about how the counsellor can assist a person in a situation where there is no immediate resolution to the issue causing the grief and loss.

5. Priorities for improvement

When participants were asked at the end of the roundtable what was their one priority for changes to be made to the service system they identified the following issues:

- Educating police (state and national) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade about how to better work with families of missing people.
- Changes to privacy law to make it easier for a family member or agency to track a missing person.
- A website for siblings containing information on other siblings dealing with the same type of situation, showing real faces and telling real stories and experiences.

6. Conclusion

This important meeting of siblings of missing people clearly meet the objectives of the meeting planners: siblings used the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences and to listen with interest and compassion to the experiences of the other participants; the discussions provided a rich source of information for the FFMPU to take forward in the facilitation and development of services to siblings in the future; and reports of the meeting – both verbal and written – should assist the missing persons sector to understand and plan interventions to better meet the needs of siblings in the future.

- Tangible conclusions to the meeting were that:
- The FFMPU made a commitment to progress the recommendations made by siblings who attended the meeting.
- Siblings agreed to being contacted individually if new siblings indicated that they might benefit from support and the FFMPU counsellor agreed to make the links between siblings with the privacy of all siblings assured.

Contact details

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

Phone (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service** 1800 555 677

Facebook www.facebook.com/missing.501 • **Email** ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

Further information

Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit

Phone: (02) 8688 8173 / 1800 227 772 (Freecall)

Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Web: www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

Address: 160 Marsden Street, Parramatta 2150