



Justice
Families & Friends
of Missing Persons

When someone is missing

A strategy to support those left behind

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Missing persons in the NSW community

In NSW each year approximately 11,000 people are reported missing to the police. Whilst almost 95 per cent are located within one month of going missing the trauma experienced by those left behind is often overlooked or under estimated.

New South Wales is the only state in Australia that provides specialised support to families and friends of missing people. Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), within the Department of Attorney General and Justice (DAGJ), provides crisis and ongoing assistance through the provision of practical and emotional support.

For more information about the services provided visit www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons

The background

In 2000 the NSW Government launched the FFMPU. The unit was created in response to concerns from families of missing people about the need for an agency specialised in addressing the needs of individuals left behind and the ambiguous loss associated with missing.

In 2004 the service expanded to offer in-house counselling and support to those left behind when someone is missing.

Ambiguous or unresolved loss, for those left behind when someone is missing, can be debilitating and disabling causing people to become frozen to the time when the person went missing. Historically families have had their experiences aligned with grief or bereavement following a sudden or unexpected death however the challenge when a person is missing is the oscillation between the possibilities that the missing person is both here and gone (Boss 1999).

In the 11 years since the service was established the concept of ambiguous loss has been explored and shared with both individuals and community groups to raise awareness about the impact of missing in our society.

Why develop a strategic framework and guidelines for families and friends of missing people?

The strategic framework aims to develop a coordinated approach to supporting families and friends of missing persons. This will be achieved through the sharing of expertise, training and support of professionals, and facilitating access to information and support for those seeking assistance.

The guidelines referred to within this document focus on the next phase of supportive interventions and exploring what is required when families reach out for assistance to other professionals.

The current system

There are two identified tiers of support currently available to families of missing people:

Tier one

Law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies including:

- NSW Police Force (including the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit)
- National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police
- Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, Department of Attorney General and Justice
- FFMPU Interagency members including Salvation Army Family Tracing, Australian Red Cross, International Social Services and Link up NSW Corp.

Tier two

Frontline, crisis and ongoing service delivery including:

- General practitioners
- Psychiatrists
- Psychologists
- Social workers
- Generalist counsellors

This strategic framework aims to develop commitment from both tiers in relation to:

- identifying the roles and responsibilities of each of the agencies around the referral and support needs of the client group;
- coordinating service provision and referral pathways;
- identifying barriers to establishing a stronger support framework for those left behind; and
- providing training and support to those working with families and friends of missing persons.

Strategic directions

Tier one: Law enforcement and non-law enforcement search agencies

It is important that the roles and responsibilities of search agencies are clarified and developed to ensure that the needs of families and friends of missing persons are considered through service delivery. For many families, this may be the only contact they have with service providers. It is critical that referrals pathways between agencies are clear.

Outlined below are the responsibilities of each agency:

NSW Police Force: NSW Police Force undertakes investigations to find persons reported missing in NSW. The Missing Persons Unit (MPU) assists in the coordination of all missing persons inquiries. NSW Police is a major point of referral to FFMPU.

Australian Federal Police: National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) is the non-operational part of Australian Federal Police. Its mission is to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons and to educate the Australian community about missing persons' issues through media liaison and campaign work. The NMPCC informs senior law-enforcement, government and community decision-makers about the issues relating to missing persons. The NMPCC will ensure that professionals who contact the centre are aware of the strategic framework and the guidelines.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit: FFMPU provides counselling and support services to families and friends of missing persons. The unit works to increase awareness and understanding of missing persons' issues through liaison with stakeholders and community education. Through the dissemination of the guidelines for practitioners the FFMPU hopes to increase awareness and understanding of missing persons' issues for those involved in working with families and friends.

FFMPU Interagency: The FFMPU Interagency is comprised of stakeholders from government, non-government and community members.

The focus is on improving service delivery to those affected by having someone missing in their lives. This is achieved through interagency communication and responding to issues identified by both service providers and families. Interagency members assist with dissemination of the guidelines for working with families of missing people.

Tier two: Supporting frontline services and ongoing service delivery

To support service providers in meeting the support needs of families and friends of missing persons, FFMPU has developed guidelines for service delivery.

What is the evidence for the development of these guidelines?

Since 2000, FFMPU has responded to more than 300 individuals or families using a range of therapeutic interventions.

A high proportion of families have acknowledged the challenges faced when someone is missing – many speak of being unsure of where to turn because it is a trauma they do not anticipate they will experience in their lifetime. Likewise agencies may be ill equipped to know the options available for families who access support.

In 2009 FFMPU conducted a survey of individuals who have, or have had, a significant person missing from their lives, to assess their support needs and potential barriers to support. The survey revealed that families seeking assistance were often met by professionals who had limited understanding of ambiguous loss, services who wanted to ‘solve’ their problems or agencies that did not link them with specialised support as quickly as they would have liked.

The key findings of the survey identified that:

- people more commonly requested help from their general practitioners, psychologists,
- social workers or counsellors following the report of a person missing to law enforcement,
- whilst 85% of individuals sought assistance to cope with the loss of a missing person many were not aware that specialised agencies were available to them,
- a majority of respondents spoke about the lack of knowledge from agencies about the appropriate counselling models suitable in responding to ambiguous loss relating to a missing person.

Guidelines for practitioners

The survey findings, a review of national and international literature and current knowledge and expertise within the missing persons sector led to the development of the guidelines to assist practitioners in responding to families and friends of missing people. They aim to promote connectedness between families of missing people, their community and the services available to assist them.

Commitment to implementing the guidelines

The lead agency for the dissemination of the guidelines will be the FFMPU within DAGJ.

The agency is small and relies on the commitment of other services and associations to ensure that information is disseminated and service providers are included in ongoing consultation.

The aim of disseminating the guidelines is to:

- increase awareness and begin discussion with peak agencies about missing persons issues and their inclusion in a support framework;
- clarify the range of responses to ‘missing’ from the professionals identified by the framework;
- obtain commitment for the inclusion of the guidelines in agency training manuals and within referral databases; and
- increase commitment from the community to support FFMPU in addressing missing persons issues and the support needs of those left behind.

Consultation

The following organisations/associations were consulted during the development of the strategic framework and guidelines:

- NSW Divisions of General Practice
- NSW Institute of Psychiatry
- Australian Psychological Society
- Australian Association of Social Workers

Implementation

The following timeframe has been developed to ensure that *Promoting Connectedness* is disseminated and evaluated.

Timeframe for implementation of the strategy	
November 2010	Consultation between agencies and DAGJ to begin roll out of guidelines
March 2011	Follow up consultation to explore dissemination, identify challenges and potential training needs
August 2011	Review of consultation findings and future planning.
August 2012	Implementation complete

Key performance indicators		
Aim	Strategy	Timeframe
Tier 1		
Increased awareness of the needs of the client group and the role of the FFMPU and timely referrals to FFMPU	1. Meetings/in-service with NSW Police <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Missing Persons Unit ii. Local Area Commands iii. NSW Police Force Training College 	1. – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Monthly meetings ii. Yearly visits to LACs iii. Twice yearly presentations to new recruits
	2. Regular FFMPU Interagency forum meetings (inc. NSW Police, Australian Federal Police and non-police tracing services)	2. Quarterly
Identification of, and input on issues specific to MP sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. FFMPU Interagency forum ii. Legal issues working party iii. Family Member Reference Group 	Ongoing
Tier 2		
Dissemination and promotion of guidelines	1. Community education/in-service to agencies working with people	Ongoing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bi-monthly presentations
	2. Presentations to Mental Health Provider Network Meetings	2. Bi-monthly presentations
	3. Inclusion of guidelines in professional journals (of APS, AASW, GPNSW)	3. Annually
	4. Guidelines available on FFMPU website and websites of interagency partners	4. Annually
Upskilling and engagement of front-line service providers	1. Community education to health services, non-government organisations and interest groups	1. Bi-monthly presentations
	2. Workshop presentations through professional networks to engage health professionals	2. Ongoing
	3. Conference presentations	3. Ongoing
Improved responses to families seeking assistance	1. Seek feedback of families' experiences through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. focus groups at family forum; and ii. clinical data mining in casenotes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. March 2011 ii. Ongoing

